

Oswego native Lazzaro to be inducted into Salem-Roanoke Baseball Hall of Fame

By MIKE LEBOEUF

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OSWEGO — Sam Lazzaro's career has covered all the bases.

On Sunday, the Oswego native will become part of an elite team in the Salem-Roanoke Baseball Hall of Fame.

"It's a great honor to be recognized and appreciated for all the hard work over the years," said Lazzaro, who earned great career success as a minor league baseball executive.

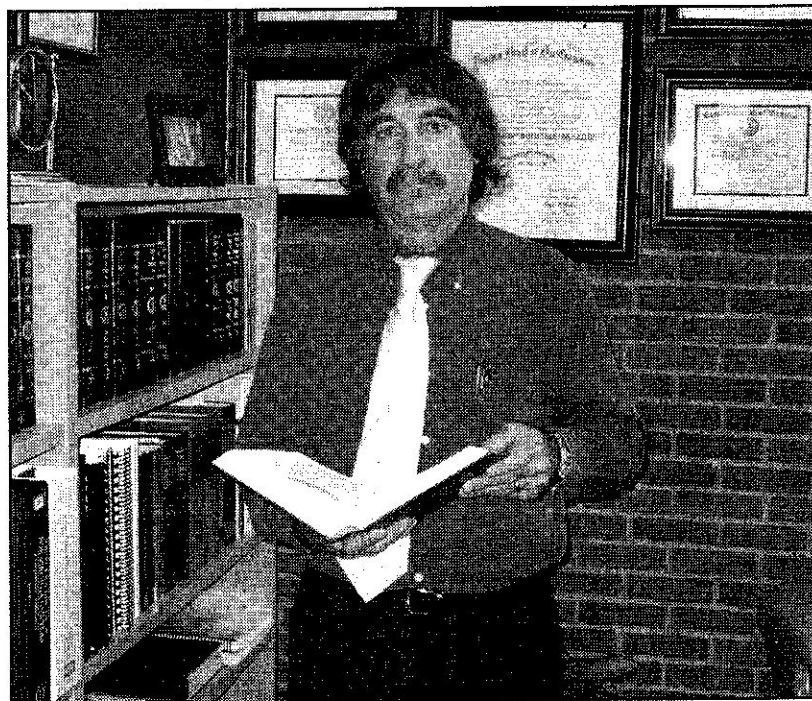
Lazzaro will be one of five in this year's induction class. The hall of fame, founded in 1991, shifted to a new building last year. The building is located adjacent to the Salem Memorial Baseball Stadium.

Lazzaro was among those who helped form the hall of fame while he was the general manager of the Salem Buccaneers of the Carolina League.

"I was standing in front of the press box talking with a reporter. We thought it would be nice to recognize the great players who had come through Salem over the years," he said. "Before we left the ballpark, we had a quorum for the (hall of fame's) board of directors."

Lazzaro credited Posey Oyler, director of the local American Legion baseball program, as a driving force for the hall of fame.

It didn't take long for the idea to



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Hall of fame career: Oswego native Sam Lazzaro carved out a successful career as a minor league baseball executive before becoming an attorney. He will be inducted Sunday into the Salem-Roanoke Baseball Hall of Fame.

become a reality.

"Within a matter of weeks we had a board meeting, and that winter was the first induction ceremony," Lazzaro said.

New York Yankees great Bobby Richardson was the keynote speaker at the first ceremony. The charter induction class included former big leaguers Dave Parker, Al

Holland, and Billy Sample.

"It only got better from there," Lazzaro said.

Several former major league players have been inducted since, and the list of legendary speakers has included Brooks Robinson, Catfish Hunter, and Tommy John.

It was special for Lazzaro to be involved with an organization that

brought baseball heroes to town.

"Baseball was always my first love," he said.

He played baseball growing up in Oswego, but did not play at the varsity or college levels.

He stayed involved with sports. After graduating from Oswego High School and SUNY Oswego, Lazzaro worked for WKFM in Fulton prior to joining WSGO in Oswego as sports director and sales representative.

He worked at WSGO from 1978-80. It was his first full-time position, and he had a special claim to fame.

"I was the first one to get all the (Oswego State) Laker hockey games on the air," he said.

He also hosted a sports call-in show, "On the Sports Scene," on Mondays.

He then took a position as director of marketing for the Eastern Hockey League's Utica Mohawks, just as the team was moving to Salem, Va. He said he was concerned about the stability of the position, so he moved on, but it was an important introduction for Lazzaro to the Salem area.

He moved back to Oswego and went to work for radio station WOLF in Syracuse, and then went to WSEN in Baldwinsville.

Baker tallied 15 points for the winners, who jumped out to a 28-9 lead after the

21-12 in the final stanza.

Mark Wallace topped Alley Cat with 19

to determine the B League playoff champion.

Lazzaro reflects on his hall-of-fame career

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He worked in sales at both stations. "That helped me hone my skills," he said.

While reading The Sporting News, he saw an ad that changed his life.

"It was an ad looking for potential baseball front office executives," Lazzaro said. He figured he had little chance of landing a job like that. "I sent a resume. I didn't even send a cover letter."

He wound up getting a call from Bobby Bragan Jr., who said that his organization owned five minor league baseball clubs. A meeting was set up with Lazzaro, Bragan, and the owner of the New York Penn League's Elmira Suns, who later became the Elmira Pioneers, a Boston Red Sox affiliate. Lazzaro became the assistant general manager of the Elmira team, and the following year was named the general manager.

In 1984, he was named the league's Executive of the Year.

"We were getting people into the seats and doing lots of promotions," Lazzaro said.

After a couple of years there, Lazzaro began getting inquiries from other teams.

"The door was open. I was getting an opportunity," he said.

He met with several teams at baseball's winter meetings in San Diego in 1985 and

had a handful of job opportunities. Also at the meetings, he was one of the keynote speakers, addressing the topic of community relations.

After considering a few of the positions available, Lazzaro made up his mind to take the job as general manager of the Salem Buccaneers of the Carolina League in 1986. It was a position that had some challenges.

"We were a Texas Rangers farm club, and the Rangers were pulling out after the 1986 season," Lazzaro said. "The ballpark did not meet major league standards."

However, the owner of the Salem team kept pursuing Lazzaro, and the more they talked, "the more I figured it would be a good fit," Lazzaro said. "He indicated he wanted me to run the club. The more I listened, the more I liked. I spent 11 years in the front office in Salem."

The Buccaneers changed their name to the Avalanche when they became affiliated with the Colorado Rockies. Lazzaro was named the Carolina League's Executive of the Year in 1989.

A big part of his success there was the construction of a new ballpark.

"We just worked and worked every day and made the connections and eventually got it done," he said. "One of my primary goals was to see the new stadium through."

After that, Lazzaro put his skills at sales

and promotions to work. "We set attendance records 10 consecutive years," he said.

He left the position after the 1996 season. There were new challenges ahead.

He started a couple of local sports magazines in the Salem area, and those magazines continue to thrive now.

Lazzaro decided to pursue a career in law. Virginia is one of only a few states that allow someone to take the bar exam without having attended law school. But Lazzaro had to serve an apprenticeship in a law office for three years. He did this while working full-time with the magazines.

"It was just something I wanted to prove to myself I could do," he said.

He passed the bar exam on his first try, and now part of his work as an attorney is a growing practice in sports law.

Lazzaro has also authored a book, "More Than a Ball Game: An Inside Look at Minor League Baseball."

Regardless of the task before him, Lazzaro has carved out career success. The upcoming hall of fame induction is the latest example. He has listened to his heart, and it has paid dividends.

"I've always followed the beat of a different drummer," he said.