

'There was no pretense in him': Friends remember Nick Corbo

Friends remember Nick Corbo's love of baseball, cars

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Posted: 05/28/2009 07:29:12 PM EDT

Updated: 05/29/2009 09:20:49 AM EDT



Nick Corbo, 65, died last week. Friends recalled his love of cars and his work as a youth baseball coach in Stamford. (Bob Luckey Jr./Staff Photographer)

Nick Corbo hoped to see another summer, and in a way you could say he did.

He died over Memorial Day weekend, when summer unofficially began.

His family will bury him on Saturday, as he asked. Nick's final wish was for a line of muscle cars to follow the hearse, and he didn't want his friends to miss work to drive in his funeral procession.

That thoughtfulness was his hallmark.

Nick, a lifelong lover of Plymouth Barracudas and Dodge Chargers from the 1960s and '70s, and a beloved baseball coach, died of cancer at 65.

After The Advocate published a story May 1 about how Nick's friends from New Jersey came to Stamford to take him for one last ride in a muscle car, notes and calls poured in. Most recalled the kindnesses Nick showed them at car shows and swap meets, and how he took good care of the young ballplayers in Stamford's Babe Ruth leagues during 30 years of coaching.

A friend and fellow coach, Stamford attorney Dan McCabe, said he will most remember that Nick was full of fun. That was clear the day they met 13 years ago.

"I was a button-down, tuck your shirts in, nice and orderly type of coach," McCabe said. "Nick comes wheeling out on the field in an old pickup with kids hanging off the back, kids all over the place, shirts hanging out, hats turned backwards. I said, what the heck is that? It looked like an episode of 'Hogan's Heroes' or 'F-Troop.' "

It was a classic Stamford clash -- North Stamford McCabe vs. West Side Corbo.

"We thought that game would be a walk in the park. It was anything but," McCabe said. "Nick was serious. He really knew baseball. He knew how to position his players, when to hit, what pitches to throw. He knew how to coach, and the kids loved him. He had some tough kids, but he had a way, a magic. We had a decent team, but he beat us."

They became friends.

"He made people comfortable. There was no pretense in him," McCabe said.

His respect increased after he saw how Nick coached his son, McCabe said.

"I went to the hospital when Nick was near the end, when his voice was a whisper, a rattle. He told a story about my son," McCabe said. "My son was not feeling well, but he showed up at the field. They needed nine players to start the game, so he played. He made a terrific catch and got a hit."

Under the rules, the team could lose a player mid-game without having to forfeit, "so my son ran off the field, went home and rested for an hour, then came back and finished the game," McCabe said. "Nick said, 'He's part of baseball history.' That was the last thing he said to me.

"To me, the circle was complete," McCabe said. "It was Nick thinking about the kids, as he always did."

Nick wanted to live until August so he could watch one more Sharkey Laurenno Tournament at Cubeta Stadium. For 23 years, he helped run the tournaments and raised \$180,000 in scholarship money for Babe Ruth ballplayers.

His friend of 27 years, Lou Sclafani, helped him. They met in high school but got to know each other when Sclafani's sons played in the Stamford American Babe Ruth League.

"His passion for the game and his devotion to teaching the fundamentals have endeared him to players and parents," Sclafani, too upset to discuss Nick's death, wrote in an e-mail. "Nick was a happy-go-lucky guy -- a generous, sensitive human being and a great friend. I will miss him dearly."

Nick was worried about the Sharkey Laurenno Tournament, Sclafani said.

"This is going to be a tough year, with the bad economy," Sclafani said. "It was very close to his heart."

Nick won't be at the tournament, and it's not clear whether he'll get his last wish.

He told his daughter, Tina, about it weeks ago and repeated it in the hospital.

"When he was feverish and losing his voice and wearing an oxygen mask, he said, 'Don't forget about the cars,' " Tina said.

But his muscle car friends from New Jersey, who brought a 1971 Barracuda to Stamford a few weeks ago to take him for a last ride, may not be able to drive in the funeral procession.

Bob Pontrelli of Toms River, N.J., said he is trying to find out.

"Most of our cars are apart. They haven't been put back together yet," Pontrelli said.

The Coachmen Rod & Custom Car Club in Norwalk hopes to send a member or two when Nick is buried Saturday after a 10:30 a.m. Mass at Sacred Heart Church, 37 Schuyler Ave. He will be buried in St. John's Cemetery in Darien.

Besides his daughter, Tina, he is survived by his wife, Linda, and a brother, Jimmy, who lives in Phoenix. Visiting hours are 4 p.m. to 8 p.m. today at Lacerenza Funeral Home, 8 Schuyler Ave.

"He's my hero," Tina said.

-- The Sharkey Laurenno Tournament is scheduled for Aug. 1-10 at Cubeta Stadium in Scalzi Park on Bridge Street in Stamford. The entrance fee for a team is \$400; for spectators, a \$3 donation is requested. Trophies are awarded to the top two teams in each division. Profits from the concession stand benefit the scholarship fund, as do raffle ticket sales. First prize is four N.Y. Giants tickets; second prize is two N.Y. Knicks tickets and a \$200 gift certificate to Dylan Prime steakhouse in Manhattan; third prize is four New York Yankees tickets; fourth prize is a \$200 gift certificate to Noelle Spa for Beauty & Wellness; and fifth prize is a \$100 gift certificate to Stop & Shop. Organizers also send out a mailing for donations.

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