

The Gold Jacket and The Golden Rule:

Eddie DeBartolo, Jr. and the road from Youngstown to Canton

It's a hot summer day in Youngstown, Ohio. The year is 1961 and young Eddie DeBartolo, Jr. just climbed into his father's Mark IV. This would be a routine trip for father and son. A day in the life making their rounds from Akron to Cleveland to Pittsburgh. The moment is recalled as one of Eddie DeBartolo, Jr.'s fondest memories; driving from job site to job site with his father Eddie DeBartolo, Sr. at the wheel.

"What I remember most about those trips, recalls Eddie Jr., is watching him. Watching the way he treated people. The way he spoke to them - from the engineers to the foremen to the laborers, each with dignity, each the same - with respect."

Some may define those lessons as The Golden Rule and for Eddie DeBartolo Jr., a quick study, living by The Golden Rule has led to slipping into a Gold Jacket as a member of the 2016 NFL Hall of Fame Class.

Mr. D. (as his players affectionately call him) accumulated a football legacy from 1977 to 2000 that holds its own weight in bronze: five Super Bowl Championships, 13 Division Titles, 16 Playoff seasons and 10 Championship games. Yet, for many former players, fans and even for Eddie Jr. himself, the stats that he accumulated off the field may be his greatest legacy.

From the start, Eddie DeBartolo, Jr. embraced NFL ownership like no other owner before him: with a hug, a heart as big as an O-lineman, a clean towel after a game, and if you needed it – the shirt off his back.

"His legacy will be that he was an owner that cared about his players. Once we became part of the 49ers, we became a part of a family. That's who we are to this day." Jeff Fuller, 49ers DB, 1984-1989

"The measure of him as a person is the way he has (without notice and preferably so) taken care of players, throughout time, to this day – under the radar." Randy Cross, 49ers G-C, 1976-1988

"I believe his induction will be a testament to the success of the entire 49ers organization and that starts with the family atmosphere he introduced to the league and the longstanding relationships he continues to have with his players. With Eddie it was always, 'We're doing this together,' and I am sure he will turn his Hall of Fame induction into an honor that he shares with the entire 49ers family." Jed York, 49ers CEO

"When I heard that Mr. D. was elected into the Hall of Fame, my initial reaction was a sigh of relief. He deserves this. He set the bar. To finally see him get recognized with a Gold Jacket? It means everything to me and I'm looking forward to calling him, 'teammate.' It's like I'm able to enjoy my own induction for the first time, because it feels better - sharing it with him." Derrick Brooks, Buccaneers 1995-2008, HOF

"This Vote and this honor bestowed on Eddie by the Hall of Fame is validation that he did make a difference and he did enhance the sport of football. It says, 'Eddie DeBartolo you were a great owner and what you did was good for football. We know it and your bust in the Hall of Fame will forever make that statement.' It is something so grand and so rewarding and he deserves it and everyone that ever came in contact with him understands how well he deserves it." Carmen Policy, former 49ers President

With Saturday's enshrinement ceremony, flocks of 49ers family members will spill into North Canton, Ohio. Most will fondly remember previous team trips to DeBartolo's beloved hometown, Youngstown, Ohio, only a few miles down the road.

"Youngstown is a town with a never-say-die attitude," shares DeBartolo. "If you're not from there and haven't lived there, it's very hard to try and tell people what it's like."

Like many Italians in Youngstown, the senior DeBartolo was raised in an area fondly referred to as Smokey Hollow, or the Hollow. The steel mills and the war produced what is known as Youngstown grit. Men and women worked hard for their families.

"I think the greatest part about Youngstown was my upbringing," shares Eddie, Jr. "We were brought up on Danbury Drive near the Newport Theatre, then moved to Boardman where my dad built his office. My father lived and died with his business and that work ethic is instilled in me and instilled in my sister, Denise (DeBartolo York). That's part of the Youngstown mentality. I have never taken Youngstown for granted, because I don't believe I would ever be the success - any type of success - that I've become if it weren't for my upbringing in Youngstown."

Eddie Jr. and Denise would choose to raise their own families in Youngstown, passing on that familiar mantra ingrained in them by their parents: work hard, treat others with respect, keep the family tight and be home on time for dinner. Each of the DeBartolo and York children graduated from their parents' alma mater, Youngstown Cardinal Mooney¹.

Eddie's oldest daughter and Hall of Fame presenter, Lisa DeBartolo, reflects on being raised with strong core values in a small town.

"Our family traveled often between cities growing up with the team. Going back to Youngstown was like, 'Well, this is home. This is where we get to be ourselves.' Being raised in a conservative Midwestern town grounded us. We felt a sense of community, and a real sense of family. There weren't people coming up to him for autographs, because the people in Youngstown knew him. In Youngstown, he was just another hard working dad going to work. Seeing how hard he works and my grandfather worked gave me the foundation for how I want to live my life, whether it is the Foundation², my two sons or my household. I am proud of where I come from and proud of my lineage. With that comes the responsibility of honoring it, so when my children are grown and out in the world, they are as proud of their last name as I am."

For Eddie DeBartolo, Jr. who is definitely more comfortable blending in with the other dads, the road to Canton offers opportunity not to celebrate himself, but to pay homage to the players, coaches, friends, family and fans that made that era what Randy Cross calls, "the sports version of Camelot."

Friends, like beloved head coach Bill Walsh.

"Our relationship was like a marriage. You have your great times and then there are times you're in the kitchen together and you don't talk because of some stupid little thing that someone said. Bill and I made a great team. Towards the end, when he was very sick, we spent a lot of time together talking. We talked about the great times we had in San Francisco and even the not-so-great times. Bill Walsh was a

man's man, without question one of the greatest coaches that ever lived, and my best friend." Eddie DeBartolo, Jr.

Friends, like fellow Youngstown native and former 49ers President, Carmen Policy.

"I believe that Eddie's success came from his training at the doorstep of Eddie DeBartolo, Sr. and seeing how he operated in the world of business across the country. That coupled with his upbringing from his mom, with her old-fashioned values, gave him a foundation. It was the Youngstown community where it's about hard work, family, church and community. Then you have his personality, passion, feistiness, and big heart. With all of that combined, when he found he could travel his own path, which was professional football, he saw an opportunity to get to the finish line and put the accelerator to the floor."

Family, like his nephew, Jed York, who - like him - was young when he took over ownership and who Eddie praises as being, "very strong, smarter than me and capable of jumping over hurdles, just as I did my first few years."

"My uncle is always the first person to reach out Monday morning after a game. When we talk, it is never lecturing. He helps you find your way and makes you feel comfortable and confident along that way. He is always reassuring. If you are down, he builds you up - when you win, he is the first person to high five you. Everything he does and says is unselfish. He is a great mentor because he gives you the space to grow on your own." Jed York, CEO 49ers

Players, like Jeff Fuller who sustained a career ending spinal injury in 1989. Eddie DeBartolo, Jr. not only honored Fuller's remaining contract, he made a commitment to pay him \$100,000 for the remainder of his (Fuller's) life.

"He is one of the most loyal people that I have ever been around to this day. Twenty years after being a part of the 49ers organization, he is still a part our lives today. He cares. The NFL needs more people like him. More owners like him. Without him being in the NFL it is a loss to every player that might have played for him and every owner who could learn from him." Jeff Fuller, 49ers DB, 1984-1989

Players, like Derrick Brooks, co-founder and partner of Brooks DeBartolo Collegiate High School in Tampa which boasts a 96% college entrance ratio with 30% academic scholarships.

"When I approached Mr. D. with my vision of creating a charter school in Tampa, a private school with public school costs - meaning zero tuition, he said, 'I'm in.' I continued with my pitch and he cut me off and said, 'Derrick, I said I'm in.' I don't remember my exact words in those first two minutes, but I think it may have been something like, 'I want to make this the best school in the country.' I believe that's how he goes about everything- be the best, because that is what is in his heart." Derrick Brooks, Buccaneers 1995-2008, HOF

"Be the best, because that is what is in his heart."

With that quote, Derrick Brooks offers a prelude into the biggest decision Eddie DeBartolo, Jr. ever had to make. A decision that no one could make but him.

After one year out of the game, a new season was approaching. With an expression often used by his father, it was time to Boom, make a decision³.

“Although difficult, leaving the game was the choice I made. I had been in football for 23 years. We won five Super Bowls. My children were getting older. All of a sudden I have three grandsons and there is no way you can spend the time with your wife, your daughters and their husbands and your grandchildren and give them the type of time and do the things you want to do with them and still be the owner of a national football team. It’s impossible. Football is a 12-month a year job now and even though it was difficult at first, I truly believe I made the right decision for my family. I wanted to focus on being the best husband, the best father and the best grandfather.”

Shares daughter Lisa, “When my dad owned the 49ers, I never felt that he wasn’t present. I think when the time came to evaluate, that year away from the team had given him a taste of home life with my mom and together they decided it was time. We girls were getting older and starting to have children and he wanted to focus on us. Those first years out were an adjustment for all of us at first, but in time, we noticed a subtle difference in my dad. Even though he had always been present in our lives, it was more of a relaxed presence. He still lights up when he sees former players like Joe Montana, Ronnie Lott, Bill Romanowski, Jerry Rice and Harris Barton, any of his players for that matter. Football is still his life, it’s just not life or death anymore.”

Today, Eddie DeBartolo controls DeBartolo Holdings, LLC between Montana and Tampa while he and his wife of 48 years, high school sweetheart, Candy (Papalia) divide their time between daughters Lisa, Nikki and Tiffanie. Offering up advice on his favorite new title and greatest accomplishment to date - Papa - DeBartolo offers up the X’s and O’s of good parenting.

“You have to be a sounding board, a figure of respect. You have to show them that you care. Time together is so important in order to help to guide them in the right direction in life. I spent so much time with my dad. I watched him. I never would have been near the success in San Francisco or today if I didn’t try to emulate that great man who was my father. The way he treated people and the way that he cared about people, and he taught me that and he taught my sister that and I’m forever grateful and thank him every night when I say prayers. He made it all possible just by the way he lived his life, the way my mom lived her life and the way she taught Denise and I how to live ours.”

This Saturday, Eddie DeBartolo, Jr. will be inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame. Twenty-five thousand men have played in at least one NFL game. Two hundred and ninety five football players, coaches and/or contributors have been inducted into the Hall of Fame⁴. It is another staggering statistic added to his legacy, but by the time the enshrinement concludes and Mr. D. is done thanking everyone and rerouting attention from himself to his players, the 49ers organization, the fans, and his family, you might almost forget the honor was bestowed upon him, and he’ll be just fine with that. All that will matter to him is that his three grandsons, Milo, Jasper and Asher are in the front row watching. Watching how he receives his bronze likeness - humbly. Watching how he slips on his Hall of Fame ring - graciously. Watching how he treats everyone who approaches him - each with dignity, each the same - with respect.

Cynthia Zordich, NFL Player Engagement Contributing Writer

Cynthia is the wife of former NFL Player/current University of Michigan Coach Michael Zordich and the mother of free agent FB Michael Zordich (PSU '12), former UB Quarterback Alex Zordich ('13) and Penn State graduate Aidan Zordich (Advertising '14).

1. In 2014 Eddie DeBartolo, Jr. donated \$5 million to Youngstown Cardinal Mooney. Denise DeBartolo York matched his donation.
2. Lisa DeBartolo is the Executive Director of the DeBartolo Family Foundation, Tampa, Fla.
3. As sited in Cleveland Magazine 1976
4. As sited on www.profootballhof