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AT UNDERHILL FIELD IN SOUTH Orange, home of the Columbia High School Cougars, the bleachers and ball fields are empty now, but in the sunlight the grass has that gold and emerald shimmer that John Porcelli remembers from those endless childhood summers, or from those good dreams years later, long after his childhood was gone.

"I'm lucky," explains the 47-year-old athletic director and head football coach at Morristown High School. During the eleven seasons that Porcelli has guided the Colonials, they have won four North Jersey, Section 2, Group 3 championships, the last three in a row while building a 30-game winning streak. Last year the *Star-Ledger* named him high school football coach of the year. "I'm lucky to work in a supportive community like Morristown," Porcelli says. "Lucky to have the players I

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do and lucky to have grown up in this neighborhood."

Porcelli isn't talking geography—not exactly. But he can't ignore the fact that the only barrier between Underhill Field and the backyard of the house he grew up in on Montague Place was a six-foot-high chain-link fence. Or that his sliver of a South Orange neighborhood produced two other current high school football coaches—John Pew of Wallkill Valley Regional in Hamburg and Edward Manigan of Newark Academy in Livingston.

All three men played football for Columbia, but it was as young boys that they became aware of the local high school team. Pew lived down the block from Porcelli, on Waverly Place, a two-

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**By Peter Golden
Photography by
Vincent Colabello**

minute dash from Underhill Field. "Columbia began practicing in August," recalls Pew. "It was hot, and in those days coaches didn't believe you should drink during workouts. I used to sneak the players ice cubes and oranges."

Manigan lived on the corner of Montague Place and Radel Terrace. He would have been Porcelli's next-door neighbor except that their houses were separated by a steep graveled lot that led to the rear entrance of Underhill Field, where on Saturday afternoons during football season (and on Thanksgiving morning), volunteers unlocked the gate and sold tickets for 50 cents. As parents and children streamed in, wearing red-and-black Go COUGAR buttons and carrying

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Ties that bind: Porcelli
with Carmine Fornaro
(left) and Johnny Moore.



Porcelli

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 73

bags of confetti, the band music and cheers drifted a half mile back from the bleachers, mingling in the autumn-blue sky with the scent of burning leaves.

In his mid-fifties now, Edward Manigan still recalls hearing the sounds of early-morning football practice filtering through his bedroom window. "I couldn't wait to get dressed and go watch," he says. "I remember the drills and the interaction between the coaches and players. Those young men, only five or six years my senior, were idols to me, and perhaps the influence of the neighborhood played a larger role in shaping my future than I ever thought."

Geography as destiny—something to that, admits Porcelli. He is an erstwhile teacher of history, and that is today's assignment, a trip into his cultural past. This corridor of memory is not lit by just the candlelight of nostalgia. Too much sadness in any life for that. In Porcelli's case, there is the premature death of his mother and the breakup of his first marriage.

Still, it is a worthwhile journey, this backward glance at the mood and mores of a bygone era, because it demonstrates how one football coach applies the past to the present in the hopes of helping teenagers create a future.

WHEN JOHN PORCELLI WAS TWO YEARS OLD, his mother and father, Millie and John Sr., moved from their apartment in East Orange to 416 Montague Place. The house had been built by Millie's father years before, but Millie's parents died young, within months of each other, and left three sons and a daughter at home. Millie had brought her family from East Orange to help care for her brothers and sister.

"I remember my mother cooking, cleaning, hanging laundry on the line, and telling us what to do," Porcelli says. "With my aunt and uncles, me, and then my younger sister, Marie, I don't know how she got everything done."

Porcelli's father, a tall, quiet, broad-shouldered man, served as the perfect audience for his effervescent wife. Like many fathers in that neighborhood of modest houses and neatly clipped lawns, he owned a small business, a grocery store called John's Market, on Montgomery Street in Bloomfield, where he worked six days a week twelve hours a

day. Disciplining his son was rarely required. John and his friends knew the rules, which seemed to exist as naturally as the winter snow and summer sunshine: Watch your mouth; call adults mister, miss, or missus; keep off the neighbors' grass; and God help you if you're ever caught stealing anything.

Of course, this was the 1950s and early 1960s, when authority was in vogue and fathers were not shy about exercising it—a reality that fueled their sons' self-discipline. It was similar to the Cold War strategy of nuclear deterrence: The bomb didn't have to go off for you to know the results would be mighty unpleasant. "My dad's 82, and I still wouldn't want to get

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him angry at me," says Porcelli. "When I was growing up, fathers didn't have to say a lot. Knowing they would be coming home from work was enough to keep you in line."

Not that Porcelli's mother needed much help in that department. Since Millie never learned to drive, she was constantly walking over to the stores on Irvington Avenue or down to South Orange Village. If she happened to spot you cutting school or performing stupid bicycle tricks in the street, she'd sing you a verse of "Straighten Up and Fly Right."

Frank Uzzolino, Porcelli's closest childhood friend and former football teammate, recalls the Millie Porcelli method for teaching twelve-year-olds not to smoke. "We were playing football at Underhill on the field right behind Johnny's house," says Uzzolino, who today is an actor living in Santa Monica,

California. "At halftime, a kid lit a cigarette and gave Johnny a puff. Suddenly, Mrs. Porcelli was climbing over the fence from her backyard. That was something—I never saw anyone's mother climb a fence. Next thing I knew, Mrs. Porcelli was knocking the cigarette out of Johnny's mouth by smacking him on the helmet. Then she started on the kid who'd been smoking in the first place."

What is unusual about this story is that Millie hadn't been on the sidelines for the kickoff. "She almost never missed a game," says Porcelli. "She knew an incredible amount about sports. She must've learned it from my uncles. And she didn't hesitate to offer advice. When I got home from my games, she'd pull me aside and review every play I made or didn't make. She was highly competitive and passed that on to me. She wanted me giving my best every day—in school, in sports—no excuses. When I messed up, I heard about it, and there were consequences—always. She was the major influence in my life."

Porcelli didn't experience the tight parental reins as a lack of freedom. Quite the opposite. "I tell my sons that I grew up happy," he says. "I was free because I knew the rules, and as long I followed them, I had the run of the world."

That world extended in two directions: down to Prospect Street, where he attended Our Lady of Sorrows parochial school until ninth grade, and up across Underhill Field to the Clinton School playground, which had a basketball court, plenty of grassy space for baseball or football games, and strike zones painted in white on the side of the brick school for perpetual rounds of stickball.

It was at the school yard that Porcelli first coupled his organizational skills with his love of football. The neighborhood kids frequently played tackle in full equipment, but it was often difficult to round up enough players, and the games could be ragged, with all the bickering over calls. In addition, Porcelli hated to lose, and he was sure the key to winning would be regular practices. So he went looking for a coach. He found sixteen-year-old Mark DeMichele. "I thought Mark walked on water," says Porcelli. "He was five years older than I was and played for Columbia."

"It was my junior year," recalls DeMichele, today the vice president of a construction company in Camden, Maine. "I'd been injured during the football season and I had the time, so I agreed."

Thus were born the Clinton Patriots, a sandlot team that played against other sandlot teams every autumn Sunday that DeMichele or any team members—including John Pew, who played in the backfield with Porcelli—could arrange a game. The Patriots went undefeated for three years. DeMichele coached every game—even after graduating from Columbia and enrolling at Seton Hall University.

"People had a special sort of closeness in those days," says DeMichele. "Your neighbors and your neighborhood were important to you. It never occurred to me not to help out John and the kids. Maybe people are too busy now for that. Or maybe there's too much 'me-me-me' and worrying about the kind of car you drive. You rarely see kids playing in school yards any more—not after three o'clock or on weekends. But I'm glad I did it. I can't tell you how many times I've been back in New Jersey and run into players from the Patriots, and they say, 'You don't know how much that meant to me, you coaching us back then.'"

John Porcelli went on from the Clinton Patriots to play for Columbia High School. By the time he entered Bloomfield College in 1970, he knew he wanted to coach high school football.

Although her son had graduated, Millie remained a steadfast fan of the Columbia Cougars, attending every home game. But because she didn't drive and her relatives were no longer attending John's away games, she had to find alternate transportation. "She rode the Columbia team bus and became an unofficial mascot," John Porcelli says. "I'm sure she had plenty of advice for the players and coaches, but they must've enjoyed it because they took her everywhere."

Millie also did some networking on behalf of her son. By 1976, John was teaching seventh and eighth grade at Our Lady of the Valley in Orange. Millie introduced him to Columbia head football coach Dominick Deo, who eventually hired Porcelli to coach the freshman team in September 1978. Millie, however, never saw the start of her son's career. She had died in April that year.

"The injustice of my mother dying too soon," says Porcelli, "is that while she didn't have much education or opportunities for herself, she made sure people she loved had them. Then she didn't get to see her hard work pay off."

In 1984 John Porcelli was named head coach of Columbia's football team. He held that position for five seasons, also teaching U.S. history and economics at

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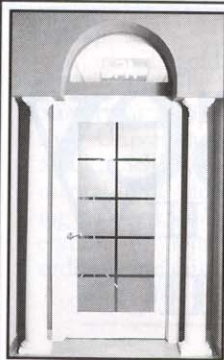


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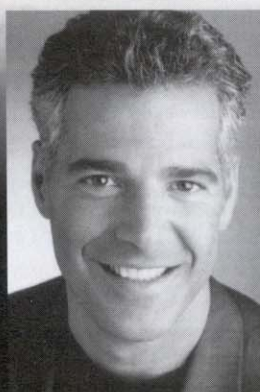
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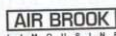
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Porcelli

the high school. Porcelli's long-term plan included a role in school administration, so when he saw the opportunity to become athletic director at Morristown, he took the job. It should have been the happiest moment of his life, but at the time his marriage was coming apart. For a while Porcelli moved in with his father on Montague Place, bringing his young sons, John and Matthew, to stay with them every weekend.

"As parents going through a divorce," says Porcelli, "you do the best you can for your children, but it's not an ideal situation. It takes time for everyone to heal. Along with the death of my mother, my divorce was the toughest thing I ever faced."

Fortunately for Porcelli, he later met Lisa Delli Santi, a health teacher at Columbia. They've been married for eight years.

ON THE EVENING OF MARCH 9, MORRISTOWN High football players, parents, friends, teachers, and administrators crowd into the high school cafeteria, where John Porcelli awards his team their 1999 championship rings. An anonymous benefactor has paid for the rings, and every player, regardless of his contribution to the eleven victories, receives one. In fact, no one who wants to play for Morristown is cut from the team; in games that the Colonials will clearly win, Porcelli and his assistant coaches make every effort to get the reserves enough time on the field to earn their varsity letters. But the young men have to follow the coach's program—no easy task, as Porcelli expects his players to train year-round. He justifies the regimen to his players by explaining that football is not simply a game—it is a way of life that teaches self-discipline, the rigors of friendship, and the ability to strive, skills that his young charges will need long after they're done playing.

Applause fills the cafeteria as Porcelli finishes handing out the rings. Before the crowd adjourns to the dessert tables, Porcelli has a message for his team, words that might have come straight from Millie Porcelli: "I don't want to see your rings floating around school. I don't want to see your girlfriends wearing them. You earned those rings, and if you'd like to give them to somebody, give them to your parents. Or put the rings away, and one

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Later, as the cafeteria clears, Porcelli pauses to reflect on a quarter-century of teaching and coaching.

"I wouldn't want to be a kid today," he says. "They have too many distractions and are forced to deal with so much more than I was. Some of my players have been in family situations that seemed unimaginable a generation ago. At least half my kids are growing up in single-parent homes, and mostly the parent who's missing is the father. That's where a coach can help, can provide that role model and a few well-chosen words of encouragement and discipline."

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The cultural change, says Porcelli, has also altered the way he believes a coach must relate to his players.

"My coaches knew little about me or my family," he says. "To be a successful coach today, you have to know whose folks are splitting up or whose mom or dad just lost a job. You have to keep your eyes open or some kids will fall through the cracks. Football can be the most dependable thing kids have going on in their lives."

Porcelli believes the old-fashioned style of coach—the drill instructor wannabe—would be destructive in today's environment. "In my day, coaches tried to motivate you through humiliation," he says. "My sophomore year in high school I was still a fullback. I'd been one since I started playing sandlot, and I liked the position. But one day the head varsity coach came up to me in the locker room and said, 'Porcelli, you're too slow to play fullback for me. You're gonna have to be a line-man.' I was embarrassed, and I wouldn't disrespect a player like that in front of his peers. He would withdraw emotionally.

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Porcelli

You have to take a player aside and explain the situation until he understands."

Porcelli's willingness to be sensitive to the finer points of male teenage psychology should not be mistaken for a reluctance to use his authority. When a group of his players were caught cutting school during the 1999 season, Porcelli suspended them from the team—no matter that the suspensions might threaten the team's winning streak or a shot at another championship.

"I think teenagers are looking for adults to set boundaries and force them to follow the rules," Porcelli says. "Many parents seem hesitant to do that, and coaches shouldn't make the same mistake. I'm not sure why parents hesitate. I sense they're afraid for their children to fail and are always trying to make things right. Maybe they work too many hours and feel they're not around enough for their children. Or maybe they're divorced and feel guilty about that. Either way, the result is that a lot of teenagers appear to feel their parents won't push them to grow up."

To address some of these issues, Porcelli instituted several postseason programs for his players, which may seem innovative but in fact come straight out of Millie and John Sr.'s playbook. Beginning in January, the coach meets with every player. "We discuss how things went with football and what they hope to accomplish next season," he says. "Then we discuss their performance in class."

At Morristown, once the season is over, the players participate in a three-day-a-week after-school conditioning program. The benefits to the athletes are obvious. What is less apparent is that it enables Porcelli to touch base with his players. The same is true of Morristown's summer conditioning program. As athletic director, Porcelli must be at the high school during July and August, so for a few hours every weekday morning and afternoon, he opens the weight room and encourages his players to come by if they're not working or on vacation. That allows Porcelli to let his players know he's available if they need him. They also know that the coach will hear about any summertime nonsense, which tends to keep it to a minimum. On Tuesday evenings, Porcelli holds a scrimmage on the football field, and it is here that for another generation of teenagers he re-creates the joys of his boyhood summers on the Clinton School

playground.

"Accomplishing something on the football field and in the classroom go hand-in-hand," says Porcelli. "One of the best examples I've seen is Owen Ritzie."

At the beginning of the 1999 season, Ritzie, a 5-foot-6, 145-pound junior, kept telling his coach that he should play tailback. Ritzie had earned a letter on special teams as a sophomore, but Porcelli wasn't sure he could handle the larger role.

"Owen was persistent," says Porcelli. "And I finally got smart enough to listen to him. He was a star for us this year on offense and defense. Owen has faced some significant challenges in his personal life, and as he became a standout on the field, his grades improved dramatically. He's become an excellent student."

"Coach Porcelli?" says Ritzie. "He's a father figure, and he's on us all year long, especially about school. It's not like his players get any breaks around here."

ON SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 16, AT MEMORIAL Field in Morristown, the Colonials open the 2000 season, putting their winning streak on the line against Columbia. Earlier that day, as Porcelli does before nearly every game, he will kiss his wife good-bye, then drive from their West Caldwell home to a quiet cemetery in Orange. There in the cool stone shadow of St. John's Church, he will stand before Millie Porcelli's grave. On this particular morning, the sadness might last a little longer than usual: His 48th birthday is four days away, and whenever his team plays Columbia the brighter moments of his boyhood flash behind his eyes like a highlight film, heightening his sense of loss. Yet it is not grief that brings him here, but gratitude.

"My mother would've enjoyed following my coaching career," Porcelli says. "She also would've pointed out everything she thought I was doing wrong. In so many ways, she is responsible for the values I try to pass on to my players. Visiting her at the cemetery is the only way I have of sharing the football season with her. And because of all she did for me, she deserves that gift."

He does not linger at the grave. He doesn't have to. There is another game next week, and he'll be by again. *JD*

Peter Golden, an award-winning journalist, is the author of Quiet Diplomat: A Biography of Max M. Fisher, and co-author of I Rest My Case: My Long Journey From the Castle on the Hill to Home.