

O'Brien column for The Valley Mirror for April 14, 2011

Dan Marino and his dad
draw praise from fans

I can still see Dan Marino Sr. sitting in the stands at Pitt Stadium. He was the only person sitting in the stands that afternoon during spring football practice in April of 1982.

He was sitting on a metal bleacher halfway up the stadium on the 50-yard line. He had the best seat in the house to watch his son, Dan Marino, at practice with the Pitt football team. The 1982 Pitt football team was thought to be one of the best college football teams in America.

Young Marino was a pre-season All-American and high on the Heisman Trophy watch list. He had his dad's vote from the beginning.

I was working as a sportswriter at *The Pittsburgh Press* at the time and was doing a cover story for the Sunday *Roto* magazine of that daily newspaper. A year later, I would leave *The Press* to become the assistant athletic director and public relations director at the University of Pittsburgh. I would miss the Marino era with the Panthers. I missed those three consecutive years of Pitt having an 11-1 record under Jackie Sherrill.

Now Pitt Stadium is gone, *The Pittsburgh Press* is gone and Dan Marino Sr. is gone. He died last year at his home in South Florida. Only the memories remain.

He and his wife Veronica had been living in Weston, the same community where their son and his family resided. Their son had been the star quarterback of the Miami Dolphins for 17 seasons. That son, though it's hard to believe, will turn 50 this coming September.

Frazier Field, the sandlot ballfield back in their old neighborhood of South Oakland, at the end of Parkview Avenue where the family lived for so many years, was renamed the Dan Marino Field. There is also a children's hospital for kids with special needs near Fort Lauderdale named the MCH Dan Marino Center. Dan and his wife Claire have six children, and one of them has special needs.

Dan Marino and his dad drew many laudatory remarks from the many speakers at the 25th Annual Awards and Scholarship Banquet held by the Pittsburgh chapter of the Italian-American Sports Hall of Fame at the Westin Convention Center Hotel last Saturday night.

No one praised Dan Marino Sr. more than his son. "If I could be half the father my father was, I would feel that I accomplished something," said Dan Marino.

He was being honored as The Man of the Year and was being inducted into the local chapter's Hall of Fame. "I thought I was already in this Hall of Fame," declared Dan Marino with that wonderful smile of his. "What took you guys so long? Hey, I had 17 pretty good seasons in the NFL."

It was particularly poignant that Marino was being honored at the 25th anniversary of his recognition dinner. His dad was responsible for starting the Pittsburgh chapter of the organization that is headquartered in Chicago. His dad wanted to raise fund to help local Italian-American children with scholarships to college and to fund them if needed for young athletes to compete on an international basis.

I've always been fascinated by how many Italian-Americans have made their mark in sports and in other areas of achievement that are honored by his organization. I felt like I was back on Sunnyside Street in Hazelwood. I grew up in a neighborhood that was predominantly the descendants of families that had immigrated to America from Italy. I bowled as a child at St. Anthony's Club, an Italian-American club in our community. Nobody called it an Italian-American club in those days. It was just the Italian club.

My friends back in New York were so impressed when I was honored as a "Legend" by this chapter of the Italian-American Sports Hall of Fame back in 1999. "How'd a guy named O'Brien do that?" one of them asked.

I spoke with Dan Marino, Sr. on several occasions and enjoyed his friendship and fatherly advice.

"My dad spent a lot of time with me as a kid, teaching me how to throw a football, and how to be an athlete," said Dan Marino. "He also taught me how to be a man."

Marino was known for having a quick release, but his throwing motion was not a textbook one. Of course, Johnny Unitas and Joe Montana had their own unique throwing motions as well. Jackie Sherrill, who coached Marino during his Pitt days, once told him, "Don't let anybody change your throwing motion."

It was good to see Dan's family at the dinner this past Saturday. His mother Veronica remembered me, and she smiled when I reminded her of the time she danced with Myron Cope at a draft party held at the home of his teammate Sal Sunseri in Greenfield back in 1982. Sunseri and Emil Boures were both late draft selections of the Steelers that year.

Marino was in the following year's draft and the Steelers had an opportunity to pick him with the 21st pick in the first round and passed on him to draft Gabe Rivera, a defensive lineman from Texas Tech. Rivera was a promising prospect but he was injured and left paralyzed by an auto accident during his rookie season. Marino went to Miami, and under the tutelage of Don Shula, became one of the outstanding quarterbacks in NFL history.

People at the banquet and those I have seen since the event are still upset that the Steelers didn't draft Dan Marino. It is my personal theory that he would not have become the same Dan Marino we know and love had he stayed in Pittsburgh. Miami and Shula and the warm weather and a change of scenery were perfect for Marino.

His dad didn't regret it either. Dan Marino Sr. had worked as a truck driver for *The Post-Gazette*, delivering the paper to outposts throughout the city in the middle of the night. It wasn't a glamour job. "When people would tell me they felt bad for me that Danny didn't play for the Steelers," his dad once told me, "I said, 'Yeah, I missed all those vacations on the North Side.' Are you kidding?"

The Marinos moved to Miami after the dad retired from his job in Pittsburgh and have remained there ever since.

At the dinner this past Saturday, I also had a chance to say hello to Dan's two kid sisters, Cindi and Debbie. Cindi is married to KDKA- Radio broadcaster Larry Richert, who has emceed the dinner for more than 20 years. He was recruited by his late father-in-law to handle the task. "The price was right," allows Larry Richert. He misses Dan Marino Sr. as well, and offered kind words for his influence from the podium.

One evening back in the winter of 1982, I was invited to join the Marino family at their home on Parkview Avenue for a spaghetti dinner. “Dig in,” the dad ordered me.. “You don’t have to put on any airs at this table.”

It was a great meal, I remember. The company and the conversation couldn’t have been better. “Danny doesn’t get treated any differently than either of the girls,” the dad told me with more than a hint of pride.

Young Dan Marino was inducted into the local chapter’s Hall of Fame along with an old neighbor and former boss of his, John Rosato, who has been associated with Duquesne University football for 25 years as an assistant coach and scout and recruiting director under four different head coaches.

Rosato grew up in South Oakland and his family came from the same town in Italy as the Marino family. One of their neighbors back in those days was Bruno Sammartino, who for many years reigned as the wrestling champion of the world, and sold out Madison Square Garden 187 times or more than any other individual. Bruno, now 75 and bearing a dark mustache, also spoke at the dinner. He remains a most popular figure in Pittsburgh.

Rosato told a story about how all the Marinos worked at one time or another at his family’s nursery business in that South Oakland neighborhood. Danny disclosed a story I had never heard before how he almost lost a foot in his teenage years while mowing a lawn for that landscaping service.

“I was mowing grass on a hillside and the grass was wet and I was wearing tennis shoes,” said Marino. “I slipped and cut off the front end of my one tennis shoe. I only bruised my toes, but I hate to think what could have happened.”

He wouldn’t have been honored at last Saturday night’s dinner, that’s for sure. John Rosato, who spoke at length about everybody in his family – and he’s the oldest of 14 children -- said that Danny has been after him ever since to pay for those tennis shoes he ruined that day.

“I figure I owe him some interest on that money by now,” said Rosato. So he announced that he was making a donation of \$1,000 to the chapter for a scholarship for a deserving student the next time around. He offered another scholarship in his father’s memory.

Dan Marino was terrific at the dinner. One of the honorees was his former teammate John Brown. Remember when Marino threw Brown a touchdown pass on fourth down in the closing seconds of the 1982 Sugar Bowl to beat Georgia? It was a perfect pass over Brown’s shoulder and he held onto the ball even though he was instantly hit by two defenders and was knocked head over heels in the back of the end zone. “He couldn’t drop that ball,” Marino said on Saturday night. “I stuck it in him.”

It was that kind of night, full of good memories. Marino has gone on to become a big hit as an analyst on CBS-TV, sitting next to former Steelers’ coach Bill Cowher on the panel each Sunday.

There was never a disparaging word about Dan Marino during his entire NFL career, and he was cited on several occasions for his charitable efforts, especially with children. Fudge Brown, a public relations assistant with the Dolphins who grew up in Pittsburgh, once told me that whatever city the Dolphins visited, Dan was always meeting a Make-A-Wish Kid or some youngster with a special need who wanted to meet a star football player.

I've always admired the Marinos. Like most popular Pittsburgh sports heroes, Dan Marino has remained humble and does whatever he can to help out. He still sends so much signed memorabilia every year to his alma mater Central Catholic and has been the prime catalyst for their fund-raising efforts.

He may not have played quarterback for the Steelers, but No. 13 is still a real Pittsburgh guy. They don't come any better.

Pittsburgh sports author and Valley Mirror columnist Jim O'Brien has a "Pittsburgh Proud" series of books available at all area bookstores. His website is www.jimbriensportsauthor.com