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For Washington Township man who loved to punt, an online slice of football glory awaits

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STAFF WRITER | THE RECORD

Jerry Romano of Washington Township was called many things over his 18 years in minor league football: teammate, captain, champion. On Friday he will add one more title to his gridiron résumé – hall of famer.

Romano, 56, will travel on his own dime to Las Vegas, where he will be inducted into the Minor League Football Hall of Fame, capping a long, sometimes difficult and always unglamorous football career.

"Obviously I'm grateful for the honor to be nominated," Romano said. "I've had three passions in my life: my family, my business and football."

While the Pro Football Hall of Fame is a landmark in Canton, Ohio, the Minor League Football Hall of Fame exists only online, unknown even to most die-hard football fans.

The hall of fame was established in 2004 as an outgrowth of a print publication, called Minor League Football News, that had been first distributed a decade earlier, when one of its founders produced a newsletter on the photocopier in his office.

Each year, the hall's board of directors selects inductees from among the nominations it receives from hundreds of minor league teams across the United States and Europe, according to hall founder Dick Suess. The list of inductees now stands at more than 500, Suess said.

The induction ceremony itself is a no-frills affair. There are no gold jackets or bust sculptures, and relatively little pomp and circumstance. On Friday, Romano and his 11-year-old son, Peyton, will gather with 60 other inductees and their families and friends in a banquet room at Arizona Charlie's Decatur, a hotel and casino off the Strip. The former players will receive a certificate honoring their achievements, and a laser-engraved lapel pin. For \$48 per person, attendees can partake in an all-you-can-eat buffet.

Much like the players, the hall of fame directors are passionate about football and recognize the sacrifices many players make, Suess said.

"We thought we needed to honor these guys because, unlike the NFL, these players go to their jobs every day, feed their families, scrape together extra money for pads and cleats and buy insurance for themselves," Suess said.

"It's a labor of love to play minor league football, and that's why we decided to start this – and it's been growing ever since."

Romano, a punter, played on eight independent league teams. Over the course of his 18-year career, Romano said, he kicked the football approximately 48,037 yards, averaging 42.6 yards per punt, and more than 200 of his punts landed inside the opponent's 10-yard line. His longest punt soared 68 yards. He said he earned a modest salary from some teams – far short of a living wage – but he noted that many others never were paid for their playing time.

Romano didn't start punting until late in high school, he said, and he was a walk-on during his first two seasons at Montclair State College. Things started to click in 1984, his junior year, when a coach at Ramapo College coaxed him to transfer. It was at Ramapo that he began to show off his talent.



CHRIS PEDOTA/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Jerry Romano, a punter for 18 seasons, in the back yard of his Washington Township home last week. He will become a Minor League Football Hall of Famer on Friday.

"I only started punting in my senior year of high school. I was really only mediocre then," Romano said. "But it was something I knew I had a passion for, and it was one of those things where I just knew I wanted to continue to pursue it."

After college, Romano worked at different camps to "hone his skills." He said he had opportunities to try out for the Dallas Cowboys and Washington Redskins.

"At my walk-on with the Cowboys, I didn't punt well — I'm not a fabricator," Romano said, laughing. "I continued to work, though, and the next year I was invited to the Redskins camp. I made it down to the final three punters out of 30, which was exciting."

The disappointment of not reaching the National Football League didn't stop Romano from playing the game he had grown to love.

After his NFL tryouts, Romano played for a succession of minor-league teams, including the Scranton, Pa., Eagles, the Newburgh, N.Y., Raiders, and four New Jersey teams — the Oaks, the Bears, the Cougars and the Wolverines, the latter of which played their home games at Hinchliffe Stadium in Paterson.

Romano said he excelled at "directional punting" — sending the football exactly where he wanted it. He was so good at it, he said, that in practice he would punt footballs for wide receivers to catch when the quarterback was tired.

He endured his share of triumph and heartbreak, and a weekly grind that included long bus rides and "more than a few" missed family functions — all while holding down full-time jobs as a sports embroidery salesman and, later, as an entrepreneur.

"We were happy if a thousand fans showed up," Romano said. "But it wasn't easy to juggle everything. I may have missed a few things on the weekends, but it never affected my work. I made it somewhat of a religion to make sure I made it to practice two times each week — it was important to me to gain the respect of my teammates."

A back injury forced Romano to retire in 2002, he said. Today he owns a waterscape design company, Liquid Designz.

Romano said that when he is inducted into the Minor League Football Hall of Fame, he will look back fondly at all of his former teammates with whom he shared a passion for the game that drove him to step between the sidelines once a week each fall for 18 years.

"I met so many different people, from all different walks of life, that were just really genuine guys," Romano said. "Everyone had a hard-luck story, but they were all definitely talented. For me, the passion came from knowing that I had an ability to punt well and had a real enjoyment of the game."

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