

BASEBALL

ACCC, P'ville form mentoring partnership

Bucs coaches offer helping hand, life lessons during offseason meeting

By **DAVE O'SULLIVAN**
Staff Writer

Early October isn't usually a time for talking baseball, unless you're talking about the Major League Baseball playoffs. But in a classroom in the A wing of Pleasantville High School earlier this month, there were more than a dozen teenagers listening intently to what Atlantic Cape Community College baseball coaches Rod Velardi and Bert Rosica had to say.

Velardi, the Bucs' head coach, and Rosica, one of his assistants, reached out to several area high school baseball programs this past summer to see if they could spread the word about the benefits of community college as an option for high school baseball players. New Pleasantville coach Matt Zachariades took the coaches up on their offer to come and speak to his team. Velardi and Rosica used the meeting less as an opportunity for recruiting and more like an information session, and also brought along several current players to give their experiences of playing for ACCC.

"We had a meeting (with coach) early in the summer and he was saying how he had kids with some challenges, and would we come and talk to them. We said we'd love to, and maybe we can develop some sort of mentorship program where his guys get to meet



Glory Days Magazine photo/Dave O'Sullivan

Pleasantville baseball players listen to Atlantic Cape Community College coaches and players talk about their experiences with community college baseball during an offseason meeting at Pleasantville High School earlier this month.

our guys, can come visit the school, visit our practices, shadow some of our players. We can talk until we're blue in the face, but our kids are going through it and a couple of years ago they were right here (where the Pleasantville players are now). It was really

Matt's idea, and when he suggested it, we said absolutely, it's a great idea," Rosica said. "It ties in perfectly with what we are trying to teach our guys, to give back to the community. We have a thing in our handbook where our guys have to choose a local charity to

give back, hands-on — a soup kitchen, or whatever they chose — and this is something they can volunteer to do."

"I've known coach Velardi for a while and I met Bert this summer, and the

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fact that they are taking an interest in our program, both with baseball and academics, really means a lot," said Zachariades, who has been teaching at Pleasantville for a few years now and will be the program's new head coach next spring. "A lot of kids think our program isn't that good, so a lot of them wouldn't come out for baseball, so hopefully seeing that colleges are interested in this program, maybe that will convince more kids to come out and play baseball, and hopefully we can turn this program around."

Not only did Rosica and Velardi talk about community college baseball — and how ACCC plays in one of the toughest regions in the country along with schools such as Gloucester County and Cumberland County — but they also spoke to what it means to be a productive member of society after graduating high school, and about how many opportunities are out there for players who are willing to do the research necessary to find out about them. They also brought along players Mike Bates of Absegami, Dan Burke of Middle Township and Usi Marmalejos of Atlantic City to describe what community college has meant to them, not only for their baseball careers, but also for their development as young men.

"I tell these kids what I've told my own kids — you can do whatever you want in life, just get that degree first. Nail that down, get the degree, then go on and do what you want," Rosica said. "The priorities we have, we pound them into our kids. Your family comes first, being a man to others is second, school is third and baseball is fourth. And if you get those out of whack, you're going to screw your life up. I'm an old guy, I have four of my own kids and have coached for 30 years, and I've

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seen what love, nurturing and proper baseball instruction can do for a young man in terms of his self esteem and self confidence, and kids respond to that."

"The one thing I've been trying to harp on with my kids is they are student-athletes, and academics come first. One thing I want them to do is to go to college, and that was the whole point of the meeting, that baseball is important, but so is academics. And I thought (the guys from ACCC) portrayed that message perfectly," Zachariades said. "I've been teaching at Pleasantville for two years now, and I know a lot of the kids can't afford college. So, going to ACCC gives you all the opportunities that a four-year school can give you at less than half the cost."

The players who gathered for the meeting said they were impressed with Velardi — a former two-time all-state player at Toms River South who went on to pitch at Butler University — and his staff.

"This means a lot to us. These coaches, talking to us — we've never had college coaches talking to us like this, so this should motivate us to do better. They've opened our eyes up. Now we know there is a step forward. I think this will help us out and make us do better so that maybe we can play (beyond high school)," said sophomore Alejandro Rosado. "This got me thinking, because a lot of us don't have the money to go (to a four-year college). I would take that opportunity (to play at community college)."

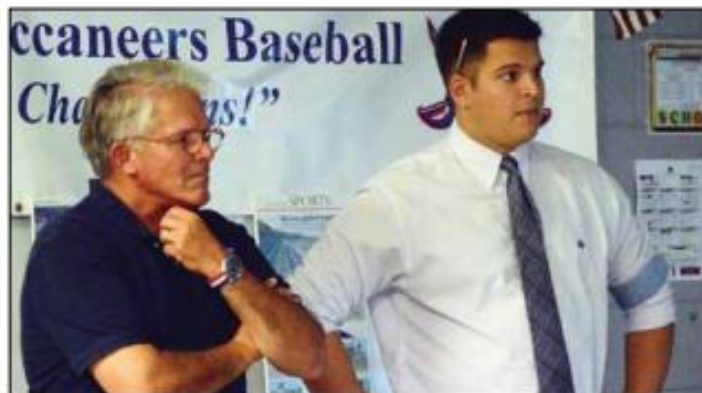
"Whatever they do on the field, they can't do anything to eclipse (giving back). This is what it's all about, be-

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Alejandro Rosado
Pleasantville sophomore

ing a mentor. The Pleasantville kids are great kids. Who knows what comes of this, but some good, hopefully," Rosica said. "ACCC is a resource that we want these kids to understand exists, and we want their parents to understand. They don't have to go to school and spend \$60,000 a year. They can come here, spend \$6,000 a year and get a very good education, then move on to a four-year school. It's an excellent option for many kids. Some people look down their nose at community college, but I'm actually a student there. I'm taking a creative writing course, and I'm learning from the inside that there are a lot of talented kids at ACCC. And this school's mission is to offer affordable higher education. It's not a destination, it's a springboard to the next level — just like it is for our ballplayers. Our mission is to get these players to Division II at least, and possibly Division I, and to move on and get their education. We pound that into these kids, to get their associates degree then a bachelor's degree."

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Atlantic Cape Community College assistant baseball coach Bert Rosica, left, and new Pleasantville coach Matt Zachariades listen to ACCC players speak to Greyhounds athletes during a recent meeting at Pleasantville High School.

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