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## When the game is life or death

Youth coaches who bolted into action and saved life of a stranger to be honored Saturday at Wagner

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STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE

Frank Casiano's 42, old enough to have missed the game-ball craze, when coaches started handing them out like chewing gum: "To Joey -- 2 tackles -- Homecoming 2003."

John Strandberg, who's 37, figures he might've gotten one or two in Little League, but their trophy status was shortlived.

"I probably wound up playing with them," Strandberg says, "just like my Mickey Rivers and Lou Piniella balls."

Now the folks at Wagner College have decided that situation needs to be rectified.

We throw around words like "hero" all the time in sports, a habit we swore off for awhile after Sept. 11, 2001, when most of us realized the real heroes weren't the ones making free throws or five-foot putts.

We treat the games like they're life and death; but deep down, we know they're not.

Still, every once in awhile, something happens in a gym that meets the standard. Like the day at Wagner College recently when Casiano and Strandberg -- off-duty court officers who just happened to be in the stands because their kids played in a halftime scrimmage -- brought Edgar Cartotto, the 75-year-old supervisor of officials for the Northeast Conference, back from the dead.

Simple as that.

Late in Wagner's game against Robert Morris, something made Strandberg, an assistant coach for the St. John's Lutheran Tyro team, look to his right in time to see Cartotto -- who was sitting in the end zone stands with another NEC observer, former Curtis High School coach Bert Levinson -- collapse in the bleachers.

By the time Strandberg got to Cartotto, the older man was unconscious. He wasn't breathing, and he had no pulse.

By any clinical measure, he was already dead.

(In some precincts, he might still be. One West Coast newspaper, where a harried copy editor must've seen the words "heart attack" and jumped to a gloomy conclusion, ran the ASSOCIATED PRESS account of the incident under the subhead, "Official Dies.")

As he and Levinson struggled to lift Cartotto, Strandberg looked up to see Casiano, who'd been sitting a little farther away with his wife, at the stricken man's feet.

For several tense minutes, while stunned bystanders gaped -- "Wow, dad, when you ripped his shirt off, the buttons flew everywhere," Casiano's son told him later -- the two court officers performed CPR without any response.

And when a Wagner staff member arrived with a defibrillator, Strandberg and Casiano took charge of that, too.

They shocked him twice, and the second time Cartotto began to breath.

In no time, he was back to being the feisty character NEC coaches have come to know, arguing that he felt too good to go to the hospital, and quoting basketball rules to an EMT who wondered if he still had all his faculties.

"You didn't kiss me, did you?" he asked one of his rescuers.

It figures that Casiano and Strandberg, the two guys who leapt into action when everybody else was still stuck in neutral, would be from the "Aw, shucks" school of real-life action heroes.

"Our training just kicked in," Casiano said.

"We didn't do anything special."

Uh-huh. And Superman's just another guy in a cape.

There was no signal between them, when Cartotto went down; no agreement to go to the aid of a stranger.

Strandberg, a Superior Court officer in Brooklyn, and Casiano, who's assigned to Family Court in the Bronx, had never worked together until that afternoon at Wagner. They met for the first time during basketball season, after fifth and sixth-graders at St. John's Lutheran were melded into a single team.

"We had one of those 'I'm on the job, so am I' conversations," Casiano says. "Now I feel like we'll be linked for life."

The whole saga, scary as it was, has served to heighten awareness at Wagner for the need for emergency equipment and trained personnel; and to drive home a lesson to any of the rest of us who ever said, "You know, we should get CPR training one of these days," and then forgot about it.

Alumni at Wagner's Delta Nu fraternity have already committed to purchasing another defibrillator for the athletic department.

For his part, Cartotto, who lives in Wyckoff, N.J., was on his way home from the hospital this week after quadruple bypass surgery, and already plotting his return to Wagner -- "I'm gonna sit in the same seat" -- with a side trip to Duffy's, in West Brighton, for a burger.

"I miss basketball," he said. "I've been away three weeks."

Even over the phone, you could picture him making a face, like he's apt to do when some whiny coach makes a scene at courtside.

"It's been too long," Cartotto said.

And Casiano and Strandberg, who will be presented game balls at halftime of the Wagner-St. Francis (Pa.) game this Saturday, can pretty much forget that "nothing special" routine of theirs.

"I'll tell you what," Edgar Cartotto says. "It was pretty special to me."