

The ADVOCATE

Stamford hedgegie revives UNH football

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Stamford resident and hedge fund manager Ralph DellaCamera paid for the synthetic turf football field at his alma mater, the University of New Haven. (contributed photo)

Ralph DellaCamera Jr. says he owes his success in the hedge fund industry to his love of football and his alma mater, the University of New Haven.

The Stamford resident has shown his gratitude to the school by funding the installation of a synthetic turf surface on the UNH football field in hopes of giving student-athletes the opportunity to attend college, much as he wanted to do as a student at North Branford High School.

DellaCamera, who graduated from UNH in 1975, was a leading player on his high school football team when a detached retina ended his dream of attending college on an athletics scholarship.

"It was devastating. It just destroyed me. I was a pretty good athlete," said DellaCamera, whose goal of attending college was rekindled when he became part of a construction crew at UNH, and met a admissions officer at the school.

After four years of classes and summers working in construction, he earned his bachelor's degree in marketing and headed into the world of finance, eventually starting his hedge fund firm, New York-based DellaCamera Capital Management, where he is a managing member and chief investment officer.

"I got lucky and went to Wall Street and found my calling," said DellaCamera, who became a regular donor to his college. "I love football, and the school did a lot for me. They made a bet on me, and the bet worked. You can't forget where you come from."

He certainly hasn't forgotten his blue-collar upbringing and work ethic.

"I've been around mobsters, drug addicts, Wall Street types and Ivy Leaguers. I can get along with anyone. When I was there, UNH was a blue-collar commuter school," said DellaCamera, who is proud that the university has emerged as an academic leader on various fronts, including as the home of the Henry C. Lee College of Criminal Justice and Forensic Sciences.

DellaCamera's commitment to his alma mater led to an invitation from UNH President Steve Kaplan to serve on the board of governors, where he pushed for the re-start of the football program, which was dropped in 2003 and reborn this year.

His idea was supported by the board, Kaplan and Debbie Chin, the UNH director of athletics.

DellaCamera's vision didn't stop there. He funded the installation of the blue and gold artificial Sprinturf field, as well as a media box and scoreboard. He did not disclose the level of his donation, saying only that the cost was "more than six figures."

The novelty of the UNH Chargers playing on a blue field, however, was not missed by Boise State University, which has the only other blue field in the nation. Boise State objected to UNH having a blue field, contending that it was one of its marketing tools, DellaCamera said, crediting the NCAA for helping the two schools reach an agreement that allowed UNH to keep its colors, but mandating that no other college football fields can be blue.

UNH agreed to name the 3,500-seat stadium Ralph F. DellaCamera Stadium after the Stamford resident's father. The Chargers dedicated the stadium last month with a homecoming weekend win over Stonehill College.

DellaCamera had several reasons for supporting the reinstatement of football -- a main one being the attention that a football program can bring to a school, as well as the fact that former UNH football coach Tony Sparano is head coach of the Miami Dolphins and former coach Mark Whipple was an assistant coach for the Pittsburgh Steelers and Philadelphia Eagles.

Dropping football in 2003 was a contentious decision, but the board saw it as a necessity to control costs, said Chin, noting that UNH was not in a conference.

"We were so good that Division II schools in the Northeast didn't want to schedule us. We had to travel to play. It became cost-prohibitive," said Chin, director of athletics since 1993. "The alums weren't very happy, and neither was I."

The school since has joined the Northeast-10 Conference, reducing travel.

Chin credits DellaCamera for the re-emergence of the program.

College athletic programs are eager recipients of donations from loyal alumni, said Jim Ferris, director of the Center for Philanthropy at the University of Southern California.

"The ones you hear about are the larger ones because they get more press," he said.