

St. Joseph coach Zavaletta legendary figure in academy

Gus Zavaletta was a student at St. Joseph Academy in the in 1940s. A native of Brownsville, he had attended public schools at Annie S. Putegnat Elementary and Clearwater Elementary before enrolling in St. Joseph.

He recalled that when he enrolled at St. Joseph as a 5th grader his brother was playing football for Brownsville High School, making him popular among his fellow students. This caused Gus to begin wondering why St. Joseph didn't have a well organized athletic program, like the one at Brownsville High School.

He began wondering if he should attend Brownsville High School so he could play football. And as time went by, he began to picture himself as a full-time health and physical education instructor. He could envision being able to teach boys not only in the classroom, but also how to use their physical talents on the athletic field. While still in high school, he began to use his leadership talents by organizing a boxing team.

After graduation, he entered the Marine Corps, where he organized and coached athletic teams. This brought him to the realization he wanted to become a teacher, and he decided to get a college education to learn how to teach. In 1955, he became coach at St. Joseph, where he became a legendary figure.

When he began there, the school was located near downtown on Elizabeth Street, where the athletic program and facilities were very limited. He began working with Brother Paul Urban to develop a strong athletic program. Earlier articles have described how a football field and running track were built on the school's new property near Palm Boulevard. Zavaletta built his own athletic equipment, such as weight-lifting gear, using cement, paint cans and old pipes. He had a tiny office he could barely squeeze in to, and the small shower doubled as an equipment closet.

What he lacked in facilities he made up with hard work and determination, and he instilled pride and discipline in his athletes. He wanted them to feel a sense of ownership in their facilities. They painted the bleachers, set up and removed equipment and picked up trash.

He was described as tough, but lovable. When he disciplined someone, he always came back, shook their hand and said, "Let's move forward."

And he looked after his boys. If a boy was in Matamoros and late coming home, the coach would travel across the river and see that he got home safely. He would find them summer jobs. If necessary, he would pay their tuition.

Oscar Garcia credits Coach Gus Zavaletta with helping him and many other young men understand that a life was not to be taken for granted, that each of their lives was important and that it was their responsibility to always use their lives for good. One of Zavaletta's favorite sayings was, "Good, better, best; never let it rest until your good gets better and your better gets best."

He felt that he was not only a coach, but an educator. He worked with his fellow educators for the welfare of the students and for the entire program. He felt a good coach should not only be an inspiration to his boys, but to the faculty, the community and the entire student body. He felt he must instill in his boys the desire to excel not only in athletics, but in the classroom and in their other activities.

He worked at a job he loved to do, and he developed a career that affected the lives of a generation.

Upon leaving St. Joseph, he coached at Brownsville High School, then became recreation director for the City of Brownsville, and following that, was invited to become head coach at the Institute for Technology in Monterrey, where his team won the National Championship.

In 1992, he was inducted into the Rio Grande Valley Sports Hall of Fame. He also earned a masters degree from the University of Houston and began studying for his Ph.D.

Gus Jr. is now a coach at St. Joseph, and most of his children and grandchildren are graduates.

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