

Fairfield County Sports Night -- Hilaire is honored as Chelsea Cohen Courage Award winner

Posted on 10/21/2009

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GREENWICH -- As a goalkeeper, James Hilaire's soccer career was built around having a strong dislike for the forwards he was so successful at stopping.

The fact he was almost accidentally killed by one of those forwards had nothing to do with it.

On Monday night at the Fairfield County Sports Commission's 5th annual Sports Night banquet, Hilaire, a Stamford High graduate who went on to play at the University of New Haven, was the recipient of the 2009 Chelsea Cohen Courage Award.

Cohen is a former Norwalk High School girls soccer player who thrived as a high-scoring forward for the Bears. She passed away in 2006 after a two-year battle with cancer.

The irony of Cohen's chosen sport and preferred position was not lost on Hilaire, who addressed the issue with the near capacity crowd during his acceptance speech.

"Chelsea was a very good forward in soccer and I was a good goalkeeper," he said. "As a goalkeeper, I didn't like forwards. But I like Chelsea. She's not here any more, but I am still here and her spirit will always be with us."

Last fall, Hilaire was in goal for New Haven during a road game at Merrimack College in Massachusetts. With 27 minutes left in the game, Hilaire collided with Merrimack's Robbie Sabadoz.

Sabadoz's knee struck Hilaire in the head, causing a vein in the goalkeeper's head to rupture and breaking his jaw, as well.

He was rushed to a local hospital where doctors didn't think he'd survive the night. He was quickly transferred to a Boston hospital where he was in a coma for eight days. He later dodged death again when a blood clot was found in his lung.

A little more than one year later, a fit-looking Hilaire returned to the Merrimack soccer field and also to the visit the hospital that saved his life.

Then, a few days later, Hilaire walked into the Hyatt Regency Greenwich proud to accept the award.

"It means a lot," Hilaire said before the ceremony started. "She was a soccer player, also, and that's special. Her mom and her dad and her brother, they are just incredible. I'm so proud of this award and I can't thank them

enough."

The award was presented to Hilaire by Cohen's twin brother, Dan. Her parents, Larry Cohen and Barbara Rittner, were also on the dais during the presentation.

The Cohen Award is handed out as part of the Fairfield County Hall of Fame inductions.

Six people from throughout Fairfield County joined the regional Hall of Fame on Monday, as well.

Former UConn stars Jen Rizzotti and Charles Smith, who were inducted into the Jackie Robinson professional wing; Westport golfer Dick Siderowf, a two-time British Amateur and three-time Connecticut Open champ, and New Canaan's Pete Demmerleand were inducted into the James O'Rourke Amateur Wing; and Joe Benanto of Shelton and Terry Lowe of Greenwich in the J. Walter Kennedy Community Service wing of the Hall.

The Bill Gonillo Local Sports Media Award was given to The Hour's associate sports editor George Albano, who also serves as a staff writer for The Stamford Times.

Norwalk's Mark Kurimai received the Special Olympics Sports Person of the Year for his 29 years of giving to that organization in his hometown.

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