



LEGENDS ARE MADE IN LINCOLN PLACE: Statue Of Soccer Legend Ruben Mendoza Dedicated In Granite City

by Colin Feeney, Contributing Sports Writer
June 6 2019 9:01 PM



GRANITE CITY – The influence that Ruben Mendoza had on soccer, not just in the Metro-East area but in the city that his family settled in, could be summed up in one simple sentence on the back of a T-shirt.

“Legends are made in Lincoln Place.”

That’s the neighborhood in Granite City where Mendoza’s family settled after moving from their native Mexico, and on Saturday afternoon, a statue of Mendoza, executing his famous bicycle kick, was dedicated in a ceremony outside the Granite City Cinema that was attended by many in the Granite City soccer community.

Mendoza, who died in 2010, played on the Kutis Funeral Home team that won the 1957 U.S Open Cup and reached the semifinals two other times, and also played on the 1952 and 1956 Olympic teams in Helsinki, Finland and Melbourne, Australia, as well as earning four caps with the United States men's national team, scoring two goals in World Cup qualifying matches. After retiring as a player, Mendoza started the first youth soccer program in Granite City through the local YMCA, and that program produced many outstanding players that would go on to play on teams that would win IHSA state championships, along with many regional and national championships, and also on collegiate and professional teams.

He was elected to the St. Louis Soccer Hall of Fame in 1984, and today, his legacy is still felt, not only in Granite City but all over the area, as he also helped start high school programs in Collinsville, Edwardsville, Alton, and other cities and school throughout the Metro-East area.

But Mendoza's legacy will always be felt in Granite City, and members of his family and the players he helped coach and bring to Granite City, and in speeches made during the ceremony, Mendoza was remembered very fondly by the people whose lives he touched through soccer.

"My dad learned to play soccer in Mexico," said Mendoza's eldest son, Danny. "He went down at about age seven or eight, by my grandmother, who was trying to keep the boys out of World War II. And then, they came back when he was about 16; he ended up going to the Korean War anyway, all three of them. My uncle Hector, my uncle Hoover, and my dad. He went to St. Louis, and he found a team, he found a lot of good players, and it turned out that St. Louis happened to be the hotbed of this country, that it was for years after that.

"He played with Kutis, he played with a guy named Harry Keough, who was the Saint Louis University coach," Danny Mendoza continued. "Some of our guys were players – Don Goldschmidt, Jr., David Fernandez – if I'm leaving anybody off, I apologize. Those guys, to me, were soccer legends, and still, are."

Danny Mendoza also cited long-time Granite City South and Granite City High coach Gene Baker, who came to Granite at the behest of Mendoza and went on to coach the Warriors to nine state championships, including five consecutive from 1976-1980, along with titles in 1982, 1987, 1989, and 1990. Granite City also won the first IHSA title in 1972, and the girls' team won its only title in Class 3A in 2011. He also cited statue committee co-chairmen Domingo Valencia and Bob Galvan for their efforts in creating the statue.

“Those two guys made this happen,” Danny Mendoza said, “along with our mayor, Eddie Hagnauer, and I thank you so much,” he said to the applause of the audience. Danny Mendoza also credited Madison County Coroner Steve Nonn, a Granite City native, for his help in getting the statue created.

Keith Gehling, who played on the first state championship team at Granite City High, and went on to a very successful college career at Rockhurst University in Kansas City, as well as a pro career with the Wichita Wings and the Memphis Americans in the Major Indoor Soccer League, as well with four teams in the old American Soccer League, talked about Mendoza’s influence on his own career.

“I always felt as a player, the best compliment you could get is that if someone said to you ‘I enjoyed watching you play,’” Gehling said in his speech. “With Ruben, it was different. Ruben was one of those special players that not only people enjoyed watching play, but they tried to emulate him, they tried to play like him. Ruben had style, and to Ruben, soccer was the beautiful game. More importantly, for kids like me growing up in Granite City, we all know that he started the program in Granite City in the 60s.”

Gehling’s story was like so many others in Granite City: He went to grade school at St. Joseph’s, near the downtown area, and with his classmates, was always playing pick-up soccer games during recess, along with evening pick-up games at in the parking lot at the old Illinois Bell building near downtown. Gehling played for the Mexican Honorary Commission team under Don Goldschmidt, Sr., where he first met Mendoza.

“He’d be at some at our practices, helped coach, and at times, join in,” Gehling said. “And it was really easy to learn from Ruben. All you had to do was watch him.”

Gehling played on the 1972 IHSA state championship team as a junior under coach John Sellmeyer, and he enjoyed the experience tremendously.

“For us, it was like winning the World Series or the World Cup,” Gehling said. “What a wonderful experience that we were all able to share as teammates.”

The next year, the high school split into two, and Baker was hired to coach the team at Granite City South. Gehling credited Baker for helping him open the door to playing in college, as Baker did for other players.

“Soccer’s been such an important part of my life,” Gehling said, “and I enjoyed everything about playing. But in the end, it’s about all the people you meet along the way. The lifelong friendships, kids I grew up with, played in high school with, and college and after. And not just the people you played with, but the soccer community, the soccer family that we all share.”

Gehling also talked about Mendoza's personality and all the lives he touched through the game.

"It wasn't just he started the program, directed the program, it was how he did it." Gehling said, "with his unforgettable smile and who he was. But for me, it's not hard, it's easy to measure. All I have to do is ask 'what if?' What if Ruben wouldn't have started the program in Granite? He would have come eventually, just like he came to Edwardsville and Alton years later. But I wouldn't have been playing at St. Joe's or Illinois Bell with my buddies. Would have missed out, along with my teammates, on the memory and the thrill of winning a state championship together. Wouldn't have met my close friend, Gene Baker, had the opportunity to play for him my senior year, or go on in college. I would have missed that time in my life of playing in stadiums and arenas across the country. Not to mention all the lifetime friendships, and all the people along the way."

Gehling also said that while St. Joseph's and Illinois Bell no longer exist, what will never change is Mendoza's influence and legacy on both soccer and Granite City itself.

"One thing we can all count on is change," Gehling said. "St. Joe's, Illinois Bell are gone. But what will never change is the impact Ruben had on the community, the influence he had on me personally, and how fortunate I was, and grateful that I am, that Ruben was in my life."

Baker thanked the Mendoza family and wished that both he and his late wife, Norma, were there to see the dedication ceremony, and said that the gift was well-deserved, heartfelt and accurate. Baker had one thing to say about the statue's detail and accuracy.

"In all honesty, I think it's the best one I've seen," Baker said.

Baker gave credit to Valencia, Galvan and the rest of the statue committee for their hard work and efforts to bring the project to life. Baker was an English teacher at both South and Granite High, and as he mentioned that author O. Henry's trademark was irony, Mendoza's trademark was his bicycle kick.

"Who can say that?," Baker said. "Who can say that in any sport? Not many. It's really a terribly neat thing, and it's something that he could do that often enough. Well enough that the bicycle kick became synonymous with the name Ruben. Everybody in St. Englebert's school yards made fools of themselves trying to do a Ruben," Baker also said to the laughter of the audience.

“To risk hyperbole, who else in the world, honestly?,” Baker continued. “There are great players in the world, and so many could do so many great things, but he was way ahead of his time.”

Baker grew up in the St. Englebert parish in St. Louis City, where the church’s soccer teams won many trophies and cups in the area, but nothing could compare to the Kutis teams that Mendoza played on in the 1950s and early 1960s.

“They were a cut above, as players, and frankly, as men,” Baker said. Baker also reflected on how Mendoza’s fundamentals as a player were perfect, and how he worked on everything.

“One thing that I reflected upon getting to know Ruben, one thing that I mentioned to Pat (McBride, a St. Louis soccer legend who played with Mendoza on the famous Kutis teams, and was in attendance), that always struck me at an early age was that Ruben’s fundamentals were like spot on,” Baker said, “It was obvious that he really worked at them. A real tribute to his game.”

Baker also talked about how his father, Ed Baker, took him to see the great Kutis teams play, and mentioned the great players on the team, including the late Bob Kehoe, who coached Granite City North throughout its existence, longtime Saint Louis University assistant coach Val Pellazaro, and Keough, among others. The Kutis teams weren’t just great players, but the team, Baker felt, was ahead of its time, and was also very diverse as well.

“What a class group,” Baker said. “They had character. In the Greek, character is what you have engraved across here. And the Kutis players were clean players. Skilled players, a cut above.”

And Baker also pointed out a very important difference between the Kutis teams and Ruben.

“What distinguishes them from Ruben? This, being you,” Baker said, pointing out at the entire audience. “What a neat thing, all the people coming out here, in the heat, to be bored by me,” Baker said to the laughs of the audience, “is a real tribute to your fortitude.”

Mendoza will always be remembered in the entire Metro-East area for introducing a game that he could help popularize and teach, and help teach so many life lessons as well.

“Something that I was struck with back 50 years ago is that Ruben had such an emphasis on respect for the game,” Baker said, “and for each other. It looks like he succeeded. His symbol of this is that it is something that of a common man hero. I mention that in Granite City. It’s an incredible compliment. A common man, and his lasting effect. I think it’s a tribute to the common man, to his players, to all of you, and it’s a proud moment to say some things.”

Mendoza’s granddaughter, Isa Scaturro, whose mom is one of Mendoza’s daughters, Marta, thanked the audience for their support, and talked about her grandfather’s accomplishments and legacy.

“If any of you were or are involved with Granite City soccer, it’s because of this man,” Scaturro said. “Not this exact man, because it’s a statue, but the man it’s based on. He coached, he played, he supported, and it’s really just because of him that this whole thing is happening.”

Scaturro talked about the impact that Mendoza made – and is still making – on the Granite City community.

“He really just made such a ginormous impact upon this community,” Scaturro said, “when it came to soccer, and just other things.”

Mendoza had many friends in the Granite community, and Scaturro related a story about how she would go around with her grandfather meeting people around town.

“Honestly, my grandpa was a very popular man,” Scaturro said. “He knew a lot of people; any time I would be out with him, as a little girl, he would just say hi to everyone. And I was kind of jealous, not gonna lie. It really just showed me what kind of a person he really was, and that I was so honored to be a member of his family.”

Mendoza’s impact on his family was just as wonderful, as Scaturro told stories about how Mendoza taught his grandchildren, and later his great-grandchildren the love and the fun of the game while teaching life lessons. Scaturro said she didn’t focus on the lessons, but on how great of a grandfather he was being.

“He wouldn’t just teach us soccer, he taught us a lot of stuff,” Scaturro said. “He taught us Spanish, he taught my sister that doing the dishes could be fun, he really taught me how to make a mean quesadilla. The impact that he made, it’s just amazing, and I wish he could be here to see it. My grandma, I wish she was here to see it, but it’s really because of him that this is happening.”

Scaturro also offered a challenge to the current generation of kids currently playing soccer in Granite City.

“I have a challenge for the kids – there are some out there, I know,” Scaturro said. “Whenever you guys feel like that you aren’t going to succeed in this sport, or you’re not going to have the same love for the game, come here to this memorial, and just look at all of this, and see just the impact that he made on this community, and see that that could be you one day. And maybe that will keep you having that love for the game.”

In addition to the statue, a part of Niedringhaus Avenue from the movie theater to Ernie and Annie’s Tavern, a staple of the Lincoln Place neighborhood, where a street party was held in honor of the dedication ceremony, was renamed the Ruben Mendoza Memorial Way.