

Francesco "Frank" Speziale, Sports Photographer



A picture paints a thousand words is an adage attributed to Frederick R. Barnes back in 1921 when in the Dec. 8 edition of the advertising trade journal *Printer's Ink* he remarked that graphics can tell a story as effectively as a large amount of descriptive text.

Hundreds of years earlier, though, the renowned Italian Renaissance painter Leonardo da Vinci reflected on why he considered the paint

medium better than words when he said, "A poet would be overcome by sleep and hunger before being able to describe with words what a painter is able to depict in an instant."

Fast forward to the present day and that is exactly what Francesco "Frank" Speziale was able to achieve with his trusty cameras. For more than 50 years, he produced awe-inspiring, heartwarming and truly spectacular photographs for *The Evening Sun*.

Those photos, in turn, archived the athletic achievements of thousands of Norwich athletes. Because of that sincere dedication to his craft and his excellent photographic consistency, Frank is being honored as a Norwich High School Sports Hall of Fame contributor for the 11th annual class.

As his countryman da Vinci was in metropolitan Florence, Frank, too, was born in Italy to Angelo and Domenica (Berti) on July 26, 1936 on the island of Lipari, the southernmost of the seven Aeolian Islands – "The Islands of the Winds." Located in the Tyrrhenian Sea off the northern coast of Sicily, the island has been known for its flourishing pumice mining industry since Roman Empire times. So, it was there that his father worked as a stevedore with American lines in the pumice trade.

Almost 20 years after his birth, Frank decided to immigrate to the United States. Booked to sail on the *Andrea Doria* in July 1956, he, instead, found passage on the *SS Cristoforo Colombo*, the former liner's sister ship, in May out of Naples. Fortunately for Frank he made that switch, because the *Andrea Doria* sank off the southern coast of Nantucket Island on July 25, after colliding with the Swedish ship *MS Stockholm*. Although most passengers were saved, 51 still died.

"Contacts in America wanted me to come earlier," noted Frank. "Thank goodness they did."

After disembarking in New York City, he traveled to Norwich where he was initially employed by Norwich Knitting Mills and Norwich Shoe Co. before embarking on a 20-plus-year career with the Norwich Pharmacal Company. It was there at the Pharmacy where he first got introduced to photography.

"There was a guy there named Vince DeVilla, who was a

photographer," recalled Frank. "He was selling all of his equipment, so I bought it all."

That transaction, which occurred sometime in the early 1960s, resulted in his first camera – a *Graflex 45* speed graphic 4 x 5 large format unit, and a few years later his long and outstanding career at *The Evening Sun* began when he was hired by owner Tom McMahon and managing editor Joe Quinn to cover a myriad of photographic shoots.

Over the years, that *Graflex 45* gave way to his trusted *Hasselblad*, a Swedish-brand camera. It was great for sports photography, involving fast-paced movements and iconic imagery, always producing crisp and clean images. Neil Armstrong used one on the moon during *Apollo 11*, carrying out all the photography, himself, with the *HDC* attached to his chest.

And like Armstrong who memorialized that historic flight to the moon in 1969, Frank produced more than stunning local sports photos. Besides covering the Baseball Hall of Fame induction ceremonies in Cooperstown for 17 years and the 1988 *Tour de France* in Paris, Frank captured the personal essence of many world leaders by virtue of his photographic handywork.

There was Mikhail Gorbachev, former General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and President of the Soviet Union, at Colgate University in April 1997; former President Bill Clinton and his wife, Hillary, at the Canasawacta Country Club in August 2002; Pope Francis in Philadelphia in September 2015 and both George H.W. and George W. Bush in Cooperstown following their presidential terms in office.

Steve Wulf, who assumed the role of Sports Editor at *The Evening Sun* from 1972-74 and who has gone on to much fame, himself, at both *Sports Illustrated* and *ESPN The Magazine* has many fond recollections of Frank.

"Equipment is important to a photographer. For the half-century that Frank Speziale spent shooting the people, places and events of Chenango County, he relied on his *Hasselblad*, which he called 'the Mercedes of cameras.' But Frank came armed with something else that you can't buy, and that made all the difference – his charm," remembered Wulf. "He could brighten a rainy day of soccer, a frigid night of football or a sparsely attended basketball game. The eyes in all those team photos he took, day after day, year after year, reflected the gleam in his. He sometimes strayed into fair territory to take a baseball action shot, but he was forgiven because he was. . . well, he was Frank.

"When I arrived in Norwich some 50 years ago, Frank was already a fixture. No assignment was too small for him, no challenge too big, no





game too far away, no schedule too tight. What was a problem was picking which picture to run because Frank gave us so many good ones from which to choose. He was, in short, the Mercedes of photographers.”

Although his trusted Hasselblad was by his side throughout most of his career, he went digital in 2000.

“Before then everything was black and white. I developed all my pictures in my own darkroom,” explained Frank. “Besides being able to print colored photos, it made it easier for me, especially if you were in a hurry.”

It was during that digital time that he worked together with my successor, Pat Newell.

“Frank, in my mind, is greatly misunderstood. To the public, he is this larger-than-life personality who mixed easily with the crowds at the events he covered,” noted Newell. “As the years went by, I came to know him as a true artist and Renaissance man.

“He was skilled in so many crafts, it boggled my mind. Not only was he a fantastic photographer, but he was a carpenter, painter, musician, horticulturist, expert landscaper and fantastic cook. Most people knew the not-so-serious Frank Speziale, but I have known him as a passionate family man, who was devout to his faith and his career.”

Besides those myriad interests Frank had a love affair for, he also flew a Cessna plane with Bill Sumner as his instructor, and took great pride in his wine making skills, the grapes of which flourished behind his Clinton Street home.

But it is still his photographic genius that has made Frank a household name. “It boggles the mind to think what Frank Speziale has done for Norwich and Chenango County, how many events he has chronicled, how many moments he has captured, how many people he has photographed for their parents, siblings, friends, children and grandchildren to see,” praised Wulf.

“In a way, he’s like another photographer from upstate New York – Matthew Brady, who captured the Civil War and the mid-19th century for readers to see and feel. For three generations, Frank has done that for this area. He is as much a part of Norwich as the Lady Justice figure atop the Courthouse.

“His induction into the Hall of Fame is a profound acknowledgement of that. So, when you pass by his plaque in

Norwich High School in the days and years to come, do what he asked thousands of players, coaches and cheerleaders to do: Smile.”

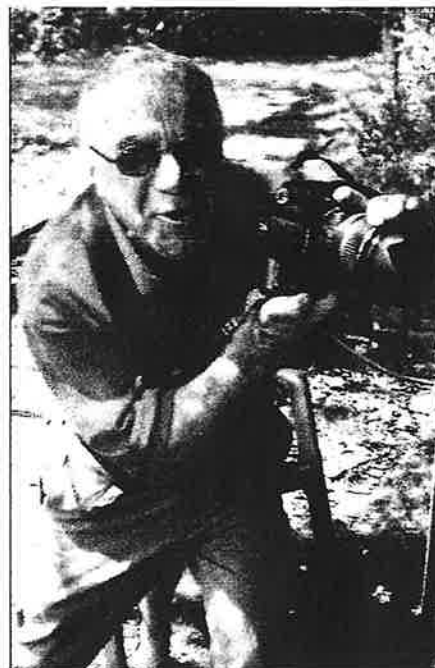
Newell almost mirrored Wulf’s thoughts. “Frank created thousands of memories for local athletes that will live forever in The Evening Sun archives. He took great joy featuring athletes and made it a point – when he was covering the same team multiple times in a season – to feature different athletes each time.”

Although blessed with immense skills when holding a camera, Frank gives much credit to his church. “I need to recognize my spiritual leaders – Monsignor (Guy) Festa, Reverend (Robert) Libera, Reverend (Douglas) Cunningham and Reverend (Ralph) Bove. They taught me Christian principles like being nice to your fellow man. They kept me out of trouble.”

Frank is married to the former Patricia (Pat) Nichols of Oxford, and has five adult children – Mark, Christina, Angela, Domenica (“Mica”) and Francesco. And all three of his siblings are still living. His brothers, Antonio and Bartolo, reside in Paris, France, while his sister, Nunziata, lives in the family’s hometown of Canneto, Lipari.

In closing, I need to honor Frank with my own heartfelt words. He was not just my photographer during my tenure at The Evening Sun, but my confidant. He never questioned where I would send him on assignment, but took those missions with aplomb and delivered superb readership photos. Difficult at times, he has remained steadfast to his ideals and his trade. I consider him not only an accomplished photographer and friend, but a true Norwich treasure.

I first heard of Frank shortly after he came to Norwich in 1956. Over the years we have enjoyed much conversation, many dinners and celebrations at his home on Clinton Street and a few frosty lagers. And to reference Pat Newell’s remembrances of his musical talent, one should have seen him in action on Aug. 18, 1990. Hired to photograph my wedding, Frank could not resist the itch to perform a musical number – “(Let Me Be Your) Teddy Bear” – much to the delight of the assembled throng. Once again, he stole the show.



You, my friend, instilled a fervor in your work, and the pictures you have produced are your eternal legacy of a life spent making others happier because of your genius with your trusted Hasselblad.

Congratulations Frank on an honor as much deserved as da Vinci’s paintings are revered.

—Tom Rowe