



To Vieira, Petrucciano 'star of show'

CHRIS ELSBERRY

Article Last Updated: 06/07/2008 08:47:14 PM EDT

BRIDGEPORT — He wasn't a troublemaker, not really, but trouble seemed to always find Porky Vieira. A fight here, a fight there. A lot of dumb stuff. As Porky tells it, one day while he was at the Middle Street Boys Club, Vieira's older brother, Gus, was giving him another lecture on his behavior when he pointed over to a kid shooting baskets.

"Maybe if you acted more like him, you might not get in so much trouble," Gus told Porky.

The kid was Ernie Petrucciano.

Over the years, Porky and Ernie became as close as brothers. They played high school basketball together at Central, winning the state championship and the New England Championship in 1950. They played college basketball at Quinnipiac, each being inducted into the school's athletic Hall of Fame. As kids, they played baseball together for the White Eagles and Lenox in the Senior City League. As 85-pounders, they played basketball at Madison Square Garden in New York City and in the Boston Garden.

Ernie was the best man at Porky's wedding.

It was a lifelong friendship.

Petrucciano passed away on May 29. He was 75. Along with playing college basketball at Quinnipiac, he also played for Arnold College before heading off for a tour of duty in the Army, helping the team to the Division II finals.

"He was a wonderful guy," Vieira said last week. "Ernie was a great friend. Very soft-spoken. He was a great, great basketball player. I wanted to be just like him."

While Porky went on to become Quinnipiac's all-time leading scorer, in high school (and at Middle Street), Petrucciano was the "star of the show," as Vieira put it.

"Ernie was Mr. Basketball when we were kids," Vieira said. "When we'd play as 85-pounders before the (Bridgeport) Newfields games under (coach) Perry Pilotti at the Armory, Ernie would be like the featured performer. He was incredible."

Petrucciano was the starting guard for the 1950 Central High team under coach Ed Reilly that won the state and New England titles. Back then, Reilly played his five starters the entire game. Vieira was the sixth man. So if the Hiltoppers were comfortably ahead, Petrucciano would intentionally foul out to allow Vieira to play the last couple of minutes. "I loved him for that, just letting me play a little," Vieira said.

It was that friendship that helped Vieira to slowly erase that troublemaker image and start a baseball coaching career at the University of New Haven that lasted 44 years.

"Ernie took me under his wing, I think, because of Gus. I had to prove myself to Ernie before he became my friend," Vieira said. "I had to go to school every day and then go to the (boys) club to work. Middle Street became like a second home to us. Seeing him every day, finally gaining Ernie's acceptance was so special for me.

"It was Ernie that got me back into college. I had messed things up at Arnold and flunked out. I was working at the (Bridgeport) Brass Factory when Ernie



talked (basketball coach) Tuffie Maroon into taking me at Quinnipiac."

Between 1953-57, Vieira scored 2,649 points as Petrucciano graciously stepped aside and let Porky have the spotlight.

"I wouldn't have been able to do anything without him. He's the one that got me the ball," Vieira said. "When he got drafted into the Army, I wanted to jump off the top of West Rock. What was I going to do without him?"

After college, the two played briefly in the Connecticut State League, but Petrucciano soon hung up the sneakers for good, working for the state of Connecticut's Sheriff's Department. "Ernie just kind of packed it up after college," Vieira said. "He just didn't want to play much any more."

When Vieira retired as baseball coach at New Haven in 2006, it allowed him to do something he hadn't been able to do for the last 40-plus years: reconnect with his good friend.

"That's been the best thing, these last couple of years, being able to stay in touch," Vieira said. "Coaching takes up so much time, it's crazy. But we got back together and I'm so happy for that. Ernie and I had lunch together just a week before he passed. Thank God for that. We were friends for 65 years. I'll miss him terribly."

Contact Chris Elsberry at celsberry@ctpost.com