

WESTCHESTER COUNTY BUSINESS JOURNAL

Profits & Passions Michael Durante

Team builder

By BOB ROZYCKI

Some people like to read books; Michael Durante likes to read defense.



And he tries to impart his reading as well as other skills to his disciples of the court as in basketball court.

Durante, president and co-founder of Select Telecom Inc. in Valhalla, doesn't look much like Pete Maravich as he sits behind his desk talking on the phone with a client. But in his younger days playing street hoops in the Bronx, he swears he had the long, mopy hair and moves that were a symbol of the underhand, between-the-leg and behind-the-back passing of "Pistol Pete," hall-of-famer and basketball player extraordinaire.

For Durante, it was stickball and basketball growing up in a neighborhood off White Plains Road in the northeast section of the Bronx. During the winter, he and his friend Butch would grab shovels and clear an area on the court to practice foul shots and lay-ups. It was the "you did what you had to do" mentality of time, place and childhood.

As good as he was on the street court, the odds worked against him making the team at Evander Childs High School that had a couple thousand students filling its classrooms.

But he did make the high school basketball team in his senior year; but it wasn't at the East Gun Hill Road school. Instead, it would be at Kuna High School, about 2,000 miles due west, in Kuna, Idaho.

His mom, Mary, thought the rough streets could take him down the wrong path, so he did a stint with his older brother and wife who lived in the town just southwest of Boise. He tried out for the basketball team and made it. The coach loved the young Durante, so much so he wanted him to stay back a year so he could play for two years on the team and guarantee himself a college scholarship. But, alas, as they say, you can take the boy out of the Bronx, but not the Bronx out of the boy. A day after graduation, the Kuna Kaveman was on a plane back to his beloved borough.

He got a job with a telephone company, starting what would become a 30-year career in the telecommunications industry. After a couple of years, he moved on to installing and maintaining telephone systems with TSI in Rye. In 1991, he joined Williams Communications Inc. as an installation manager for all of Connecticut and started its first branch in Westchester, growing it to more \$5 million per year as a service and installation company.

Having to always want his own business, Durante and Gerald Moscariello opened Select Telecom in 1996. He says customer relationship management is key to running a successful business. "I'm loyal to my customers and they're loyal to me."

He says he's always willing to speak to a customer and doesn't "hide behind" his voice mail. Select Telecom, www.Select-Tele.com, has 24 employees, 1,700 customers and six years ago opened an office in Raynham, Mass. And he's also loyal to his workers; in 11 years he says he has not lost a technician.

As he grew the business, he never forgot about basketball. The first to be introduced to sports in his family was his oldest, Samantha. He worked on her skills at Patterson Recreation. She joined the Wesconn Fillies, an Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) girls basketball team. He coached her until she was 14, when she made the Brewster High School team.

Then it was coaching son Mike and then Nick in the rec and CYO leagues. With the support of his wife, Susan, Durante began coaching with the Westchester AAU four years ago. His team is made up essentially of members of Brewster High's boys team.

The coaches clinics begin in February and then teams are chosen for the season that has 30 to 40 games.

Durante says he takes what he learned from business and imparts it with his team: "Basketball is like life. You're not gonna win all the time. You have to be proud; proud that you played with dignity."

It's interesting to note that Durante and his boyhood hero, Pete Maravich, share a bit of a connection, albeit loosely at best. Maravich played for several years with the Atlanta Hawks. The name of Durante's team? The Westchester Hawks.