

For 25 years, scholarship helps honor late Bel Air High football coach Al Cesky's memory lives on

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In the 1950s and early 1960s, high school football became synonymous with one name in Harford County — Coach Albert “Al” Cesky.

And rightfully so: Mr. Cesky was the first football coach at Bel Air High School and, arguably, the most successful coach in the 61 years the sport has been played in Harford County high schools.

He was known for instilling values and morals in his players and encouraging them to be the best they can be.

Mr. Cesky, who spent 30 years with the county's public school system, was dedicated to helping student athletes succeed on the field, in the classroom and in life. His legacy lives on today through the Al Cesky Scholarship Fund Inc.

Mr. Cesky died in April 1985 at age 57 after suffering a heart attack. One month later, former players, students and longtime friends established a scholarship program for Harford County high school scholar-athletes in his memory.

The Al Cesky Scholarship Fund Inc. will celebrate 25 years of success tonight (Wednesday) at its annual awards banquet at the Richlin Ballroom in Edgewood beginning at 6 p.m.

‘Gratifying’ program

“It is very gratifying to see the Al Cesky scholarship fund and its activities are alive and well after 25 years, still recognizing and encouraging young people to unselfishly contribute to things bigger than themselves,” Donald Pardew, a former player of Mr. Cesky's and one of the founding fathers of the corporation, wrote in an e-mail. “This unselfish duty to do the right thing was really what Al Cesky taught. Athletics in general, and football in particular, was just a forum in which the lesson could play out in a way that young people could understand and internalize it.”

The fund honors one male and one female student athlete a year from each high school in the county, who not only participates in sports, but also succeeds in academics and is involved in the community.

“The purpose of the Al Cesky Scholarship Fund Inc. is to preserve and keep visible the values reflected in the life and work of Al Cesky, with special reference to his contributions to the spiritual, emotional and intellectual development of youth and his role in fostering community life,” according to the annual program for the banquet.

At the 25th anniversary banquet, the keynote speaker will be Janie Cesky, Mr. Cesky's widow. Their children, Dave Cesky, the current Fallston High School football coach and athletic director, and Kathy Garcia and Mary Jo Newman, spoke at the 20th banquet.

Emotional time

“It's very emotional for me,” Janie Cesky said. “It's a wonderful thing, but it does bring back lots of memories... I am looking forward to it, I really am.”

The couple was married for 33 years before Mr. Cesky's death.

“He was not only my husband, he was my best friend... The kids in school, they remember him and it's a wonderful feeling. I know he would be tickled to death, but I am in amazement, too,” she said.

Of the 24 student athletes selected as school winners, two of them, one male and one female, will be chosen as major award winners and will receive scholarships

amounting to \$5,000 each over a four-year period. The remaining 22 will each receive \$2,000 awards.

All past classes and some individual recipients will be honored in a special booklet, and a special presentation on Mr. Cesky's life will also be given at tonight's banquet.

‘Great honor’

“I think it's a great honor,” Dave Cesky said. “The surprising thing about this is that it has lasted 25 years. A lot of his players and personal friends got together and were determined to make this a really big deal and go on forever.”

responsibility;

- Student's propensity toward service to others;
- Level of athletic achievement;
- Academic achievement; and
- Financial need.

“It's designed to come up with the best of the student athletes in each school,” Bob Slagle, president of the foundation, said.

Slagle has served as the president for the last two years, and as a member of the foundation for the last seven.

Each participating public or private high school must select its two athletes, one male and one female, from the foundation's criteria, but the method in which those students are chosen varies from school to school.

“I think it's fabulous that the school system and schools do all the work that they do,” Ann Ramsey, secretary of the corporation, said. “It's very time consuming at the school level.”

Once each school has submitted its two athletes for the honor, someone with the Al Cesky Scholarship Foundation, usually the president, will make all of the applications anonymous for the corporation's selection committee.

Each member of the selection committee reviews the applications, and together they select one male and one female for the \$5,000 scholarships.

The winners are announced at the annual banquet.

Members of the corporation serve three-year terms and may serve more than one term. The corporation has 30 members, 10 of whom are selected by the Chamber of Commerce, 10 by the Harford County Board of Education and 10 by the Cesky family, according to the foundation's Web site, alceskyscholarship.org.

Each member of the foundation serves on a committee within the corporation.

Involved students

Page Brannan, who was the 2000 school winner for C. Milton Wright, serves on the selection committee for the scholarship.

“Every year I am more amazed by what the students are doing and all of the community events they are involved in,” Brannan said. “It's very refreshing to be reminded that there are great kids out there and that are going to do really well in the future.”

The scholarship award for those who are not the major award winners is \$2,000 today; it started at \$500 and then grew to \$1,000. The two \$5,000 top awards have been at that level since the program's inception.

“We were in a position financially where we could increase the value of the scholarship,” Slagle said, adding it's been within the last 10 years the secondary scholarship amount has increased to \$2,000.

Ramsey said she thinks all of those who are chosen for this award are winners.

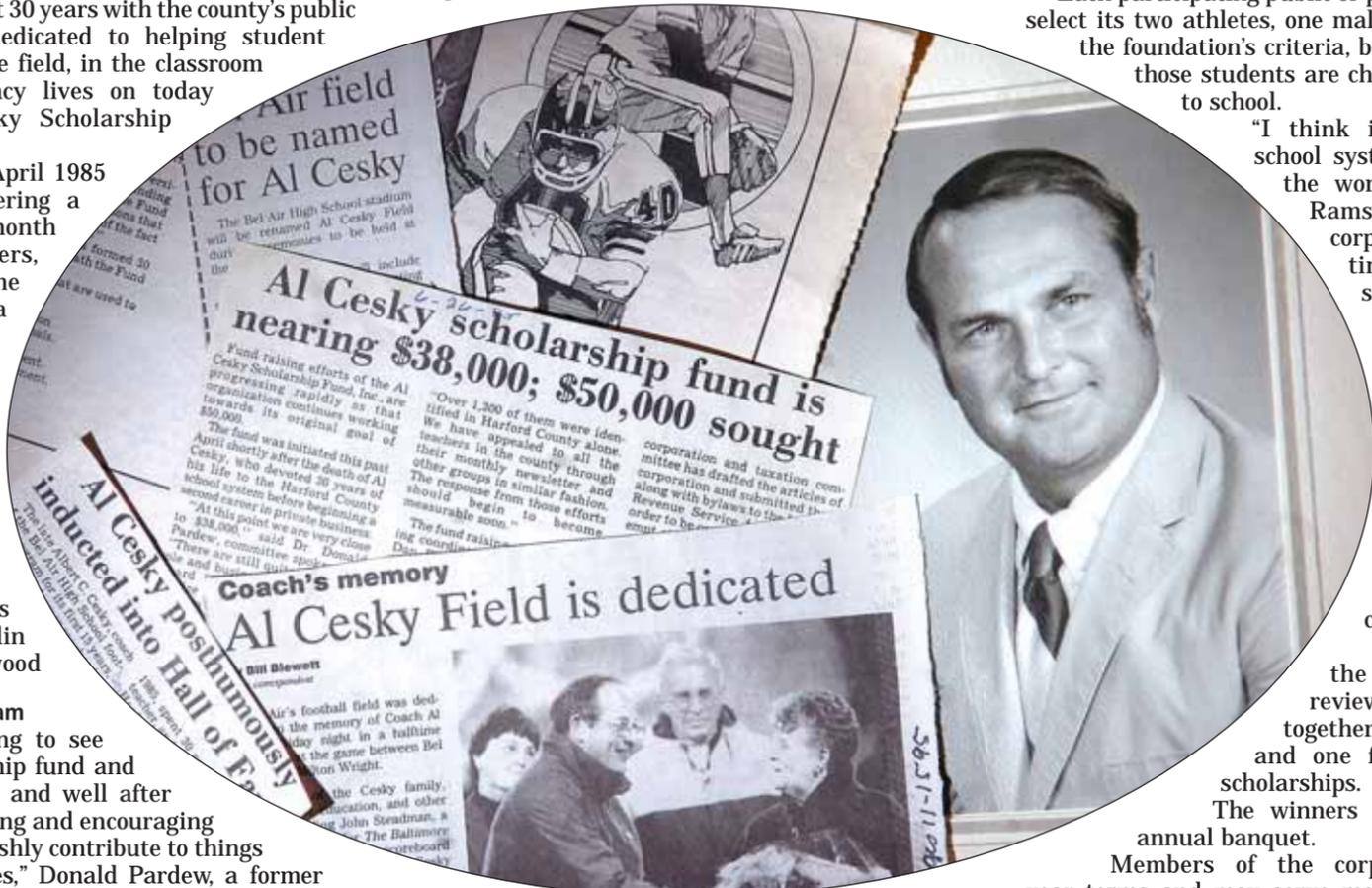
“The students appreciate it,” she said. “It's really a prestigious thing in the schools to win this award.”

How it began

After the sudden passing of Mr. Cesky, Mozelle Brown, whose five brothers played football for Mr. Cesky, called her siblings to inform them of the loss of a legend.

When Brown called her brother, Donald Pardew, to break the news and inform him that she was sending

Please see SCHOLARSHIP, AA6



Al Cesky's memory lives on

SCHOLARSHIP, from AA1
flowers on behalf of the family. Pardew said sending flowers just wasn't enough.

"To say that I decided to start the scholarship would be to give decision making a bad name," Pardew wrote in an e-mail. "I did not decide to start the scholarship. I was emotionally jolted into starting it."

Pardew wrote that he could recall the exact moment his sister called — he was sitting in his office in Albany, NY.

"I was very distressed," he wrote. "He had been so much and meant so much to the community, had positively affected the lives of so many young people like myself in their hour of personal doubt. I felt like my life had been stripped of its legitimacy. I could not let his passing take with it the message he had managed to get through to so many young people for whom it made all the difference in the world: 'You can accomplish whatever you set your mind to if you believe in yourself, and I am going to be here for you believing in you so long as you make the effort and believe in yourself.' So I did not decide the action, the action decided me. I had no choice. Something had to be done to preserve the Cesky force in the lives of young people in the community, and the times were, more generally, in need of the Cesky message."

So, Pardew called back his sister to ask if she could organize a meeting of community leaders as soon as possible, and he would make the trip down from New York to chair the meeting.

Honoring a mentor
Immediately following Mr. Cesky's funeral, a group of about 30 people, both former students and players of Mr. Cesky's and members of the community, met in Brown's living room to discuss starting a foundation.

"That's when they laid the groundwork," Brown said.

The group began meeting once a month and Pardew would make the trip down from New York to attend the meetings.

"After the initial meeting, at which a scholarship was agreed to be a fitting memorial, the dedication to and energy for the idea was so high it really did not need my participation to maintain its momentum, and although I did stay actively involved for the first couple of years, the power of the idea and the dedication of initial organizers ... was all the propellant it needed," Pardew wrote.

"In short, Al Cesky was too much of an influence, too much of a force to leave us, and he did not."

The first Al Cesky Scholarships were awarded in May 1986, nearly one year after the passing of Mr. Cesky and also the beginning of the foundation.

Teresa Boyd and Eric Crabtree of Havre de Grace High School were the first winners of the award and received \$5,000 each in scholarship money, according to an article published May 29, 1986 in *The Aegis*.

Fundraising efforts
When the charter members formed the Al Cesky Scholarship Foundation Inc., they decided their initial fundraising goal would be \$50,000.

The late William McGuirk, who was then chairman of the board at Mercantile Bank and member of the group that started the foundation, and his wife, Mary, donated \$25,000 to get the corporation off the ground. The McGuirks and Ceskys were friends and fellow tennis enthusiasts.

"People were sending in any amount of money," Brown said. "It just came from everybody. Everybody wanted to do something."

The foundations surpassed its fundraising efforts its first year, collecting \$85,000.

Since the initial sum of money was raised by the charter members, Slagle said the corporation has been able to maintain the funding source for the scholarships through subsequent fundraising events and donations.

Slagle said the banquet is pretty much self-sufficient, but that the foundation also hosts a golf tournament almost every year, and has held a community run in the past to raise funds. He said business and personal donations also contribute to the success of the scholarships.

This year's golf tournament, the 22nd Annual Al Cesky Scholarship Fund Golf Tournament, will be June 14 at the Maryland Golf and Country Clubs in memory of foundation sponsor George "Corky" Connolly Jr.

Mr. Connolly, a former Aberdeen High football and baseball coach, was posthumously inducted into the Aberdeen High School Hall of Fame in March.

"We would love to do more, but with the economy, we are just not able to do that right now," Brown said.

Family members said the committee members' dedication to keep Mr. Cesky's legend alive is remarkable, and is something that should be commended.

"I'm just so proud of the volunteers," Jane Cesky said, adding that she goes to all of the meetings even though she cannot be a voting member because of the corporation's bylaws. "I do go because they work so hard, you just have to praise them all of the time. A lot of people who were winners are now on the committee, and that is wonderful."

The legend
Mr. Cesky began his career in education as a teacher and football coach at Bel Air High School in 1950 after graduating from the University of Maryland, where he played varsity football.

A Baltimore native, he was brought to

Bel Air by a group of prominent Harford County residents who were trying to get a football program started at BAHS. One of those who recommended hiring him was another ex-Maryland player, the late Bill Greer.

He was the coach of the Bel Air football team until 1965, when he ended his 15-year association with the program when he was promoted from physical education teacher to assistant principal.

During his tenure at Bel Air, Mr. Cesky also coached baseball and basketball.

In 1974, Mr. Cesky became the supervisor of secondary physical education and interscholastic athletics for the school system.

As a school administrator, Mr. Cesky introduced boy and girls lacrosse, soccer, swimming, golf, tennis and other sports at the interscholastic level, according to the program for tonight's banquet.

Mr. Cesky retired from the school system in 1979 and then started a second career in private business.

In 1988, Mr. Cesky was posthumously inducted into the Maryland Scholastic Football Coaches Association's Hall of Fame, and in 1995, Bel Air High's football field was dedicated in his memory.

On the gridiron
High school football was in its infancy in Harford County when Mr. Cesky arrived in Bel Air.

Within two years, he had a winning program and soon, the Friday night games became the hottest ticket in town, with crowds routinely estimated at 3,000, more than half the town's population in those days.

"Football back then in the early to mid-'60s at Bel Air was a happening," Peter Schlehr, 62, who has served on the foundation in the past, said. "There were football Friday nights like there are in Texas, the whole town would come out."

Mr. Cesky's Bel Air football teams had four undefeated seasons, and he compiled an overall record of 90-33, according to an article published Nov. 8, 1995 in *The Aegis*.

In the 1965 season, Bel Air played only one Harford County team — Aberdeen, according to Schlehr. The other games were against traditional powerhouses from elsewhere in Maryland and in surrounding states. That team, Mr. Cesky's last, was undefeated, going 10-0.

Schlehr, who played on the 1965 team, said they played Loyola, Calvert Hall, Westminster and Gonzaga from Washington, D.C.

"We played all of the big schools in the state; there was no Harford County league at the time," he said. "For anyone in the county to attempt to play that schedule today, couldn't."

But Mr. Cesky's football successes were not a one-man feat.

"Al had some really good people around him," Schlehr said.

Pat Hennessey was Mr. Cesky's assistant coach and also the baseball coach at Bel Air High School. He took over the head football coach position upon Mr. Cesky's retirement.

Schlehr, along with two of his brothers, Michael and Chris, played four years of football under Mr. Cesky.

"We were the whole left side of the line," Peter Schlehr said. "Al [Cesky] made sure that we had an outstanding football program. He was a football guy. He was going to make sure the kids had the best possible experience they could. He was well-known around the state, and he looked after his boys, too."

Demanding excellence
Chris Schlehr, 60, who graduated from Bel Air in 1968 and serves on the foundation, saw Mr. Cesky as a disciplinarian.

"He was a disciplinarian, there was no question about that," Chris Schlehr, who is Bel Air's town administrator, said. "He demanded excellence and he got it. He demanded excellence, but commanded it at the same time. Obviously, he was a great football coach who had a great football mind."

Chris Schlehr said Mr. Cesky taught his players that personal accountability was important.

In addition, Schlehr said, he taught student athletes individual achievements are important, but that the team is most important.

"There was no reason not to celebrate individual, but to him [Mr. Cesky] the team was more important," he said.

Chris Schlehr said the 1965 team of nearly 50 players was certainly not the fastest or the biggest, but had a chemistry no other team had.

"The chemistry among the players was special and the chemistry with the coach and coaching staff was special," he said. "I never had that again on any other athletic team."

Not only was Mr. Cesky instrumental in molding his young men on the field, he also helped many of them choose a path after high school, including helping them get into college.

"He got us into college," Chris Schlehr, a U.S. Naval Academy graduate, said. "He encouraged us and helped us in that regard. I played a year of football at Navy, and the way I got there was by Al Cesky."

Family tradition
When Pardew reached high school in

the late 1950s, he brothers had already played for Mr. Cesky.

"By the time I reached high school, and it was my turn to play football, I was facing a rather difficult life situation, not exactly predicted to run for president or win a Nobel prize in the future," Pardew wrote in an e-mail. "But by then it had become, at least in our family, a moral duty as well as an honor to play football for Mr. Cesky. So I did, and as a result I came to have a respect for, and belief in, myself and my ability to accomplish whatever I put my mind to, but more importantly to put my mind to honorable things."

"This was the real lesson. And while I went on to play much more football, it was what Al Cesky taught me about myself that made it possible, not what he developed out of my very average athletic ability."

Pardew wrote that Mr. Cesky was a saint-like icon in his family and provided mentoring to Pardew and his brothers that was quite profound.

"So, to the extent that the route my life journey has taken has been a series of opportunities met and acted on, each made possible by the occurrence of the previous one, I owe my current, very satisfying life largely to Al Cesky," he wrote. "As a psychoanalyst friend of mine asserted, football saved my life, and Al Cesky was the reason I played football."

Remembering a legend

"Al was a football coach among other things, but the most important thing he did, in my opinion, was to teach sportsmanship and fairness and the values we all want to live by," Brown said. "I think that is why everyone cared for him so much, he was always dangling those values in front of you and challenging you to grab onto them."

Brown heard positive things about Mr. Cesky from her brothers growing up.

"He kept his team members on the straight and narrow," Brown said. "They respected him so much that he also influenced other parts of their lives other than their athletic endeavors."

Mr. Cesky was dedicated to football, but he had other athletic passions, especially tennis.

When Brown was in her 40s, Mr. Cesky did what he did best — he took another interested athlete under his wing to coach, and taught Brown and her husband, Joseph, how to play tennis.

Bud and Ann Ramsay, who both serve on the foundation, can also attest to the type of person Mr. Cesky was.

"He had the ability to bring out the best in anybody," Bud Ramsay said. "It's a gift."

Bud Ramsay has served on the foundation for the last eight years and is a past president. Ann Ramsay, serving as secretary, has been on the foundation for more than 10 years.

Bud Ramsay said Mr. Cesky stood for true values, which have carried forth for 25 years in the lives of his students and those student athletes selected for the honor.

"It's a very simple thing when you think about it, but it is very important," he said.

Bud Ramsay, 70, knew Mr. Cesky briefly at the end of his football coaching career, but Ann Ramsay had the privilege of being a student at Bel Air High when Mr. Cesky was a coach.

Ann Ramsay, 69, who graduated in 1958, was in marching band under the direction of Ray Dombrowski.

"He [Mr. Cesky] taught me everything I know about football," Ann Ramsay said, adding that she learned the game from the bleachers by watching Mr. Cesky coach.

Ann Ramsay also worked alongside Mr. Cesky when he became a school administrator.

"It was weird to know him as Mr. Cesky, and then get to know him as Al Cesky," she said. "I think my memory of him is that he was always a happy person. He was just happy."

But what impressed Ann Ramsay most about Mr. Cesky in high school was his devotion to students.

Showcasing the best

Slagle, the athletic director at Edgewood High School when Mr. Cesky was the county's supervisor of athletics, worked under Mr. Cesky for some time.

"I've always admired him," Slagle said. "I have always felt the scholarship is a tremendous award to showcase the students we need to showcase."

As athletic director at Edgewood, Slagle saw numerous student athletes recognized with the scholarship.

Once he retired, Slagle said, he was asked to serve on the foundation and jumped at the opportunity.

"It was an honor to do so," he said. "With the Al Cesky Foundation Inc., Mr. Cesky's legacy will continue to live on for years to come."

"I just wish the younger generation could know a guy like him," Peter Schlehr said.

Representing North Harford High School, Rachel Konopacki received a \$1,000 Al Cesky Scholarship in 2004.

— Editors

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