

July 16, 2008

Palling with pinstripes

Morristown native's job brings him close to many former Yankees

By Joe Hofmann

Daily Record



Morristown native Tim O'Neill, right, stands with former New York Yankees great Yogi Berra. O'Neill has made friends with many former Yankees through his work with Wish You Were Here productions, where he plans corporate golf outings, speaking engagements and dinners with corporate clients.

When he was younger, Tim O'Neill used to crawl into bed, close his eyes, and fall asleep. Then he'd have nightmares about a big, bad, flamethrowing righty who used to pitch for the Yankees named Goose Gossage.

"I used to have nightmares about Gossage," O'Neill said. "I'd go to games and he was so intimidating.

I was scared of him."

These days, O'Neill and Gossage are good friends. In fact, O'Neill can count a lot of ex-Yankees among his friends because of his job working in sports marketing for Wish You Were Here productions. O'Neill has an occupation a lot of Yankee fans would die for, planning corporate golf outings, speaking engagements, or dinners with corporate clients.

Along the way, he has gotten to know the ex-Yankees quite well and now is quite close with many of them.

"Goose is such the opposite of that guy I'd have nightmares about," O'Neill said. "He is a big teddy bear."

Born in Morristown in 1963, O'Neill grew up on the campus of Morristown Prep. O'Neill graduated from Bayley-Ellard in 1981 and went to St. Francis College in Loretto, Pa., before teaching English and coaching baseball and girls basketball at Morristown-Beard for two years.

"I was teaching and coaching when I got out of college," O'Neill said. "It was a great two years."

Soon, O'Neill got into the corporate world and went to work for Kraft foods, where he was involved in sales and then management for a total of 16 years. He soon got involved in sports marketing and began drawing up contracts with the National Football League, Major League Baseball, auto racing, and professional golf.

"I was a sales guy, but I was able to move up to management and I became a sales manager," O'Neill said. "I ran some local events in my management role, they created a new position and I was the first one to take it. Everything took off from there."

After that, the president of Kraft, Jim Cragie, went to Spalding and took O'Neill with him. O'Neill moved 10 times in nine years -- living in such places as Syracuse, Boston and Indianapolis -- before moving to New York City in 1997. During that time, O'Neill met his wife, Gina, and the two have been married for 17 years and have three children.

His reputation with his clients is spotless.

"Tim and I get along great," said ex-Yankee third baseman Graig Nettles. "We got along right off the bat. I trust him. He always comes through with whatever he says he's gonna do."

O'Neill set up Nettles and the two are in a commercial together for a local Audi dealership.

"He's the straight man," Nettles laughed. "Tim does great things. The commercial has worked out very well for me."

O'Neill has run Joe Torre's charity golf outings and the two families have spent Thanksgivings together at Torre's home in Harrison, N.Y. In fact, O'Neill reunited his own father, Charlie, with Torre. Charlie O'Neill once taught high school Latin to Torre back in the 1950s at St. Francis Prep Brooklyn.

"Joe and I go on vacation together and we're very close friends," O'Neill said. "I run his golf tournament at Trump's Course in Briarcliff Manor."

O'Neill has a great relationship with Yankees from the days of Casey Stengel (Yogi Berra and Don Larsen), Billy Martin (Nettles, Gossage, Mickey Rivers, Oscar Gamble) and Torre (David Cone). O'Neill has also dealt with Ron Blomberg, the first DH ever, and has even booked Bucky Dent

together with Mike Torrez.

"I have been very fortunate," O'Neill said. "The neatest part of this is, one of them will wind up at a Morristown Little League game and talk to the team. It's neat having them around Morristown because I grew up here."

One time, O'Neill was playing golf with Gossage and asked Goose if he'd come and speak with his son Timmy's team. Gossage obliged, spoke with the team, and fielded questions from the Little Leaguers.

"Once in awhile, you sit and work with them but then you have a flashback," O'Neill said. "I thought about Nettles making great plays in the World Series. I remember Joe Torre when he was leading the National League in batting, and now I'm in his house for Thanksgiving."

When he first began meeting the athletes, O'Neill decided that he was just going to treat them like anyone else. That is when he found that they were just like anyone else.

"I can't say I was nervous," he said. "I always approached it to just be one of the guys. My partner (Andrew Levy) and I have been honest and done some solid business. Torre is the guy who introduced me around. I'd go to spring training and Joe would introduce me. That's how I met Goose or Nettles. They were special instructors."

O'Neill doesn't like asking any of the athletes for autographs, but he could not resist Yogi Berra's at Bobby Thomson's golf tournament one time.

"I never asked Yogi for an autograph," O'Neill said. "He writes, 'To Tim, best wishes, Yogi.' I ask him, 'What about your name?' He said, 'You know my name.'"

O'Neill asking that time was the rare exception. When he does events with the athletes, he sees just how adored some of them are.

"They look right through you and at the athletes," O'Neill said. "I'm just a guy. I try and have no ego. I try not be a name dropper. It's all about the athletes. I'm just the middle man."
