

TOUCHING ALL THE BASES

by John J. Fontana, Executive Director,
Connecticut State High School Coaches Association



Rob Szymaszek “Life is Good”



I do not profess to be a writer, but after hearing that Rob Szymaszek passed on I sat thinking about him and our friendship over the years, especially the last six or seven years. It is my hope that in these few paragraphs you get to understand how and why he was so loved as he touched so many lives.

Rob's book that is being released is entitled "Life is Good" and even though he was battling cancer, he never retreated from this belief. Rob found out in 2001 that he had developed a brain tumor and, like every great coach, he fought and lived every day like he was going to live forever. He believed God kept him alive to help support other people and their families who had been told they had cancer. He struggled to beat it to the very end. The proof of his spirit to live on amazed me. When I sat by his bedside two days before his passing, I held his hand and was stunned by the grip and pressure he constantly applied while squeezing my hand.

Rob and I talked almost every day for a few minutes over these past six years, if not on the phone, in the car going to meetings, or I would pick him up and drive him to some appointed destination. When I think of Coach Rob Szymaszek, words like **friendship**, **loyalty**, **commitment** and **love** easily flow into my thoughts. I knew Rob for many years, but these past six really showed me the true individual.

Rob's love for his wife, Diane, and daughter, Jennifer, was hard to put into words, but when he talked about them you could sense his great feelings. It was hard for Rob to ever miss a football game let alone the Connecticut/Rhode Island All-Star game which he had helped put together. In the past few years he missed a couple, because he called me and said I am taking Diane away on vacation, because it could

be our last. Then Rob would apologize every day for a month, because he thought he was letting everyone down. Every once in a while during the past few months, he would snap something out to Diane or anyone else without realizing what he had done. He would then continually ask me, 'John, was I wrong in what I said and how I said it, because I love her too much to hurt her.' This was Rob the family man.

Rob's favorite word to the coaches association or to any job or coaching duty was the word *commitment*. This past June he had Steve Filippone take him to our All-Star game at Rentschler Field. He arrived at 10 AM and stayed until 9 PM when we forced him to go home. He sat on the sidelines in his wheelchair alongside Len Corto and me, while we tried to convince him many times to go home and rest. That favorite word shot from his mouth, 'John, I made a commitment to this game!' When he made a commitment to something you could chisel it in stone – it was forever.

In the past few years, Rob made many trips to meet with people who had cancer to offer his support and the encouragement he believed they needed to beat it. I drove him a couple of times to meet with youngsters who were diagnosed with cancer. He would sit by the hour talking to them and lifting their spirits. He would say to me in the car, 'I believe God let me live to do this job.' He made these visits even while undergoing his own chemo and radiation treatments.

When Rob was head coach at Maloney he would annually take his players to the Franciscan nun's complex in Meriden to do work and he would always help the nuns with whatever they needed. A couple of times he called and asked me to come and drive him there. When we got there, we would sit for two to three hours talking to them. To this day, I don't know whose friendship and love was greater – the Franciscan nuns for Rob or vice versa.

Rob's loyalty to Meriden, Maloney High School and his football players was almost carried to an extreme. When he talked about his coach, Ed McGee, Bill Papallo, Senator Tom Gaffey and many

more, his eyes would glisten. Many times Rob would call and say, 'John, can we help this player get into this school?' or, even if it was Maloney's rival, Platt, 'How do we get this youngster on this All-Star team? He was overlooked.' Many times when I went over to his guidance office to go to a meeting he would say to me, 'Please wait, this youngster has a problem.' I remember waiting outside his office for more than an hour as he helped this child. He treated all youngsters, not just players, as family and this is sometimes hard to do. Recently, the city of Meriden named the Maloney High School football field in his honor which he told me meant so much to him. It was great to see the city recognize Rob for all his dedication to the youth of Meriden while he was still alive.

Rob impacted many other football coaches as well. On a weekly basis he would hear from football coaches such as Dave Campo from the Jacksonville Jaguars; George DeLeone, Temple University; Paul Pasqualoni, Dallas Cowboys; Steve Adazio, University of Florida; and so many more who held a special place in their hearts for Rob.

Rob Szymaszek touched so many people, it would be hard to mention everyone. I hope I did him some justice in this article for you coaches who did not know him – truly he was a special person.

I personally will be lost without our daily phone calls, car rides or meetings. We had our disagreements concerning issues in the Connecticut High School Coaches Association, but never did we let it affect our friendship. Rob and I had a special relationship and although it was never spoken, we loved each other as brothers. Everyone in this state is better off for having known Rob. The ones who have lost out the most, because of his shortened life, are the youngsters of the future whom he never got to coach and never was able to guide with his wisdom and love. He will be sorely missed. Life is good.