One step at a time

Savastanos believe they are on right track at JFK as hard work begins to pay dividends

By KEN KOSTIK

There is an old saying that things always happen for a reason.

At least, that is what you tell a person after they catch, what they believe, to be a bad break.

Three years ago, Nick and Vinny Savastano found themselves in that exact situation.

It doesn’t see too long ago that the Savastanos were reviewing what went wrong with their John Jay boys’ lacrosse team in its quest for a fifth straight sectional championship – that title dream derailed in June of 2009 by Somers in the Section I/Class B final.

By the end of that calendar year though, after accusations of misbehavior by several former and current John Jay players, the Savastanos, along with their JV head coach Erik Hoaglund, were removed from their coaching positions at the Cross River school after rebuilding it into a national power.

The trio was soon in some unchartered waters – really an ocean of uncertainty, as they all wondered where and when they would finally land back on their feet and be able to coach lacrosse once more.

As it does with all quality coaches, it did not take too long before opportunity came knocking on their front doors.

Before they even had much of a chance to ponder what life would be without coaching a lacrosse program, all three landed firmly on their feet as John F. Kennedy Catholic High School in Somers took a flyer on the coaches and handed them the keys to their boys’ lacrosse kingdom.

Now, as they look back at what they have accomplished in those three years at JFK and where they are heading, the Savastanos can say that all that did take place for a reason.

“Yes, you can say that things certainly do happen for a reason,” said Nick Savastano, who serves as the head coach at JFK and is a co-founder of the Westchester Warriors travel lacrosse program. “It gave us a fresh, new start and it gave us the opportunity to educate kids about the game of lacrosse – and, as teachers, that is what we do best, educate kids.”
The Savastanos walked into a rough situation at JFK – taking over a Gaels team that went just 3-9 in 2009.

Under the brothers’ tutelage, the Gaels improved to 5-12 in 2010 and qualified for the Class C sectional tournament.

Then, in 2011, JFK took another “baby step” with a 10-7 mark – and again qualified for the Section I/Class C tournament.

Heading into this past season, the Savastanos sat down with the team and laid out a pair of goals – win the league championship and win a sectional game.

“They had never won a sectional game here,” said Savastano. “And, they had never won a league title. So, getting both of those this year – especially winning the sectional game the way we did in overtime, was something special. You know, since they had never won a league title, there was no lacrosse banner up in the gym – now they will have one.”

Those goals were a far cry from the ones set at John Jay by the Savastanos, who entered each season entertaining thoughts of competing for a state crown and came within one victory of achieving that goal back in 2007 when their 21-3 Indians’ team upset the top-ranked team in the country, Huntington, in the state Class B semifinals before losing to Jamesville-DeWitt in the title game.

“It was hard at first,” Savastano said of having to alter their goals. “At certain times, we looked at each other and asked if we still knew how to coach this game. It was frustrating at times, but the end result has been very good and we are moving forward – and we feel that we are going to bring bigger things here.”
The Gaels finished this past season with a 14-4 mark – and they posted a 12-11 overtime sectional win over Irvington, who could not hold onto a three-goal fourth quarter lead in the May 18 in a first round game in the Section I/Class C championship tournament.

The seventh-seeded Gaels’ Andrew Rodriguez bulled dodged his way out of the left corner and beat Irvington keeper Phil Joy from about eight yards out just 56 seconds into the extra session to give JFK their first sectional win in the three years that the Savastanos have been at the helm.

The 10th-seeded Bulldogs had led 11-8 after three quarters, but could not slow the tempo in the fourth period.

JFK, which seemed to thrive when the game was at its most chaotic, got a goal from Dylan Trodden 1:29 into the fourth quarter to close to within 11-9.

Midway through the period, Nick Garafano converted a feed from Rodriguez to make it an 11-10 game.

Then, with 3:55 left in regulation time, Pat Gleason took a pass from high in the box from Trodden on the lip of Joy’s crease and deposited the ball into the cage to even the contest at 11-11.

And, though they would fall to Pleasantville 16-5 four days later, the season still ended with a good taste in the mouths of all involved with the JFK program.

“Over these three years, we have seen extreme progress,” said Savastano. “We are real happy with what’s going on - I don’t think we could have imagined what we would see over these three years, things that we are doing, the progress the kids are making. In that first year, it was more about organizing the kids and just trying to get some interest in the game – now, the kids are playing the game the right way.”

He continued, “The system we put in place, all the little things we have done – from the same gear to the discipline to stressing that they play hard in practice and in the games and to dedicating themselves to the team and the game, it has all paid off. These kids are getting the lax bug and that is starting to help us.”

The winning and the reputation of the Savastanos have also helped make JFK an option for lacrosse youngsters.

“Our reputation as teachers and coaches – especially with the success that we had at John Jay, goes a long way with parents and kids,” explained Savastano. “The parents know that we are teachers first and educators and that goes a long way.”

And, having the full backing of the Somers school’s administration has also helped jump start the lacrosse program in the right direction.

“The administration has given us everything that we have asked for,” said Savastano. “Father Vaillancourt (the school principal) is our biggest fan; and we are looking forward to working with the new AD, Father (Matthew) Newcomb – he comes to every one of our games and is a big lacrosse guy.”

This past season was also the first that the Gaels got to play on the school’s new turf field.

“The turf field was a blessing – great to be able to get out there no matter what the weather was,” said Savastano. “It gave the kids a feel of a professional facility.”

Another big component in taking JFK to the next level is having the team members keep the stick in their hands throughout the summer and fall – and, to do this, the Savastanos started their own elite travel program, the Westchester Warriors in 2011.

“The Warriors kills two birds with one stone – it gets them to play over the summer and in the fall and it allows them to play with kids from other teams and programs, and it allows us to show other kids what we are doing and what we are all about,” explained Savastano. “From our standpoint, we have about 15 or 16 of our JFK kids playing on the two teams and they are going to play in 16 or so games over the summer – that is a full high school season of games.”

He continued, “Getting kids to play that many games at that level of competition that they see over the summer is huge for their development – and it goes a long way to making them better players.”
This summer, the Warriors fielded a pair of teams – a U-15 and a U-17, with the squads traveling to tournaments in New Jersey and Connecticut and on Long Island.

In addition to the JFK contingent, the Warriors attracted players from John Jay, Brewster, Ridgefield and even upstate New York.

“Getting the different kids and mixing them in,” explained Savastano, “allows our guys to get a feel for what everyone else is doing.”

Getting fresh eyes and ideas to the players also came from a pair of volunteer assistants – 2012 Springfield College graduate Rich Podlovits, as well as Lakeland/Panas 2012 graduate Nick Kostik, who will play D-III lacrosse at Misericordia University in Dallas, PA beginning this fall.

Podlovits is also a 2008 graduate of JFK and has a brother, Ryan, who is a member of the current Gaels.

“It’s great to have kids who want to give back,” said Savastano. “Rich is a graduate of Springfield with a teaching degree and has been doing some great things with the kids – he brings a fresh, new look to the team.”

He continued, “Nicky has been with us for a long time – he started going to our camps when he was in third grade and we are so proud of what he has done in his career. For him to volunteer his time and give back to us makes us feel good – it makes you feel good that you have been able to reach out and touch kids and make such an impression that they want to come back and help you continue doing what you are doing.”

It is all just part of a bigger plan to bring bigger things to JFK.

“Right now, we are having so much fun,” said Savastano. “When they won that sectional game last spring, you would have thought that they had won the sectional championship with the way they reacted.”

He added, “Now, we have to take that next step and we feel confident about doing it.”