

Smith leaves a legacy with Wagner athletics

Outgoing college president made a profound impact on improvements in Seahawk facilities and academic gains

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STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE

When Norman Smith leaves Wagner College for England and American University of London some time next month, he'll leave a sports legacy.

Undoubtedly, some Staten Islanders and some coaches who have had to deal with Smith's formulas for financial aid will take exception to that statement.

The coaches, almost all of whom were not at Wagner when Smith became president 14 years ago, can be forgiven for their reaction, but Staten Islanders who were here then are guilty of short or selective memory.

"I remember Norman's first day," Wagner athletic director and football coach Walt Hameline said yesterday. First, Hameline was told budgets had to be cut to save the financially floundering institution.

Then, Hameline took Smith for a tour of Sutter Gymnasium. Sutter, with its two squash courts and tiny weight room beneath the basketball court was the sum total of recreational facilities for the student body — and really, the school's athletic facilities.

"The staff," Hameline remembered, "was downstairs painting the lockers." The football "stadium," was aptly named Fischer Field. It was just that — an open field surrounded by the remnants of a cinder track, something from that sport's dark ages. The football surface was in such bad condition in the mid-1970s that one of the team doctors warned the administration that the field could cause players' injuries.

The baseball and softball teams shared Willetts Field with the softball diamond and its cutouts in baseball's centerfield.

On spring mornings and fall after-

noons, it was beaten up when it tripled as the football team's practice field.

Occasionally, Smith's manner rubbed people — even sportswriters — the wrong way, but in retrospect, he had more vision than any of us, and that vision proved contagious. Just ask Donald Spiro who donated the millions for the new gym and football stadium.

Spiro Center upset some in the community who were looking for an arena, something which could seat 5,000 spectators. Not that we have anything here — not even Curtis-St. Peter's on Thanksgiving eve or the SIHSL basketball tournament — which could come close to filling that size facility.

Smith's vision, though, was for something more: A picturesque gym which seats 2,500 and recreational facilities for the student body. There's a pool. There's an exercise room, a free weight room, and an aerobics room which students use from early morning until the facility closes. And, there are actually offices for members of the athletic staff who were bumping into one another in the old gym.

Fischer Field, a football "stadium" each fall when temporary seating was installed, is now a real stadium with permanent seating for 3,000 and with lockers, a weight room (which gets athletes out of the rest of the student body's way), an equipment room, and a trainer's room beneath the stands.

There's an all-weather track around the football field. The latter can now be maintained because there's a sprinkler system built in. And there's a practice field behind the stadium which is now lighted, courtesy of Elsie Love. Willetts Field is now strictly a baseball field with an infield and outfield not beaten up by softball and football.

And, except for those who would be in favor of high-rise apartments being constructed down Howard Avenue to Clove Road, this community owes Smith who had the vision — there's that word again — to purchase the former Augustinian Academy.

That's where Wagner's women's softball players and the men's and women's lacrosse teams practice and play now (although women's lacrosse plays its matches at the football stadium), and that's why green is the predominant color at the bottom of Howard Avenue. Surely, Title IX colored Smith's thinking, but in the last decade, Wagner has added six sports for women — soccer, volleyball, golf, lacrosse, swimming and water polo — and lacrosse for men.

Full-time athletic staff has nearly doubled to 25, and part-timers and grad assistants now exceed 60. This at a school where in the last stages of the Bob Hicks football era, Hicks was refused a single grad assistant.

One more item, perhaps most important of all. A month ago, U.S. News and World Report's cover story surveyed 303 colleges and highlighted what it called America's Best College Sports Programs — at a time when it was revealed that zero percent of basketball power Cincinnati's players earned degrees.

The magazine compared overall graduation rates to scholarship athlete graduation rates. Out of those 303 schools, Wagner ranked 15th: 80 percent of those who received athletic financial aid graduated as compared to 72 percent of Wagner's general student body.

If, as Norman Smith's critics claim, he was indifferent to athletics, then future generations of Wagner athletes can only hope the next administration is as indifferent.