



# CONNECTICUT INTERSCHOLASTIC ATHLETIC CONFERENCE

## CIAC COACHES UPDATE



VOLUME II, ISSUE IV *Dr. Bob Lehr, Editor*

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### JOHN FONTANA - A CONNECTICUT COACHING TREASURE

The successes his teams enjoyed; his length of coaching service; his commitment to his athletes, community and profession; and his willingness and ability to serve and promote baseball for over forty years are hallmarks of Southington's legendary baseball coach—John Fontana. Consider some of his amazing accomplishments in over four decades of coaching, all at one school.

Eighteen of his players signed major league contracts with four making it to the major league. Nearly two hundred received college scholarships through his program. Seven of those players played in either the NCAA Division I or II World Series. John Fontana currently ranks 5th nationally among coaches with the highest winning percentage of coaches winning over 600 games.

In his 41 years as the Southington High School baseball coach his teams won 669 games, two state titles and six runner-up awards. His teams placed first in the conference on 24 different occasions and 11 times finished second. His teams qualified for the state tournament an incredible 40 out of 41 seasons.

In addition to expending a huge amount of energy on baseball, Coach Fontana also helped originate the Connecticut High School Hall of Fame, the Connecticut High School Coaches Association Senior All-Star Baseball Game, and the Connecticut Vs Massachusetts High School All Star Baseball and Softball games. John continues to serve as the Executive Director of the Connecticut High School Athletic Coaches Association. During his "spare" time he also authored several baseball articles for professional magazines.

John is married to Dorothy Fontana and they are the proud parents of five children and four grandchildren.

### NOTE FROM FRED BALSAMO

1) The state passed a law effective July 1, 2010 that requires all coaches to have a concussion education module prior to coaching. We offer the only course approved by the state. You must submit the original concussion certificate with a colored seal showing to the SDE for renewal.

2) If you are aware of any coaches needing the 45 clock hour course to become a coach please direct them to our website which offers satellite courses throughout the state. Our course is currently the ONLY course which includes the state approved concussion component. Information about the 45 clock hour course can be found at: <http://www.ctcoachinged.org/Permit.html>

Good Luck in your upcoming sports season.

Sincerely,  
Fred Balsamo, CMAA  
Connecticut Coaching Education Program



# COACH JOHN FONTANA

## CHSCA Executive Director



John was asked to reply to several coaching related questions. The following are his replies.

### **Q: What were the things that you did that made you so successful?**

**A:** *I would like to believe that before I started I received valuable lessons from three coaches I played for:*

- *Walt Lozoski - my high school baseball coach: I learned the importance of discipline to sharpen the mental focus and repeated drills to sharpen the physical skills.*
- *Bill Callahan - college basketball coach: No one I knew drove you to be an intense competitor as this coach did. He made you believe you could challenge Larry Bird and beat him.*
- *My uncle, Joe Fontana - high school football and baseball coach: He pulled me aside before I started to coach and told me this was the best advice he could give to me: "You, and you alone assess your talent; and be your own coach".*

*With these building blocks in the back of my mind I proceeded to build a program that I wanted to not only be the best in our town and state, but to be known nationally.*

*I started to work on the mind set of most athletes - that your sport was seasonal (wrong). It was my belief that the better baseball players would be noticed and go on to bigger and better things, such as a college education and for some even professional baseball leagues. My players knew that academics were part of baseball, as well as training during the off season, which helped make my job easier to deliver a first class youngster to the next level. The succession of successful players through the program made it easier for them to learn from each other without me constantly looking over their shoulder, they knew how we did it and what I expected and they were able to follow through. One of my favorite quotes about coaching I learned early and used often: "The time will come when 'summer' will ask what you were doing all winter", and I wanted my players answer to show through their successes.*

*Maybe it's because I played the game, but I believe everyone knew that when a fly or ground ball came at you, you could not step aside and ask for a replacement. What made us different was the development of my practices, time was not an issue. I needed to know each player individually and what made them tick. Our practices, because they*

were so hard and long, had to have humor and fun mixed in, but the players also needed to know when to be serious. For example I had each infielder, during each practice, handle at least 100 to 200 ground balls or pop-ups. Each practice was tedious and time consuming, and I had every player practice, starter or otherwise, so that they were all proficient. I would tell my players at the beginning of every year that “our daily practices were to drive the team to practice toward perfection, hoping to get excellence when it mattered”. They knew when it was time for fun and when it was time to get serious. Our subs worked just as hard as our starters each day and it paid them dividends, one of these “subs” went on to play baseball at the collegiate level and today is a neurosurgeon.

As years went on, I developed drills on my own that not only were built on fun, but also on great concentration, making for a more relaxed player when the time came. I tried to put the players in every conceivable situation so that there was never a time that they hadn't previously experienced. It was my belief that it was not just about wins and losses, but about using the game to make good people, and the rest would fall in place. It was the strong foundation that I built that lead my former players and scouts to describe my situation with positive words.

Buzz Bowers - long time Red Sox scout: “Fontana’s teams play hard and play it right”

Rob Dibble - former Major League player: “He was a great role model. He motivated you to motivate yourself”.

Steve Matyczuk - former player: “He pushes you very hard to be your best. He’ll make a mediocre player good and a good player great”.

One of the drills I developed and used in many schools around the country was “bunting for bucks”. I placed five batting helmets, spaced in fair ball territory in front of home plate sitting on the ground upright. I taped \$5.00 bills on the front of the helmets. If you bunted the ball and it rolled into the helmet you kept the money. The player concentration was incredible and the number of bills lost meant nothing compared to what we got in return - in one game we had four consecutive suicide bunts, all successful.

What all of this discipline building produced was a large family that stretched over 41 years. My players knew that I would do anything for them, and I still would and I hope they felt and feel the same about me. Players constantly rally around one another, whether it is a death of a family member or helping one another when one is in need. They knew I appreciated what they gave to me over the years and I would be there for them if they were, even now, having a rough time in their own lives.

### **Q: What do you think is the key to being a successful coach?**

**A:** I believe great teams are developed from strict rules and discipline. Over the years I developed many rules which parents and players signed off on in a September meeting. They apply to both baseball and personal conduct: no booze, no drugs, no chewing tobacco, no long hair, no jewelry, no hats in school, no throwing equipment, no swearing, etc. You will be a class act both on and off the field and you will be a credit to your family, school and team.

Success is also built on fundamentals through practice. You drill through repetition over and over again until the players believe they are the very best at what they are doing in a very comfortable environment.

I always remember a well known college coach telling me how disciplined his players were by each of them having a short haircut and shined shoes every game. When I asked him about it he replied, “Discipline”. Discipline allowed them to think about the team and the game. When they were on third base at a crucial time, I needed them to have their

*mind on the game, not thinking about what time the prom was, and it all started with discipline. As strict as you may be you must also show that you have compassion and understanding for your players. Remember, there is a time for toughness and a time for comfort. You have to make yourself available twenty-four hours a day, because coaches can save lives. I remember years back a single parent was having problems with her child, a player of mine; many nights I would leave my house at 10.30 and return well after 1 in the morning, after I had calmed the player down. The young man went on and played major college ball, graduated and now has a great job. I received a letter from his mother that I still keep in my desk drawer.*

**Q: What separated your outstanding teams from teams that were not as successful?**

*A: I believe that all teams were very successful. We may not have received a state title or reached my expectations in wins and losses, but we did achieve great things. I believe that in the years these players were with me we were able to graduate and mold outstanding young men, preparing them for their next step which in most cases was college. I look at all my 41 years of coaching baseball as highly successful when I can say that we had 194 players receive scholarship aid to college and over 94% went on to receive higher education.*

**Q: What were the qualities that your outstanding athletes possessed that separated them from other team members?**

*A: In Southington, the youth baseball programs were so good that when the players came to the high school they were very knowledgeable and already had many honed baseball skills. I was very lucky to work with players that had great baseball knowledge, but it was like raising a family, no two children were the same. Our players arrived knowing they had to be workaholics in the classroom and on the field, and like all things some players worked harder than others to perfect those skills. I spent many hours with these hardworking young men, because their leadership skills were unmatched.*

**Q: How were you able to handle all of the factors that detracted from your coaching efforts?**

*A: You must keep everything in perspective and set your priorities and rules. I always held a mandatory September meeting with the parents and players who would be trying out for our tams: varsity, jayvee or freshman. Some coaches are in fear of parents and they lighten up on the rules. That is something I wouldn't do. I didn't care if it was a star player or not. I wouldn't change my thinking on rules. I had a rule with all parents which was that once the season starts I would not meet with them to talk about their son or team problems (playing time etc.). I would only meet with them if there was a personal problem that I needed to know about. I would do anything to help their son, but once we had that first practice, I was in charge. In addition to the parent/player meeting I would also hold separate meetings in the evening at my house with my senior players and their parents. I would host one family an evening and discuss how I could assist them in choosing an appropriate college for their son, academically and athletically. These meetings showed that I cared about their son and his future, and it also showed that the more players I could help to be placed in a college, the easier it was for me to get these players to commit to the program and follow others that came before them. It showed future players that if they worked hard academically and athletically someone was there to help them reach their goals.*

*Many high school players lose interest in their sport over a period of time and it is up to you, as their coach, to keep their interest in the growth of the entire program. Fundraising can help in this endeavor. The fundraising that is done should include the players and it should be done in the months you are not practicing and playing. This encourages teams unity and increases interest in a great program. With our fundraising we were able to have six changes of uniforms, the first outdoor batting cage, and were able to put in our own lights for night games. We were the first team in the state to make trips south to practice and we built a team yearbook that was sent to over 200 colleges and universities to advertise our players and our program. These and many more products were what helped our growth so my players were proud of the program that they were a part of.*

**Q: How was coaching changed from the time you began to the present.**

**A:** *Coaching has changed in many ways. Very few younger coaches stay in the game long enough to build a solid program with stability because of parent interference, an inability to agree and work with the mandatory state guidelines and/or the income they received from coaching. The biggest problem to any coach is a booster club. Yes, you need parent support in fundraising to help build your program to be its very best, but I decided very early not to have a booster club like so many other schools I had seen. Coaches do not realize that once these groups meet monthly, choose officers, etc. they begin to take over most programs because coaches feel they do not have to handle these things and slowly they begin to lose control over their program. I had the best “booster club” in the state which raised a significant amount of money and did more for our program than any other sport previously.*

*I called parent meetings of our Diamond Club when we needed them. Myself and two former players’ parents, who were appointed advisors by me, ran the meetings and a former player’s mother handled the checkbook so it was not in my hands, that way there could be no questions of improprieties. At the end of each year we handed in a financial report to our principal and the Board of Education. In 41 years the Board of Education paid very little, or practically nothing, to the baseball program. Sport booster clubs have been the down fall of many programs and coaches, and it was something that I made sure would not to happen to me.*

**Q: What advice would you have for individuals starting their coaching careers?**

**A:** *Go into your program believing that you want to build the very best program possible and make sure you do not try to circumvent the rules, as one mistake can hang over your reputation forever. Take time to pick the brains of older, great coaches in the state and nation to get ideas to build up your coaching knowledge which will eventually help your players and program.*

*Develop a set of rules and regulations for all your players to follow. As a coach you need to be strict and disciplined, but you also need to know the time to be a good listener and compassionate. For example, listen to why a player is late to practice because there may be a legitimate reason.*

*Attend clinics and gain as much knowledge as you possibly can. Just because you played many years of the sport you coach doesn't mean that you know everything. Over the years you can build up a wealth of knowledge if you just take one thing out of every clinic and one on one coaches meetings. It is amazing what you will learn and what personal ideas might change.*

*And last but certainly not least, practice, practice and more practice. The more fundamentally sound your players are, the better they will perform in a very relaxed state of mind.*

# CEU

## MODULE OFFERINGS

CIAC office : 30 Realty Drive, Cheshire, Ct

**NO WALK IN REGISTRATIONS**

Register online at: [www.ctcoachinged.org/CEU.html](http://www.ctcoachinged.org/CEU.html)

**Thursday, May 12 6p.m-9p.m**

Module 8—Strength & Conditioning Program Design

**Friday, May 13 6p.m-9p.m**

Module 9—Sport Psychology

**Saturday, May 14 8.30a.m-11.30a.m**

Module 16—Appropriate Use of Electronic Media by Coaches

**Saturday, May 14 Noon-3p.m**

Module 5—CIAC Rules & Regulations

**Saturday, May 14 3:15p.m-6.15p.m**

Module 12—All-Adult Construct of Coaching

Registration for any or all of these 5 modules must be done online

at: [www.ctcoachinged.org/CEU.html](http://www.ctcoachinged.org/CEU.html)

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