

Eastern Pennsylvania Soccer Association

Hall of Fame 2024

Joseph Della Penna

George O'Neill

Karla Polli

Blaise Santangelo

Bryn Weckel



Friday, February 23, 2024

DoubleTree by Hilton

Reading, PA





2024 Hall of Fame

Welcome to the eighth induction of the Eastern Pennsylvania Soccer Association (EPSA) 2024 Hall of Fame Class of outstanding individuals. Again, this year, the ceremony is incorporated into the Awards Reception with Eastern Pennsylvania Youth Soccer. Going into the second year of my term as President of EPSA, we have continued to work together towards promoting soccer at all ages and all levels, within Eastern Pennsylvania. We have seen the opportunities for competitive play at the adult level expand, and we continue to be one of the dominant states in the USASA Region 1. Thank you, Chris Branscome and Jeff Sommer, the EPYS Board of Directors, and you, the membership, for allowing us to be a part of this event and allowing us the opportunity to honor these pioneers in Eastern Pennsylvania Adult Soccer in tonight's convocation.

Most of you here tonight, as the many who have preceded us, have been a part of this lifelong engagement, by participating within, promoting, and enjoying the game of soccer. Due to the dedicated work of so many, we now have, for the second time in less than forty years in the United States, and for the first time ever, the opportunity to bask in the excitement of hosting 2026 FIFA World Cup games in Eastern Pennsylvania. Given such great fortune, we endeavor greater engagement of present and future players who will continue building the foundation of soccer not only within Eastern Pennsylvania, but across the United States.

The five people honored with induction tonight— Joseph Della Penna, George O'Neill, Karla Polli, Blaise Santangelo and Bryn Weckel, – each exemplify the character, dedication and determination that has become the brand of Eastern Pennsylvania Soccer today. They each have donned multiple hats as they have contributed their time and effort to promote the game, especially in the areas of playing, coaching, officiating and administration. Their contributions, both past and present, impact the game of soccer at the Club, League, State, Regional, National and International levels. These five individuals helped build, and continue to sustain, the foundation for Eastern Pennsylvania Soccer that benefits each and every one of us every day.

Please join us in honoring them and their legacy.

Ron Burnett
President

BRYN WECKEL



Bryn met Len Weckel in 1989 when their league, the Eastern Pennsylvania Adult Soccer League, (EPASL) was being formed. It had just broken away from the Central Penn Soccer Association. At the time, Len was Registrar of the league and she started going to the league meetings, as well as the Eastern Pennsylvania Soccer Association (EPSA) meetings with him as league delegates.

As a result of their commitment and involvement, Bryn became Secretary of the EPASL, and Len was elected League President. Soon thereafter Len became General Secretary of EPSA. On behalf of the EPSA, they attended many USASA and USSF AGMs throughout the country as delegates or alternates, always reaching out and volunteering when necessary. Along the way, they made many friends and cherish the relationships that were formed.

Eventually Bryn took over as Registrar of their league, which at one point contained 30 teams and over 750 players – one of the largest at the time in Eastern Pennsylvania. She currently retains the title of Registrar as well as Treasurer for the EPASL, and Len is still President, and together they are looking forward to several more years of involvement at the local level. They are a team that supports each other and without their loyalty the League wouldn't be as strong as it is today.

Bryn says, "At the time I met Len in 1989 I can honestly say I knew nothing about soccer. At Len's encouragement I jumped in with both feet and have been part of local and state soccer for over 30 years." Len was also a referee so she attended many of his games and saw soccer from a different viewpoint, giving her a deep appreciation for the game.

In her "real life", Bryn was a teacher in Reading for 35 years and held many volunteer positions in various organizations: the Reading Liederkrantz where she compiled the newsletter for 16 years, Officers of Germania Soccer Club, Catholic Woman's Club, and The Ladies Ancient Order of Hibernians. She also helps Len with his involvement in the Knights of Columbus.

When she married Len he had three grown sons and she was blessed to be an instant stepmom! As the years went on, she's become grandmother to six grandchildren, and now great-grandmother to four boys. And as Bryn so succinctly states: Life is grand!



BLAISE SANTANGELO



When you think of soccer, dedication and spirit, the first person that should come to mind is Blaise Santangelo; he has been a stalwart throughout Eastern Pennsylvania his entire life. Blaise began his soccer career in high school at Archbishop Carroll, where, as an exceptional player, he was recognized as three-time All-Catholic, three-time All-Southeastern PA and two-time All-State player. He continued playing while he attended Elizabethtown College.

Post college, he played with the Ukrainian Nationals (1985-87), Allegro (1988-96) and finally with West Chester United (2004-13).

There are some things that just come naturally to people, and in this case, coaching was Blaise's calling. His ability to connect and inspire earned him the respect and dedication of his players. Naturally, from that comes championships, of which Blaise has many! West Chester United Predators have been top contenders since 2015, twice winning the National Championship in the Werner Fricker Open Cup (2015, 2022) and Steinbrecher Cup (2023). West Chester lays claim to six National final four appearances; nine USASA Region 1 Championships; eleven Eastern Pennsylvania Soccer State Cup championships and seven United Soccer League of PA championships. Throughout the years, Blaise has seen 15 of his proteges become professional players. Truly, accomplishments of the highest regard.

The energy Blaise exudes keeps him involved in many levels of the game with multiple opportunities for competition. One competition he's particularly proud of was with Newtown Pride FC, a team from Sandy Hook, CT, who plays and raises money for their local charity. Together they raised over \$5000 that was donated to family and counseling services for the victims of the Sandy Hook Elementary tragedy.

Further acknowledging his accomplishments, Blaise has been inducted into the Southeastern Pennsylvania (SEPA) Soccer Hall of Fame and received the United States Adult Soccer Association (USASA) Coach of the Year award.

In addition to coaching, Blaise was the Cup Commissioner for Eastern Pennsylvania for 5 years, supporting the State's Cup Competition program.

Blaise currently lives in West Chester with his very supportive, and perhaps a tad forgiving, wife Ellen, and they have five children—Blaise, Cecily, Nicholas, Juliana and Gabriel. He maintains his own construction business, but when he hops off the front-end loader or snowplow, you know where to find him...leading his players to the next level out on the pitch. Congratulations Blaise on this year's induction.



JOSEPH DELLA PENNA



As a referee, Joe Della Penna never sought out specific leadership positions. He liked to officiate games and stay in the background. The problem was, he was so well-respected that people kept turning to him for guidance. For more than 35 years, Joe officiated soccer games, some at the highest levels of the sport. Joe has refereed international friendlies, the U.S. Open Cup Final, the U.S. Amateur Cup Final and four NCAA Championship games. He's officiated over 300 matches in the Professional Indoor League, including 4 finals. In addition to being a referee on the field, off the field he was the Mid-Atlantic Regional Advisor the NCAA and was Director of Officials for the Major Indoor Soccer League (MISL). One of his fondest memories as a referee was of being the liaison to General Bousso (FIFA Panel) of Syria during the 1994 World Cup.

Joe has also been instrumental in the youth game, serving as the Eastern Pennsylvania Soccer State Youth Referee Administrator (SYRA) for 10 years. As a USSF Instructor and Referee Mentor, he has educated and supported numerous young referees, some of whom have gone on, like Joe, to officiate National Finals. Joe is currently the State Director of Assessment for Eastern Pennsylvania Soccer, holds his National Assignor license, and sits on the Disciplinary Committee for the MASL. He also attained a US Soccer National B Coaching License.

A Philadelphia native, Joe was an accomplished player before he joined the "third team". He played for the legendary coach, Jimmy Mills at Lighthouse Boys Club, was a Hall of Fame player at Father Judge and 4-year varsity letterman and captain of the men's squad at St. Joseph's University, coached by Jack Dunn. Prior to switching to officiating, Joe enjoyed a brief career with the German-American Kickers of the NY Metro Professional Leagues.

He and his wife Eileen live close to their two sons and six grandchildren, all of whom keep them very busy. Of course, 5 out of 6 are involved in the game of Soccer!



KARLA POLLI



Growing up in Michigan, Karla Polli didn't start out as a young soccer protégé; but as an adult, she has made an impact and set roots that would span a lifetime - both in the youth and the women's game.

In the early 90s Karla attended a "learn to play" soccer program that was organized by Cecily Englander for the Tredyffrin/Easttown Soccer League (T/E). She was hooked. She began working with Cecily to build the program, and meanwhile Karin Sturla attended. Together they organized a group in Lower Merion, as well as in Swarthmore. The two "groups" would scrimmage from time to time, with women coming in from all over the tri-county Philadelphia region, leading them to believe that there was a real possibility of starting an organized women's program. With Karin leaning on her husband Biff Sturla's connections at the State level, they found additional interest in the Downingtown and Nether Providence areas.

And that was the start of the Tri-County Women's Soccer League – 4 teams and about 50 players – burgeoning to what it is today at 24 teams, 3 divisions, and over 500 registered players!

Between 1996 and 2018 Karla served many positions in TCWSL: Vice-President, Secretary, Games Commissioner and her longest tenure as President through 2018. She attended State meetings and fought hard for equality in the women's game.

Aside from playing 3-5 times a week, running Tri-County, and raising her four sons, Karla was head coach for the women's squad at the University of Valley Forge, received NCCAA Coach of the Year and was Women's Chair for NCCAA. She obtained her USSF C license and coached travel soccer for Greater Chester Valley SA and FC Delco. And in her tradition of initiating the love of the game, she was, and to this day, is the Director of the YSC Preschool Soccer program.

Karla reflects on her accomplishments in Eastern Pennsylvania Soccer: "I was proud to have provided a place for women to play soccer when many clubs didn't support the program. Or did, but only as an afterthought to the men's and youth programs." One of her favorite memories is sitting in Barnes and Noble with Karin, writing the initial TCWSL Constitution and By-laws. "We had to work very hard to find fields to play on at a reasonable time."

Karla and her husband Chris live in Malvern...all four boys now living on their own with 6 grandchildren between them. "I'm proud of the relationships I've helped develop in Tri-County and so many amazing women have become my closest friends." We're also proud of all you've done Karla, and thank you for the tireless hours, perseverance and enthusiasm you demonstrated in making a difference for the women in our area.



GEORGE O'NEILL



George O'Neill was born in Port Glasgow, Scotland in 1942. By the age of 19 he had already achieved his boyhood dream of being a professional soccer player when he became a member of the Celtic team in Scotland. He later played for several other professional teams as well. But in 1969 he didn't know he was to become a member of an entirely different kind of team. George's sister lived in the United States and had a friend and roommate named Nora. His sister invited Nora to come for a visit to Scotland over the Christmas holidays. Nora met George and, what else can you say other than that was a meeting made in heaven, they were married in 1970. And that team is still going strong after 54 years!

In 1973 George and Nora learned that a professional soccer team was being formed in Philadelphia, and that the owner was coming to England looking for players. George was asked to come for a tryout, and he became a member of the Philadelphia Atoms. The team surprised everyone by winning the League Championship in its first year for which George received, and still has, a beautiful championship ring. Unfortunately, the team was later sold to a group in Mexico and soon ceased to exist. But given his exposure and exceptional talent, George was selected to play for the United States Men's National team which played in Haiti, Italy and Israel, even though Israel was in the midst of the Yom Kippur war.

After retiring from professional soccer as a player, George went into coaching and coached at several different private and public soccer clubs and teams, including the short-lived Philadelphia Fever. Following that, he went back to working with private clubs and also coached the Men's soccer squad at the University of Pennsylvania. George was later recruited to coach for the Eastern Pennsylvania Youth Soccer Olympic Development Program where he worked with promising young players, sharing his knowledge and expertise. He had many great years with the program, traveling the United States and other countries to play in tournaments, showcasing his developing talent. Through his guidance many continued on in promising careers as adult players.

George lives with his wife Nora and the two of them dote lovingly on their six wonderful grandchildren, thankful for all life has given them.

