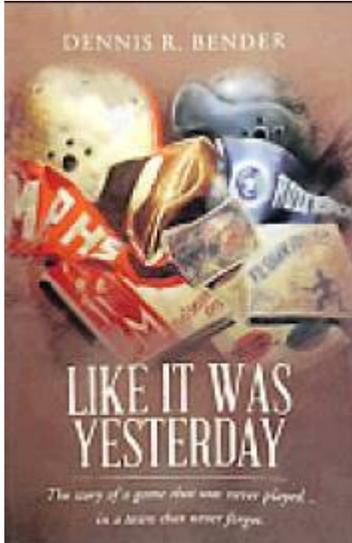


Bender revisits 1954 MP-Terrace football game

by bill buell Gazette Reporter



In Dennis Bender's own circle of friends, no one ever tires of talking about the 1954 football game between Mont Pleasant and Nott Terrace that never happened. He's hoping people will enjoy reading about it as well.

"Both teams were unbeaten and had racked up something like 300 points while allowing only 16," said Bender, whose new book, "Like it was Yesterday," focuses on the 1954 high school football season in which both Schenectady schools had 5-0 records as they prepared to square off in their annual Election Day contest that November. "It was a huge rivalry, a really big thing. It was a game these kids start dreaming about playing in when they're in sixth grade."

The game never took place because of a polio outbreak that effected both teams. Danny Monaco, a senior fullback and co-captain for MP, was struck with paralytic polio during a Saturday practice before Tuesday's game, and within 24 hours it was learned that Sonny DeVito, a reserve fullback for Nott Terrace, was also diagnosed with paralytic polio.

"Polio was a big threat back then, and 1953 and '54 were some of the worst years for polio in America," said Bender, who was a sophomore at Mont Pleasant that year. "They came out with the vaccine the following year, but that was too late to help Danny and Sonny, and it was usually only given to younger children."

Back in the 1950s, Nott Terrace and Mont Pleasant often played their games at McNerney Stadium, home to the Schenectady Blue Jays, a minor league baseball team. Larry Mulvaney was the Mont Pleasant head coach and Pete Shula handled the reins at Nott Terrace.

"Tickets were sold out and they were expecting at least 10,000 people," said Bender. "But they had to cancel the game and then the rest of the season. It's something people never really got over. It was kind of sad for me to revisit the whole thing, but it was also very interesting."

Bender's research for the book included looking at microfilm of old newspapers as well as interviews with people connected to the game.

"Nowadays it can be hard to get a hold of people on the phone, but I started leaving these long messages, explaining who I was and what I was doing, and emailing people," said Bender. "It was amazing. I probably talked to about 100 people for this book, and for every one of those messages I left and emails I sent out, not one person failed to get back to me. It was such a big thing in their lives and like the title of the book says, it was 'like it was yesterday.'"

Monaco and DeVito, who passed away in 2004, remained paralyzed the rest of their lives. Monaco went on to get a law degree and has homes in Florida and Saratoga Springs, while DeVito worked as a dispatcher for the city of Schenectady before retiring in 1992.

Now a Florida resident, Bender is spending two weeks back in his hometown promoting his book. He'll be at the Schenectady Athletic Hall of Fame Dinner at Proctors on Monday night, he'll have a book signing at the Open Door Bookstore on Jay Street Wednesday from 9:30-11 a.m., and he'll be attending his 60th high school reunion Friday at the Turf Tavern in Scotia.

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