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Still kickin'

Capomolla, 53, remains a local soccer legend

By Michael Levitt
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Fortunato Capomolla has picked up a trick or two during his nearly four decades on soccer pitches throughout the region.

Capomolla, 53, still confuses opponents with his Stamford United (Utd.) Benistar team in the Amateur Soccer League of Connecticut (ASLC), an affiliate of the Connecticut State Soccer Association.

"The first few times I played against them, I was definitely confused," said Bruce Ennis, league president and goalkeeper of longtime rival, The Doyle. "All the guys on the field are yelling the same name, 'Pass here, Fortunato', 'Shoot', Fortunato.' Usually, as a game winds on, players begin to recognize their opponents by name. With this team, it is more difficult.

"As long as I can remember, his teams have been doing that, and I've been in the league for 16 years," Ennis said. "He must have carried it over from his playing (professional) days."

Capomolla, according to any adult familiar with Stamford's soccer history, would be in the city's soccer record books - if there were any. He was an icon within the small yet growing soccer community in Fairfield and Westchester Counties and Long Island in the late 1970s, 1980s, and early '90s.

"He was the best," said Enzo Mallozzi, Capomolla's neighbor. "Growing up, my father would tell me stories about the goals he scored against our team, the Minturnese Club," a reference to Capomolla's days playing for Catanzaro Soccer Club in Stamford's long-standing independent Italian-American League.

After arriving in Stamford from Italy in the early 1970s at age 16, Capomolla made a name for himself locally. Ironically, it was his 5-6 size, and premature hair loss that distinguished him from those around him.

"He was the best player on the field. Period," recalled longtime friend and co-coach Frank Thomas. "The ball was always at his feet. Sometimes, it was on his feet a little too long."

In his early 20s, Capomolla played two seasons with the Connecticut Yankees of the now defunct American Soccer League. At the time, it was one of two premier professional leagues in America, with teams coast to coast.

People have always underestimated him because of his size. Those who know him knew better.

He also enjoys silencing critics who complain about his propensity to hold the ball.

"Why should I pass (the ball)?" Capomolla said. "If I know I can do something with it and I don't know if the guy next to me was just going to lose it, what's the point in passing?"

Countless stories have been told where Capomolla, always the smallest, always the outsider - the only Italian on all-Greek or all-Ecuadorian sides - would take over a game.

He told Bob Pepi, director of Stamford Youth Soccer League (SYSL), his sticky foot developed from his childhood in the town of Arena, in Calabria, during large, unorganized, street games.

"When you play in the Piazza, how are you going to get the ball? You want the ball to stay long on your feet because you might not see it for another 20 minutes," Capomolla said.

As his players walked through technical drills at a recent practice, Capomolla recalled a game after his days with the Yankees, while he played in the big amateur league on Long Island, where players got paid under the table. The coach of the opposing team knew he was the key to the game and wanted him out, and out for good.

"The guy (the defender assigned to guard him) let me know in the first five minutes he wanted to break my legs. So I thought to myself, I'd better do something about this. First I tackled him so hard he limped off the field. Then, I scored two goals. We won 2-1!"

Capomolla, who has worked at Pitney Bowes for 25 years, currently participates with five teams. Besides acting as player/coach of Stamford United Benistar, he coaches a Stamford-based women's travel team, which is also sponsored by the local brokerage, Benistar LTD; a team in the local co-ed league; and Catanzaro, his team in the Italian-American League, which participates in a local Columbus Day tournament.

He also stars for a Connecticut Over-50 team, which has aspirations of playing in the country's premier over-50 event, the

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He also coached numerous youth teams he coached throughout the years as his children played in the SYSL.

"I couldn't imagine my life without soccer," he said. "I used to play three, sometime four games a weekend when I was younger," he said recently while sitting next to his sighing wife, Gail. "The only one who suffered was her," he said. The couple has four children.

After his days with the Yankees, Capomolla bounced around, settling with Stamford Italica until he ran into Thomas, who was playing/coaching with Stamford Utd. The two decided to merge their teams, bringing the club, which has roots in town since 1904, to a new level.

In the early years of the ASLC, there were fewer clubs, which meant traveling throughout the county to play teams as far away as Bethel, Danbury, and Bridgeport.

As the league progressed- most notably after the 1994 World Cup, hosted by the United States- Stamford Utd. became a feeder team. Often, players would play for a few years with Capomolla and Thomas before starting their own teams; transforming from teammates to competitors.

"No doubt about it, over the years more than a half-dozen teams entered the league as direct offshoots of us," said Thomas. "Some of them aren't around anymore, but a few are still in the league today."

Most notably, Ennis' team, The Doyle, today's team to beat, is a direct descendent of such early efforts.

Today's league has evolved from its early days. Traveling is no longer necessary, as 10 of the 11 current teams are from Stamford.

The league reflects the city's diversity. Of the 11 teams, many reflect immigrant groups prominent in Stamford; Eastern European teams, Hispanic teams, a team primarily from Scotland, a Caribbean-based team; and a few teams of natives and locals scattered throughout.

"We are in an exciting place, with a good number of established teams that have been here for a long time coupled with some young and exciting newcomers," says league president Ennis. "Thanks to the longtime members and their direction, we are working to become active in the community this year and expand the league for next season."

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