

"A POSTHUMOUS INTERVIEW"

It certainly is a bright warm fall day for the 16th of November. It's hard to believe that Thanksgiving is only a week away, because the temperature is expected to be in the sixties today. If this had been a routine work day for me I would never care if it was raining or not, but this is a special day. This is the day that Rocky Giannini will complete his life's journey. You see Rocky died a few months ago, but his ashes are being brought to the final resting place that he had requested. I was informed by Carmen Giargiari who had spent a considerable amount of time with Rocky in the past six years that there would be a Memorial service for Rocky today at St. Martin de Porres Church. (For those of you who do not recognize the name and figure that I put a P in place of a T are not aware that the former St. Columba's parish has been renamed for this renowned Black Saint.) With a half an hour to spare approaching the perimeter of what was once the area of Swappoodle that we now refer to as the Old Neighborhood I decided to drive around to kill some time. I choose to stop by what was once Collins Field and somehow out of the decay and rubble I managed to reminisce and see Rocky at bat. The North Philly Angels Softball team was standing and routing for Rocky to hit one on to the roof of Friehofer's Bakery. The count was 3-2 and the sinker ball thrown to Rocky looked like it was going to be in the dirt, but with Rocky's quick swing and powerful arms the ball was hit and was in flight. The flight that later would be a legend of the old neighborhood ended as the ball hit Friehofer's water tower. This was later measured to be almost 500 feet from home plate. Rocky who had been known as a great athlete became an instant living legend with that incredible swing. It didn't take long for many of the city's baseball fans to hear about the homerun. After that people came to see Rocky play at home and away and he would

delight them quite often pounding out record breaking homeruns. It's still hard to believe that he could hit a "softball", consistently over 400 feet. Many major league baseball players find it difficult to hit a hardball 400 feet. It was not surprising that the Philly's signed him up one afternoon as a walk on tryout at Connie Mack Stadium. I slowly drive away from the field toward the church on Lehigh Avenue. It is amazing to me that even though St. Columba's is not our former parish how at home I feel hear. Perhaps it is the familiar faces of a few old friends or the ghost of all the records from St. Mary of the Eternal that are kept in the Rectory. Tony Perna, Pat Nicastro, Donnie Pacifico, John Giargiari, Joe "Flintstone" Festa and Carmen Giargiari all take time to pay homage to the memory of their friend and sports hero Rocky.

Fr. Edward Hallinan is very gracious to all of us and welcomes us as though we were members of his parish. He is very patient with us and delivers a moving and intimate homily. Father Ed asks those of us who wish to express their memories of Rocky to stand up. Pat Giannini, Rocky's widow, expresses her gratefulness to Father and the friends who are here today for bringing closure to Rocky's death. Fr. Ed refers to Carmen Giargiari as an "Angel" who was sent to him to make today possible. John Giargiari could not resist the opportunity to let Fr. Hallinan know how apropos his reference to "Angel" is, because indeed Carmen is a direct descendant of their Uncle Art "Cat" Giargiari who was the founder of the "North Philadelphia Angels." This brings laughter from all of us. The sentiments that are expressed by everyone who speaks especially those of Rocky's stepdaughter and grandson are very moving and enlightening. After all I had not seen Rocky in over 40 years and all I knew about him were the memories

of his athletic accomplishments. I asked Rocky for at least two years via e-mail about an interview with him.

I never got to do that interview with Rocky, because he was ashamed of being in a wheel chair. Pat Giannini told me that he wanted to be walking with his prosthesis when he met me for an interview. Rocky had lost his leg due to a ruptured aneurism about six years ago. I know before the memorial service the kind of interview I had planned would have centered on Rocky as a local sports legend, but after hearing the testimonials by his family I know that there was much more to Rocky than that. On the way to Mount Peace cemetery at 31st and Lehigh and during the graveside service I surmised the answers that Rocky would have given to me.

JJ- What do you believe was your greatest accomplishment?

Rocky – *I will always talk about my athletic accomplishments, but in reality they were just a passing fancy. To have been a good father to my step daughter and grandson has to be way out in front of any home run I ever hit.*

JJ- Your family refers to you as "Big Teddy Bear." What do you think of that description?

Rocky- *If that is to be my epitaph then the hell with all other accolades I could receive. It would make me proud to know that they thought of me in this way.*

JJ- We all have regrets. What about you?

Rocky- *I have like most people worn many hats in life. One that I wished I had worn longer was that of a Philly. I dazzled them with my ability to hit the long ball, but it didn't last long. The impetuous nature of youth led me to leave baseball camp for home.*

Rocky has for the final time today made that journey backed to Swappoodle. He is home, this time in his eternal resting place very appropriately gazing at the ball field!