

New stadium name honors coach's legacy in the Falls

SPONSORSHIP: Falls School District names stadium after former coach Calandrelli.

By Rick Pfeiffer rick.pfeiffer@niagara-gazette.com

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James Neiss/staff photographer

Calandrelli family members and friends cut the ribbon officially naming the Niagara Falls High School stadium the Art Calandrelli Stadium. Ellen Latham, founder of Orange theory Fitness and a Niagara Falls High School graduate, purchased the naming rights to honor her father, a former coach there.



James Neiss/staff photographer

Ellen Latham, founder of Orange theory Fitness and a Niagara Falls High School graduate, speaks at the high school stadium during Friday's ceremony honoring her father, former Falls coach Art Calandrelli.

The Niagara Falls School Board pulled out all the stops on Friday morning.

A brass band, cheerleaders and even, on cue, the sun bursting from behind a bank of dark clouds for what School Board President Robert Restaino called "a dream come true."

Officially, the board marked the ribbon-cutting opening of the district's newly dedicated Art Calandrelli Stadium. The dedication also marked the launch of the school district's For Our Kids and Yours sponsorship program.

"This is a dream that goes back a lot of years," Restaino said. "It was an idea that (former school board member) Art Jacoy and I came up with. It was an idea that hadn't been done anywhere else."

Jacoy and Restaino thought they might be able to create a program that would allow people in the private sector to make charitable donations that could be used to help support and maintain the school district's arts and athletics programs. It's a model that has been used by colleges and universities, with great success, for years.

"It's a way to maintain this beautiful facility," Restaino said, while gesturing toward the Falls' high school football field, "without impacting the taxpayers. We are so proud to partner with the Calandrelli family."

A record-setting punter at Canisius College and UB, Calandrelli was a football and track coach and eventually athletic director for the Niagara Falls School District from the 1950s to the 1980s. He died in 2004.

His daughter, Ellen Latham, who credits her dad with inspiring her to create a billion dollar empire that includes 1,300 fitness centers in 23 countries around the world, leapt at the chance to become the school district's first sponsor as a way to honor her father.

"This fills my heart more than anything I've ever done," Latham said, before cutting the ceremonial ribbon in front of an archway entrance to the stadium that now bears the Calandrelli name.

Echoing what she said was her father's best advice, Latham told the crowd that turned out for the event, "Keep pushing. Don't be afraid to be uncomfortable."

The exact value of Latham's gift was not made public. In addition to providing funds for the football stadium's maintenance, it will also fund an annual \$5,000 scholarship, for an athlete, cheerleader, musician, or other arts student at Niagara Falls High School.

Latham said the scholarship would be around long after her, sustained by her son and eventually her now infant grand-daughter.

"It's hard to put into words how much this means to me," Latham said, her voice crackling with emotion. "My father dedicated his life to his students."

Schools Superintendent Mark Laurrie said the district is just beginning its efforts to find major sponsors for naming its athletic fields, field house, sports complex, scoreboard, press box and performing arts center.

"Anything and everything we do in this project will benefit the students of Niagara Falls High School," Laurie said. "

The district is preparing a list of nearly 20 naming opportunities. Laurie said he's hoping for more dedication ceremonies in the near future.