

“amore” for the IABF!

by Nick D'Arienzo

2021 has most definitely been a banner year for the exemplary Italian American Baseball Foundation, and they're not even close to being done yet... because one of their crown jewels, their annual IABF Gala, takes place on Thursday, Dec. 2 in Brooklyn. Honorees will include Baltimore Orioles 1B/OF Trey Mancini, whose battle back from cancer has earned him the American League's "Comeback Player of the Year"; veteran sportswriter/broadcaster Tom Verducci; Washington Nationals President/GM Mike Rizzo; and former Adelphi head coach Dom Scala, among others.

Just five years old, the IABF had its inception via a conversation founder Joe Quagliano had with former major-leaguer Frank Catalanotto at Catalanotto's annual golf outing benefitting the Vascular Birthmarks Foundation. "We were talking about all the great Italian-American ballplayers," remembers Quagliano. "And we know we have dozens who were born in the U.S., but we couldn't think of anyone who was born in Italy. So we decided to check out some talent, see who's going to college in the U.S., and we put a program together.... clinics in Italy, scouting talent, surveying who was in the States playing college ball. Just to see if they could go to the next level and how

we could help them. That's basically how the idea came about."

Quagliano, the head of MINT PROS, a company specializing in baseball VIP



Co-founders Carmine Gangone (far left) and Joe Quagliano (far right) have been carrying the banner for the Italian American Baseball Foundation since 2016, but perhaps never more proudly than they and their team did on Columbus Day!

events, went straight to his Yankee fantasy camp compadre Carmine Gangone, and the foundation was off and running. Their first annual fundraising gala was held at Gangone's Brooklyn restaurant CARMINE & SONS SPORTS BAR RESTAURANT, with their inaugural honoree being none other

than Hall of Famer Michael Joseph Piazza. Gangone, the IABF's Vice-President marvels at how quickly the organization has grown since then. "It's been a lot of hard work, but it's also incredibly rewarding. The more people we talked to, the more we reached out, we realized how proud people were to talk about their Italian-American heritage... and also their passion for the game of baseball."

This year in particular, with the mid-season arrival of Anthony Rizzo and Joey Gallo to the Bronx Bombers, the celebration of culture was brought to the forefront. "It was great seeing those Italian flags in the Stadium," recalls Gangone with a smile. "It was great seeing that pride on display."

"You could feel the excitement that these two Italian-Americans were coming to the Yankees, they made the front pages," adds Quagliano. "There was a vibe that we hadn't seen in a long, long time. That tells you how much Italian-Americans love baseball. The vibe with Italian-Americans is still strong."

The ongoing conversation about pride in one's heritage is one of the things IABF Director Chris Vaccaro appreciates most about the work the foundation does. "Every email, every conversation, every opportunity where we get to discuss our heritage helps grow the foundation. What we found is all of the organizations that we've been meeting with have the same thoughts and feelings in their regions. So we're creating this network of people who want to bridge this cultural gap with sports, who love being Italian-American. Each of those conversations, each of those moments to grow, is what makes me proud."

"We also have a group of major league ballplayers who are involved with us and help us every time we ask: John Franco and Bobby Valentine, Lee Mazzilli, Joe Maddon, Joe Girardi. No one has said no to us, everyone jumps at the opportunity to try and



The IABF's fundraising launch in 2016 honored Hall of Famer Mike Piazza, seen here with John Franco and Lee Mazzilli, at CARMINE & SONS in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Franco was the 2018 honoree, Mazzilli the 2020 honoree, and Bobby Valentine (center, photo at right) the 2017 honoree. Upper right corner, YANKEES prospect Anthony Volpe will be recognized with the first-ever "Future Star" Award at the 2021 gala in December.



help. It's just been phenomenal." "Everybody wants to celebrate the culture and heritage that we all share and love," adds Vaccaro.

And while celebrating Italian-American heritage is a significant aspect of the organization's outreach, the stated mission, as Quagliano reminds us, "has always been about youth and education... through baseball and softball."

For example, the IABF spearheads camps and clinics such as the recent partnership with Long Island Baseball this past July that Catalanotto (now Hofstra's head coach) helped host, along with Mike Pagliarulo and Chris Colabello.

In another nod to youth, this year's gala will feature the organization's first "Future Stars" awards, recognizing YANKEES prospect Anthony Volpe, the up and coming 2B from New Jersey.

And perhaps most impressively, this year the IABF will be awarding college scholarships to three well-deserving recipients. "It's a great honor for us to see that our money is going to help educate kids," says Quagliano, "and they're going to be playing baseball and softball. We're very proud of this scholarship

opportunity." Scholarship honorees include Francesco Bonvini, Franco Logozzo, and Shannon Russo. Bonvini, who is from Parma in Northern Italy, is playing baseball at Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn. Logozzo is playing baseball at St. Joseph's College in Patchogue, Long Island. Russo is playing softball at Raritan Valley Community College in New Jersey.

The IABF Scholarship Committee - made up of Dan Palumbo, Joseph DiMartino, and Vaccaro - established several criteria for their scholarships, which include: a GPA of 3.0 or higher, at least 25% Italian heritage, membership on a current roster of a college baseball or softball team; and demonstration of financial need. All applicants submitted transcripts, letters of recommendation, and perhaps most importantly, a personal statement about their Italian-American pride. Logozzo, the SJC Golden Eagles' sophomore pitcher from Oceanside, couldn't be more thrilled. His hero? None other than Mike Piazza. "It's a great honor... It will help me in so many ways with my college career and can continue to let me play baseball. This is such a great moment in my life that I will

always remember." "To be able to tell my family that the IABF had chosen me was an awesome moment," adds Russo, the softball standout from Raritan, NJ. "I promise to work as hard as I can to live up to this award."

"We have a very nice mix," notes Quagliano proudly, "and I think every year we're going to have at least one student from Italy, at least one softball player, if not more. And it'll grow from there. We're going to have many more scholarships coming forward over the years." Of course, none of this work is possible without the tireless work of the team behind it, and the generous donors who support it. "The more you can come out and support this organization," says Vaccaro, "you're not only supporting the kids. you're also [paying tribute] to the past and the people who inspired us. I don't think there's anything better than celebrating our culture together."

To find out more about the great work the IABF is doing, you can visit them online at www.IABF.foundation - or in person on Thursday, Dec. 2 at GIANDO ON THE WATER. Tickets and other info are available on their website.