An Extraordinary Life

From decorated veteran to exceptional athlete, John Corbisiero has achieved greatness

BY JEFF WOOD

SOME MEN ARE MEANT FOR GREATNESS. This is the case for Independence Village resident John Corbisiero. At a young age, he excelled playing football, baseball and hockey at the highest level. He continued to shine in the military as a U.S. Merchant Marine Academy Cadet and in the U.S. Air Force, flying 106 missions in Vietnam, working with the F-15 and AWACS programs. He was a great athlete, a decorated pilot and government official, but most importantly, the patriarch of his incredible family who followed in his footsteps.

Born on August 8th, 1926 in Boston, Massachusetts, Corbisiero’s family moved to a town outside of Boston called Medford where John spent his adolescence. It was in Medford that Corbisiero became a rising star as an athlete in many sports, but it was football that got his foot in the door. “When I graduated from high school in 1944, I was selected for the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy in Kings Point, Long Island. However, there were a number of applicants at the academy and a year-long wait,” recalls Corbisiero, explaining, “Well, I couldn’t wait a year. So in the meantime, I was in contact with a very close friend named Ralph Wheeler, who was the sports writer for the Boston Herald Traveler and the lead Chicago Cubs Scout. When I got to be about 16-years-old, he started contacting me.”

Wheeler took a keen interest in Corbisiero’s athletic abilities. “He said, ‘I’d like to sign you to play for the Chicago Cubs.’ I said I’m not going to sign now, I wanted to go to college first,” says Corbisiero, “So he asked me, ‘Where do you want to go to school?’ Well, the top football team in the country was Notre Dame, so I wanted to go there. After that, he said, ‘Let me see what I can do.’”

The very next night after Wheeler used his connections, Corbisiero was offered a full-ride scholarship for football and baseball to the University of Notre Dame. “I packed my suitcase, I bought a train ticket to South Bend, then got on a bus to the university,” recalls Corbisiero, “So I was sort of looking around, saw the football field and saw there were football players out there. I walked over with my suitcase, and the next thing I know, Edward McKeever, the head coach of Notre Dame, comes over and immediately makes sure I’m taken care of.”

Not even a full day in South Bend, Corbisiero hit the ground running and so did his career as a freshman fullback, outside linebacker and corner for the Fighting Irish, who were National Champions the year before. Very quickly, John started getting playing time and making an impression on his coaches, his team and opponents. In his very first
game against Pittsburg as a back-up fullback for Elmer Angsmen, future All-Pro for the Chicago Cardinals, Corbisiero averaged 10 yards per carry. He quickly became a first-team defensive threat as a linebacker and corner, and he played at Fenway Park, in front of his hometown of Boston, against Dartmouth, where he scored his first touchdown. “I got tickets for that game for my old high school coach, my mother and my two sisters. I had a really good game. It was my first touchdown for Notre Dame, probably the only one scored for them by a Medford boy. I had about eight tackles. I played well,” beams Corbisiero.

But John’s time at Notre Dame came to an abrupt end following the Army game when the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy informed Corbisiero he was to report to duty at Alameda Navel Air Station in California for 4th Class training. Next, he began his 3rd Class training doing sea duty on the SS Clovis Victory as an Engine Cadet. His travels on the Clovis Victory took him to Hawaii, Enewetak, Guam, and he even ended up in the Okinawa invasion. “The battleships were bombing the island all night long. You couldn’t sleep the entire time. Most of us just stayed on top of the deck. I was there for 30 days, and we were credited for knocking out two and a half Kamikaze planes that were trying to take out our destroyers,” recalls Corbisiero.

Once his time on the SS Clovis Victory was done, the U.S. Merchant Marines quickly put John back to work playing for their football team, but a foot injury kept him off the field much of the season. Later, World War II was ending and so was Corbisiero’s time at the Merchant Marine Academy.

Hoping to return to Notre Dame, John was denied because of the massive flood of soldiers returning from war who also wanted to return to school. So Corbisiero found a new place to call home at Middlebury College where, once again, John left a lasting impression that eventually landed him a place in Middlebury’s Athletics Hall of Fame.

While attending Middlebury, John played football once more as a fullback and held the school record for most yards gained, most yards per carry, and most touchdowns in a season and career. He was their premier three-sport athlete, playing baseball and hockey, which led to a spot in the player’s pool for the Olympic hockey team in 1952, shortly after enlisting in the Air Force.

After graduating from Middlebury with a degree in math and physics, the Chicago Bears began their quest to draft John in 1948, but they ended up trading him to the Pittsburg Steelers. It was during this trade that Corbisiero was also supposed to play in the Easter college All-Star football game against the New York Giants, which he chose to do instead of play for the Steelers.

When his football career ended, John spent a year

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as the assistant coach at Middlebury and had a season playing minor league baseball for the Braves. But his next career choice would prove to be the one he left the biggest impression on of them all, the United States Air Force.

His military career went from being a U.S. Merchant Marine Academy Cadet to being an Air Force fighter pilot that flew over 100 missions in the Vietnam War. “I flew in the F-4 and went to Ubon, Thailand. I was an operations officer. They called us “The Night Owls,”” recalls Corbisiero, “I flew 106 missions, 100 missions in North Vietnam and six missions in places like Laos and Cambodia. We would target places of opportunity at night. We would try to find munition and lubricant storage areas, trucks on the road and convoys on the main routes coming out of China to Vietnam.”

After six successful months there, John returned to George Air Force Base in Victorville, California to train other pilots to fly missions in Vietnam. “The guys that we were training knew we had been through it all, and it was exciting for a while to make sure that these guys were ready,” says Corbisiero, “But then, things started to get boring for me, so I applied for my master’s degree and went to the Air Force Institute of Technology.”

John went on to study System Analysis and ended up in the F-15 program, which he says was the best thing that ever happened to him in his career. “Everyone in that program was hand-picked by the General,” recalls Corbisiero, “I was a Major at the time and three years later, I was a full Colonel. After that, I was a Test Director for Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) at Hansom AFB in Boston.”

Three years later, Corbisiero was offered a job in Washington working with the Secretary of Defense, but nearing retirement and his kids getting ready to graduate high school, John turned them down and went on to work as the assistant deputy for Reconnaissance on Electronic Warfare. It was the last job he would do for the military before retiring.

In retirement, John and Aileen drove by and watched as Independence Hill built their assisted living and neighborhood of garden homes, Independence Village. When they stopped in, they found the perfect home. The Corbisieros are now in their eighth year of enjoying the Independence Village lifestyle, which includes a golf and social membership to The Club at Sonterra. “As a golfer this was the icing on the cake for me,” grins Corbisiero.

As a retired man with an extraordinary life in sports and the military, John reflects that the best part of his life is the family he and his wife, Aileen, raised and loved. Their three children all followed his lead and are productive members of society in their own way. Teresa is a nurse in Denver, running the cardiac recovery program. His son, J. Michael, also went to Notre Dame and is president of a new start-up company. Marie is a dentist and is married to a doctor, fighter pilot and Air Guard Major General. But John Corbisiero, with all his success and accomplishments, feels the greatest asset he had going for him was, and still is, his wife, Aileen. “I couldn’t have asked for a better woman, by any means,” beams Corbisiero with a warm grin.