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Joseph Cloidt: Reflections of 33 years By JOE GALLO



Cloidt stands outside the gymnasium of the Chatham Middle School and watches as an excited group of eighth graders decorates the bleachers with streamers and balloons for that night's graduation dance. It's a sad, reflective moment for Cloidt, who, after 33 years of watching naive youngsters dance in and out of that very same gymnasium, will retire in just a few weeks. Dressed

in tan slacks and a warm-up jacket, the 63-year-old Cloidt chomped on a cigar as he spoke from the quiet confines of a basement lounge in the school. At first he seemed a little hesitant to talk, but after a few moments the stories poured out of him as if they had happened only yesterday.

Born in Harlem, N.Y. in 1922, Cloidt spent his childhood in Palisades Park where his family moved in 1927. After high school he started college at York University where he participated in freshman football, track and wrestling. In his sophomore year he transferred to Panzer College in East Orange, which was later to become part of Montclair State College.

It was at Panzer that Cloidt established himself as an outstanding athlete. He co-captained the track team and was a member of the varsity football and gymnastics teams. He was so talented that in 1977 Panzer honored him as one of its first inductees into the school's athletic Hall of Fame. But in 1942 Uncle Sam beckoned and Cloidt found himself in the U.S. Marine Corps stationed in the Pacific.

It was a trip he almost didn't return from. "I remember it was April Fool's Day and we were in a boat just off of Okinawa," Cloidt recalls, "and the guys were saying that this was some April Fool's joke." A few weeks later, on Easter Sunday, Cloidt and his platoon were

moving down a hill headed towards the Okinawa capital of MaHa. From behind some brush the Japanese opened fire and two bullets ripped into Cloidt's chest. "You go through the war seeing other guys get hit but you always know that there's a bullet for you. My number just came up," he said.

As he tells the story Cloidt speaks in a slow, deliberate tone. But a moment later, he gives out a hearty laugh, breaking the tension, and begins to talk about his "horrible experience" with sea sickness. By 1946 he was back at Panzer finishing his college studies. He graduated in 1947 and began teaching physical education at Carteret Prep in West Orange. After school he coached football, baseball and junior varsity basketball while still finding time to play in a semi-pro football league in Bergen County.

In 1950 Cloidt came to Chatham Borough and began an illustrious career as a teacher and coach. "I have so many fine memories here," Cloidt said. "In my job you get to see kids as they really are. When you see them under emotional and physical strain you see them as a complete person. "If a kid does something good all his friends give him the high-five.

If the same kid does something bad, they all get down on him as if he did it on purpose. It's moments like that when my heart really goes out to these kids." From 1950 to 1975 Cloidt coached a variety of sports including varsity track, varsity football, junior high school soccer, junior varsity basketball and varsity cross country. And from 1950 until now Cloidt has taught physical education at the Middle School. "Teaching physical education to kids at this level is a definite advantage. You can spot who the athletes are going to be and help him improve his body, his skills and his desire," he said. Of course, all those years weren't without memories.

When asked who were the best athletes he has seen over the years, Cloidt can reel off the names of dozens of ballplayers as if they were still playing today. Cloidt ranks Fred Abbingon, who graduated from the borough in 1952, as his personal favorite. Abbingon, who played soccer, basketball, baseball track, ran the mile in 4:23, which at the time was the third fastest high school mile ever. As for his favorite moment coaching, Cloidt taps without hesitation the 1965 varsity football game between Madison and Chatham Borough, won in the borough. At the time, Madison was the top ranked team in the area and boasted one of the best players in the state in Pete Jilaba, who later went on to excel at Alabama.

The game, played at Madison, featured punt returns of 60 and 70 yards by Al Schweikert of the borough that both went for touchdowns. Chatham Borough, which won the game 13-7, went on to capture the Group 1 state title that year. "That was the most exciting game I've ever coached in." Cloidt said. "It was unbelievable." But now the excitement has died down for Cloidt and it is time to move on to other things. He and his wife, Rosalie, will be moving from their home in West Millington to a new house in Sugar Mill Woods, Florida in July.

"This is something that is really important to my wife and I. I'm really looking forward to Florida," he said. Then, with the same enthusiasm that has kept him here for 33 years, Cloidt goes back upstairs to help with the gymnasium decorations one more time.

We've learned that Coach Cloidt passed away some years ago.