

Lakeland and West Milford softball teams place rivalry aside in honoring former player

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The high school sports rivalry between Lakeland and West Milford is a natural one.

The two schools are connected by geography - they both take in students from northern Passaic County - and they have a long history of competing against each other athletically. There are also plenty of connections between the people, right down to individual families, from the respective school communities.

As a result of it all, games between Lakeland and West Milford always mean more than others that they play. But when it comes to the sport of softball, any sort of fire and intensity is superseded by goodwill and sportsmanship.

The reason for that comes down to one name: Darlene Dondero.

Dondero was a standout pitcher at Lakeland, where she graduated in 1991. Prior to her arrival on the high school scene, where she earned All-County and All-State honors, her father, Bob, was the head coach for 10 years at West Milford, where he also taught for 29 years.

Aside from her softball skill, Darlene was a such a high-class individual that she received an appointment to the United States Military Academy at West Point, N.Y., less than an hour away from her home in Ringwood.



She continued to excel as a pitcher on the Army West Point softball team. But it was during one weekend during her junior season in 1994 when tragedy struck.

Darlene and her family hosted several teammates for Easter weekend. And on the way back to West Point on Sunday night, the car she was a passenger in was involved in an accident, and Darlene did not survive. She was 21 years old.

The North Jersey softball community was shaken by the news. So was the entire academy at West Point, where she is buried.

In the 29 years since, Darlene's memory has not faded. Among other things, the West Point softball MVP each year receives an award in her name. The team still wears her uniform number on its batting helmets. In Passaic County, there are several scholarship awards in her name, and a field in Darlene's hometown memorializes her. Lakeland softball retired her number 17, which the players proudly wear on their sleeve.

The current coaches of the two teams - Laura Junta at Lakeland and Nikki Gwinnett at West Milford - also do their part by making sure each player knows her story when they join their respective varsity.



The West Milford and Lakeland teams pictured with Bob and Marilyn Dondero after their recent game



Darlene Dondero

“We always say to the girls that we wear the number 17 on our shirt, and we always emphasize to the girls who Darlene was, who she was to Lakeland, to North Jersey in general and as a Cadet,” Junta said. “It’s really something we take pride in. When freshmen come in, we’ll talk to them and make sure her memory stays alive.”

At West Milford, the importance goes very deep. Gwinnett and Dondero were summer softball teammates, and she’s known her family going back to those days.

“She was one of the most amazing people around,” Gwinnett said. “And I’ve known the Dondero’s since I was 14 years old.”

Perhaps the most well-known thing attached to her name is the Darlene Dondero Classic, a one-day event that involves most of the teams in Passaic County, and is headlined by one of the two annual matchups between Lakeland and West Milford.

This year’s Darlene Dondero Classic was scheduled for April 15 at Back Beach Park in Wanaque. The early contests were played, but in what seems like an annual happening, the feature game was rained out.

That was no problem, since Lakeland and West Milford played a stand-alone game several days

later at Addice Park in Wanaque. Lakeland won, 8-4, despite West Milford’s Krista Keller hitting three home runs.

Once again, aside from the game itself, the focus of the afternoon was on sportsmanship and the memory of Darlene Dondero. It’s also worthy of recognition as part of the NJSIAA Sportsmanship Series, presented by JAG-ONE Physical Therapy.

“The rivalry between the schools is a friendly one in most cases, family-oriented with lots of connections among Lakeland and West Milford graduates,” noted Bob Dondero. “Many grads teach and coach at the opposing schools.”

The Dondero family is a great example of that. Bob graduated from Lakeland in 1961, and his wife Marilyn in 1963. Their son, Darren, graduated there in 1988, three years prior to Darlene.

Bob also taught at West Milford for 29 years, while Marilyn taught in the Ringwood District from 1967-1969 and from 1988 until 2011. The Dondero’s were Ringwood residents from 1967 until 2011, and have resided in West Milford since.

Their presence means they are still involved in the community, particularly when it comes to the Darlene Dondero Classic, and with the meetings between the schools.

The softball rivalry, though, is different from games between the two in other sports. And it’s all because of the talented girl who wore No. 17 inside the pitching circle for Lakeland.



Darlene’s parents, Bob and Marilyn, flanked by West Milford coach Nikki Gwinnett (left) and Lakeland coach Laura Junta (right)

“Laura and I always talk about what an important game it is, and what its meaning is all about,” Gwinnett said. “We have to tell our kids about Darlene, since it was a long time ago, and I send a bio to them about how Darlene was a great teammate, a great person and an even better student. It’s a very emotional game. Lakeland is one of our biggest rivals, which adds more emotion. It’s meaningful, it’s important, and we’re always celebrating Darlene even though she was a Lancer. The Dondero’s are also very near and dear to my heart. I’m proud of what Laura and I have established in making it a friendly rivalry. It’s tough because of the overall rivalry between the two schools, but we’ve made it so the girls respect each other. That’s what’s most important.”

Although Junta came on the scene after Darlene passed away, she remembers participating in the Dondero Classic when she played at Eastern Christian, where she graduated in 2000.



Francesca Medici of the Lakeland softball team shows off the retired No. 17 that each Lancer player wears on their right sleeve

“Nikki and I have worked to make it a good, healthy rivalry,” Junta said. “I think the Darlene Dondero Classic has really paid tribute to that, to make sure both teams are supporting each other. A healthy rivalry is always good. It’s great to help keep her memory alive and still connect with her family.” Most impressively, the players fully understand the importance of the person they are honoring, and the resulting connection between the programs.

“I really like playing as a team against them,” said Lakeland senior Francesca Medici. “It’s always a fun game. I first heard about Darlene my sophomore year, because we didn’t have a freshman season. It’s very sad, but I’m glad that we are honoring her. A lot of coaches from other teams also see the number on our sleeves and ask. It’s nice to tell them about it, and what it represents.”

Those feelings also hold true for the players at West Milford.

“It’s very meaningful,” said Keller, the player who hit three home runs in the game. “People in our community knew her and know her family, so it’s special to be a part of a tribute for her. I first learned about her my freshman year. A rivalry is a rivalry, but to put feelings aside to recognize a great girl is very special.”

Those thoughts resonate deeply with Bob and Marilyn Dondero.

“Yes, it is gratifying to know that Darlene was so loved and respected,” they said. “It warms our hearts that her memory is kept alive and her legacy is honored.”

“To know Darlene was to love her,” they added. “She had the knack of making everyone feel special and important to her. She touched many lives, and with the scholarship awards in her memory, she continues to do so.”

Perhaps most meaningful of all, Darlene’s parents noted how thrilled they are - and how honored their daughter would be - to have her name associated with sportsmanship and how the concept has become the core of the Lakeland vs. West Milford softball series.

“We are thrilled that good sportsmanship continues all these many years,” the Dondero’s said. “We thank the coaches and players who make that happen year after year. We believe that Dar is smiling down on all of us and cheering us on to continue to be the best we can be and love each other always.”