

Julie Menendez; the Driving Force

Behind Soccer in Santa Clara County

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Introduction

If my son hadn't asked me to attend a boxing match between the United States and the Irish Olympic Teams I would have missed an opportunity to meet Julie Menendez, an indeed unique and accomplished individual. Every year as part of Irish Week the San Jose Sports Association sponsors these bouts. Once a year it seems people, who couldn't find Ireland on a map, become Irish; boisterous, staunch, loyal Irish. They yelled in support of their team. Hard fought bouts, but the United States team dominated.

About half way through the scheduled bouts the announcer said, "We have a special guest with us this evening. A man who has accomplished something no one else in the history of sports has ever accomplished. He had my attention. I noticed a man small in stature and older than most in the audience make his way toward the ring. In a move that seemed second nature, he grabbed the upper and middle ropes, spread them apart and stepped into the ring. In typical fashion the announcer didn't provide a name for his guest. Instead he talked about accomplishments. He

explained that Julie Menendez had coached the 1960 Olympic Boxing team that won three Gold Medals and a Bronze. A young fighter named Cassius Clay received one of those Gold Medals. The announcer went on to explain that in 1972 and again in 1976 Julie had coached the US Olympic Soccer Team making him the only person in the history of sports to coach two different sports. The significance of this accomplishment struck me immediately, but more so the fact I had never heard of Julie Menendez.

At a writing class I attend our instructor mentioned the Santa Clara County Pioneers Annual Historical Essay Contest and encouraged all of us to enter. At the time I had no real topic I felt worthy of consideration, but upon hearing of Julie Menendez's accomplishments I felt his story deserved recognition. As he left the ring I noted him seated close by. The crowd already focused on the next fight with lots of partisan cheering and jeering, but my attention turned to how I might approach Julie after the fights. I hoped to arrange an interview to discuss his experiences. I had found a suitable topic for the essay contest. At the end of the evening I asked him if I could contact him the following week for an interview. He agreed

immediately. I knew about the Olympics and Clay, but I had no idea just how much I would learn about this man.

Julie attracted my interest for several reasons. First, I coached baseball for 15 years as my three sons grew up. Never at the level Julie coached, but I gained an appreciation for what sports can accomplish for kids. I wondered what Julie's experiences might have been. Second, personal experiences with Cassius Clay meant great stories. Clay won his Gold Medal at the age of 19, my age at that time. I watched his first fight against Sonny Liston on a huge movie screen. He won the World Championship that night. Who can ever forget the stunning moment in the opening ceremonies of the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta when Muhammad Ali carried the Olympic flame for those brief few moments? The chance to learn first hand about one of the greatest fighters of all time intrigued me.

Prior to that evening I had never heard the name Julie Menendez, but his accomplishment is unique in sports. I've lived in Santa Clara County for 25 years, longer than any other place during my lifetime. My three sons all played baseball and soccer. I know what it takes to organize a

sport and keep a league going. I often put in 50-hour weeks in Little League. Julie accomplished great things at the college level not without personal sacrifice. My immediate reaction that evening? It seemed a shame that others also might not know this man. The obvious action to correct that situation involved making him the subject of an essay for the contest.

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Julie Menendez; The Driving Force
Behind Soccer in Santa Clara County

Julie Menendez, a long time resident of Santa Clara County, accomplished something in sports nobody else has ever achieved. It started with the 1960 Olympic Boxing team and culminated in 1976 with the Olympic Soccer team. Julie coached both those teams and became the only person in the history of sports to coach two different sports in the Olympics. His accomplishments in sports go much farther. Nearly 40 years of coaching boxing and soccer resulted in 3 NCAA boxing championships and eight Pacific Conference Soccer championships. At an individual level he developed 25 All-American soccer players and 12 NCAA boxing champions. The Olympic boxing team won three gold medals and a bronze and included a boxer many rank the best ever, Muhammad Ali; Cassius Clay when Julie coached him.

But all those accomplishments, and no question they are significant, pale in comparison to his lifelong efforts to promote soccer. He learned to play soccer as a boy in East St. Louis. Eventually he became a beacon for soccer

in Santa Clara County. He talked to groups about how soccer benefits players of all ages. As Julie pointed out, "When the ball's on the ground everyone's the same size. Kids don't need to wait until they grow big enough to handle a game like football. They can play soccer at a very early age."

Julie's parents immigrated to the United States from Spain and his father worked long hours in a zinc-smelting foundry near East St. Louis where Julie was born in 1922. Like most immigrants his parents lived in a tight ethnic community. Being surrounded by familiar language and culture so far from home helped. People enjoyed common pastimes from the homeland. One of the major pastimes involved playing soccer. East St Louis wore the reputation of a tough town, but Julie explained, "It was a soccer hot bed. A truly international game the Europeans brought here with them. Everybody played soccer." He learned soccer in the streets and over the years it became a major part of his life.

Julie lives with his wife, Doris, on a couple acres in a pleasant home in Morgan Hill. There's enough room for his daughter to keep a few horses. He's now retired, although still active in sports. He's a member of the Board of Directors of the Greater San Jose Sports

Association. A modest office in his home includes a small desk and a couple chairs. When you visit he doesn't really mention all the awards, just gives them a casual wave, but you can't miss them. One entire wall from floor to ceiling is a built-in bookcase containing more trophies and awards than can be absorbed in a single visit. Letters adorn the other walls along with Resolutions from the United States Senate, United States House of Representatives, the Governor of California, and both the California Senate and House. Statues, photos and plaques pay witness to his many honors. He has been inducted into the Santa Clara County Athletic Hall of Fame (1971), the San Jose Sports Hall of Fame (1996) and the California Soccer Hall of Fame (1976). One entire section of the bookcase filled with scrapbooks stuffed full of pictures presents a major challenge to Julie; he wants to organize them. Given the voluminous amount of material he faces a monumental task.

Julie's career began with boxing. He became involved in Golden Gloves and joined the National Team in 1942 and made Captain in 1946. His boxing led to an interest in coaching which marked the beginning of a career that would allow him to help many young people through the power of sports. He commented, "Lots of kids found the gym provided them a real discipline. The trainer had real control over

the kids and what they did, how they acted. It created a real positive force in their lives."

Moving fast in the ring is a vital boxing skill. Julie learned to apply that skill to his life. By 1950 he had earned his Bachelors in Education, with magna cum laude honors, from San Jose State and from there he's never rested. From 1950 through 1958 he coached various military boxing teams in international competition, coached the San Jose State Boxing Team and in his spare time completed his Masters Degree in Physical Education at Stanford. As the coach of the San Jose State Boxing Team Julie created a sports dynasty in Santa Clara County. His teams won 15 Pacific Coast championships and three consecutive NCAA team championships that included 12 NCAA Boxing champions.

Julie doesn't hesitate when asked about his greatest thrill in coaching. It occurred during the 1960 Olympics when he coached the boxing team. Olympic bouts are three rounds of three minutes each for various weight classes. It takes about 20 minutes to complete a bout with medals awarded after each bout. There's a sparkle in his eye when he mentions listening as they played the National Anthem and raised the United States flag in the boxing arena three straight times in about one hour when the United States Boxing team won three Gold Medals.

Of the three winners, Eddie Crook, Wilbur McClure, and Cassius Clay it is, of course, Clay who went on to have the biggest impact on boxing. "He fooled a lot of people" Julie chuckled. "He wasn't the brash, arrogant, confident kid we all saw on the news. He use to come to me and say, 'OK Coach, you can't tell 'em.' I'd say, 'Tell 'em what.' 'You know, you can't tell 'em.' I'd ask again, 'Tell 'em what.' He said, 'Don't tell 'em I'm scared coach.'" Julie likes to tell that story often and he always laughs when he does.

Julie tells many stories about this young 19-year-old boxer who captured the gold in the Light Heavyweight Division. "Clay had trouble maintaining his weight, liked to eat," Julie explained. Coaches from around the country urged Julie to move Clay to the Heavyweight Division, but Julie knew better. He coached military boxing teams and knew the Italian team had a mature and experienced heavyweight. He kept Clay in the Light Heavyweight Division, but struggled to keep Clay's weight down. "One morning," Julie relates, "one of the boxers came running in and said 'Coach, ya gotta come see what Clay's havin' for breakfast.' I went in and he had a plate piled with hash browns and another with bacon. A third plate contained eggs. I counted them, 11 eggs. I asked him why

he didn't just eat an even dozen and he looked at me in *total seriousness and said, 'But coach that would be too many.'*"

The most poignant story Julie tells about Ali happened just recently. Julie and his wife visited Ali at a sports conference. When they came in Muhammad sat eating a Quarter Pounder. Julie laughed, "He always had trouble maintaining weight." When Muhammad saw them he got up from his chair. "He needed some help," Julie said. "He took a stance in front of me like a boxer and I did the same. He put his arm around one of his assistants and with some effort raised his other arm and pointed a trembling finger at me. The Parkinson's made even that simple gesture difficult. He turned to his assistant and in a voice so soft you have to lean toward him to hear what he says he told the assistant, 'He was a good coach.'" Even Julie's quiet demeanor can't hide his pride when that story is related.

Julie also filled the role of unofficial ambassador. United States teams faced tense moments in foreign countries. Poor reception occurred often. In December of 1967 Singapore fans stoned a soccer team from Dallas. Julie related a different incident in 1976. Julie coached the United States Soccer team at the Pan American games in

Cali, Columbia that year. While riding to a game Julie noted a group of boys about 12 years old playing soccer in a field full of rocks and gopher holes. Just walking on the field would have been a challenge let alone playing soccer on it. Most the boys played barefooted. They wore no shirts. Skinny legs stuck out from torn, hand-me-down shorts. They almost looked emaciated and the term rag-a-muffins conveyed a compliment. Julie could see they didn't have much in the way of possessions. Their scuffed and beaten soccer ball looked beyond repair let alone use. Julie had the bus stopped. "Loaded down with new soccer balls for the team I just couldn't go by without stopping for those kids." A picture from one of his many albums shows the kids huddled around Julie, a new soccer ball at their feet and smiles beaming across their faces.

"I guess the word spread quickly," Julie said. "When we entered the stadium instead of being booed and having stuff thrown at us like most US teams we received a standing ovation." A simple act of kindness, one Julie undoubtedly repeated many times over his lifetime, had done a great deal for the United States image and all because Julie knew in his heart what needed to be done.

Boxing was a well-established sport in college in the early fifties, not so for soccer. "We lacked skilled

players, teams formed without trained coaches, kids didn't play the game," he explained. "At San Jose State I made the boxing team my first soccer team." With a laugh and that twinkle in his eye he said, "I told them it would be good road work for them." He always felt soccer was an important sport because you did not need physical development to play the game. It allowed kids to become involved in sports at an early age and Julie knew the importance of that from personal experience.

Julie worked tirelessly at all age levels to build the game he loves. His early college teams consisted of few local players. It presented both problems and opportunities. Foreign players made up his entire 1969 team. The 11 starters came from 11 different countries. "I felt like the guard at the Tower of Babel," he said. It worked out because as Julie noted, "Soccer is an international language. It brings them together socially." Over the years many of his former players expressed a special thanks to Julie for getting them involved in soccer. They believed it helped them assimilate culturally much faster. "The game can bring you together quickly and it helped the players feel at home."

When his own children became old enough to play he faced a small dilemma. "Most our kids' friends thought

playing this game where you kicked a ball around seemed crazy," he said. Julie felt differently about the game and wanted to get kids involved. "What's more natural than kicking something around. I kicked a tin can down the street." Julie helped create four teams and started a small league.

By 1974, five short years after his Tower of Babel team, Julie had built an amazingly strong program. Not only had 12 of his 16 players been born in the United States, but even more impressive, 10 graduated from Santa Clara County high schools. This situation existed because of Julie's efforts to help build soccer as a competitive sport at the high school level. Julie received recognition as the "motivating force behind the growth" of soccer in Santa Clara County high schools. Julie recalls when the East Side School District faced a decision about whether to include soccer as part of their sports program. He met all the school principals at breakfast to discuss the importance of soccer to kids. "I explained what it could mean being part of a team, why soccer helped kids develop physically and socially," he said. As he explained so often, "It's an easy sport to start in high school. Football fields make excellent soccer fields and equipment is minimal. Individual skill, speed and team play are

paramount." The East Side District started a program that year.

It takes more than interest in the game and leagues to build a comprehensive soccer program. When his own son reached high school level he found, unlike the East Side District, his school supported no soccer program. At Julie and Doris' urging their son's school started a soccer team, but discovered they lacked capable coaches. Julie began an evening class at San Jose State to teach soccer and coaching techniques. Sixty students attended the first class including the coach at his son's high school.

Soccer, being an international sport, might lead one to assume numerous books about soccer techniques and coaching existed. Julie learned books existed, but not in English. Once again Julie filled the gap. He authored Soccer, in 1968. He'd already written a book on boxing. Soccer covers all aspects of the game including a history of the sport in the United States, field layout, equipment requirements, positions, required skills and coaching techniques. It soon became the bible for soccer coaches around the country. Julie constantly promoted soccer and provided the foundation to build it into a major sport. Over a 30-year period Julie has traveled across the United States and around the world giving of his own time to run

over 250 clinics for various civic and service organizations.

Julie gave his time in many other ways. He served on Olympic committees six times and Pan-American Games committees five times. He is past president of the Pacific Soccer Conference, Intercollegiate Boxing Coaches Association and the Santa Clara County Branch of the California Association of Health, Physical Education and Recreation. He served as Tournament Director for the NCAA Soccer Championships for five years and spent 11 years as chairman for NCAA Soccer and Boxing Committees. In 1969 Julie spearheaded the effort to bring the Russian soccer team to the United States for a tour that included a game in San Jose.

As a professor at San Jose State he taught various classes associated with physical education and coaching, including administration, coaching concepts, and physical education philosophy. He contributed two chapters on dealing with stress to Relax and Win published in 1981. One of the many pictures in his scrapbook is from a testimonial dinner. That evening a former student talked about Julie's accomplishments and his impact as a coach. "He said some very nice things," Julie relates with a slightly embarrassed look. This particular student

certainly possessed the qualifications to discuss the importance of coaching. The student? Former San Francisco 49ers coach Bill Walsh.

Every child, student and adult who plays soccer in Santa Clara County has Julie to thank. Today in Santa Clara County 10,000 youngsters play soccer in various youth leagues. Every high school in the area boasts at least two, and many, 4-6 soccer teams. The Parks and Recreation Department sponsors an extensive adult program accommodating several hundred players. "Girls play the game now," Julie explains. "Years ago a few played, but rules didn't allow girls to head the ball. Today everybody gets to play," he said with a smile on his face. Soccer has grown to become a major sport in the United States and Julie Menendez has played a significant role in that growth. He may have many great stories about Muhammad Ali. He may have received numerous awards. He may be unique in sports for having coached two different Olympic teams, but what he has done for the game of soccer, especially in Santa Clara County, stands out as his greatest accomplishment.

The End

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