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Carroll sparked a football fire Coach helped start Medfield feeder system

By John Ingoldsby, Globe Correspondent
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When the Medfield High School football team won the Eastern Massachusetts Division 3 Super Bowl last month, one of the people the players and coaches would thank for the victory was thousands of miles away.

Former New England Patriots coach Pete Carroll, now the head coach at the University of Southern California, helped to set up a middle school football program in town that some say was a factor in Medfield's success.

"The middle school kids were a group truly left in the middle, since there was no formal program," Carroll said in a telephone interview from Los Angeles as he prepared for the Rose Bowl against Michigan. "I wanted to help create a feeder system that would ultimately help the high school."

The National Football League was creating a youth football program at the time, and Carroll said he "worked closely with the league to learn the requirements to get funding. The NFL responded well, and we got thousands of dollars that initially went for uniforms and equipment."

Carroll noted that former Patriots quarterback Drew Bledsoe, who also lived in Medfield at the time, had helped with the program.

The NFL money was not Carroll's only gift to Medfield. He funded the opening of the school gymnasium for anything from weight lifting to volleyball during the late 1990s.

"I wanted to make the place available to students as an open gym year-round," said Carroll, who jokingly added that he wanted to "keep the town kids on the straight and narrow, as it were."

Carroll had a 28-23 record as Patriots coach. As coach of the Trojans since 2001, he has created a college football powerhouse with two national championships. His teams have also produced three of the past five Heisman Trophy winners.

But he can still get excited about football in the small town of Medfield.

"Pete Carroll is the most impressive human being I have ever met," said Medfield athletic director Jon Kirby. "From the day the Carrolls moved in, they were totally immersed in Medfield. I remember Pete had just moved in, but he made time to attend a school fund-

raising event while he still had stuff in boxes."

Kirby said that Carroll always wanted great things for Medfield schools. "Pete would call me and was always full of ideas. One was that he wanted to start a middle school athletic program, including football, of course."

Carroll invited Kirby and other school officials, including then-football coach Vin Joseph, to a Patriots practice in Foxborough. Carroll had arranged lunch with an NFL representative to talk about the youth program, Kirby said.

"Many of the middle schoolers who participated in those early years became members of this Super Bowl champion team," Kirby said.

The Warriors, under coach Mike Slason, were 12-1 this season.

Senior captain Bud Stevens, who played in both seventh and eighth grade during the third and fourth years of the program's existence, said the program was a big help.

"The middle school program was my first football experience, other than the backyard, and about 15 of us from this year's championship team went through it together," Stevens said. "For us seniors, we got to know each other and play together for six years.

"The program provided our first opportunity to both learn the basics, like putting on pads properly, to being taught drills, such as blocking and tackling. Plus, we knew what to expect when we tried out for the high school team as freshmen."

Kirby also credited Bledsoe with helping the schools. "Drew had a true community concept like Pete," Kirby said. The ultimate effect of that fateful day at Patriots practice, according to Kirby: "It totally spun our athletic program around. . . . The net result has been state championships."

The Medfield High girls' volleyball team also won a state title this year. The Carroll family also had connections to that program. Carroll's wife once helped to coach the squad and his daughter was on a 1998 championship team.

When told that both the football and volleyball team had won state titles this year, Carroll exclaimed, "Be sure to send congratulations from me to everyone in town. Winning those championships is a great accomplishment."