

# “Gola Goal !”: A Tribute to Tom Gola

Brother Joseph Grabenstein, FSC  
La Salle University Archivist  
St. Albert the Great Catholic Church  
Huntingdon Valley, PA  
Thursday, January 30, 2014

Monsignor Dougherty and Reverend Fathers. Caroline. Gola Family. And friends.

A wise person once said that “Gratitude is the memory of the heart.”

Well, every single person in this church today is so very thankful for one singular life, with lots and lots of memories of a man who touched countless lives and countless hearts.

Tom, you were a man of strength, tempered with an unassuming personality and blessed with a touch of humility. A man of great accomplishment, but so very approachable.

Winston Churchill once stated that we make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give. Today, we remember you as a man who gave....and gave....and kept giving. And you gave the utmost respect and assistance to everyone...

- To your classmates and teammates both at La Salle High School and at La Salle College
- To your Army buddies
- To your teammates on the Philadelphia Warriors and the New York Knicks
- To your Explorer players and fans of the Blue and Gold at old Convention Hall and at the Palestra, and even—if anyone can remember—that old creaky court in Wister Hall.
- To your colleagues at City Hall and in Harrisburg, and countless constituents.

Tom, you were a real “people-person.” If one word comes close to summarizing your 81 years, it might be the word genuine.

How many times, Tom, did you dish off the ball to a teammate and let him drive to the basket, instead of yourself? You always were an unselfish ballplayer. In the NBA, the top salary you pulled during your ten years was \$25,000—how things have changed!

It's no accident that your old coach, Ken Loeffler, called you "Mr. All-Around." And not many people know that you were a coach...in the NBA ! Back in 1966, Coach Eddie Donovan of the New York Knicks missed two games, so you came off the bench and coached the team to two victories. So...yes, you are indeed the only *undefeated* coach in the history of the New York Knicks!

And how many times did you inspire a younger generation? One particular great basketball star said in an interview that when he was younger, the college player he most admired was you. And the name of that star....was Wilt Chamberlain.

And how many times did you mentor your own players with patience, and be a role-model for them not just for skills on the court, but skills for life itself? Just ask Fran Dunphy, Larry Cannon, Fatty Taylor, and so many other Explorers.

How many times in both city and state government did you take the higher road of honesty and ethics?

Tom, you walked with hall-of-famers, with mayors and governors, with college presidents, and with national presidents. *But you never, never forgot where you came from*—that modest rowhome near 3<sup>rd</sup> and Lindley. That's a powerful message for all of us here to take home. I just wished I had asked you how you squeezed two hardworking parents and seven active kids into a house of that size? No wonder you learned to get along with others so early, Tom....you had no other choice, did you??

And even when you were playing for the old Philly Warriors, they moved to San Francisco in 1962. But quite unlike singer Tony Bennett, your heart was not in San Francisco, but rather right here in Philly! You wanted to stay near your hometown, so after a few months of playing in San Francisco—the Golden State—a deal was worked out so you would be traded to the New York Knicks and back to the East Coast.

And you seemed to always tell the truth. I just wish I could have seen your face when a fine Italian-American organization contacted you, during your college playing days, and told you that they were going to make you—Tom Gola—a member of their Italian-American Hall of Fame! No wonder how you learned to always tell the truth....after all, it was your solemn obligation to inform that group that your surname is **Polish**—even though it ends with a vowel !! By the way, I have good archival information that your surname was never changed from the original.

And I never perceived any vanity in you, Tom. Well, there was one little exception in which you showed some self-acclaim. It's in the archives that you gave your favorite pet dog the name of "One-Five." And if anyone here needs a translation, your jersey number at La Salle just happened to be....Number 15 !

You were a man of integrity, Tom. I was a freshman at La Salle College when you were elected to the office of City Controller in 1969, with your partner Arlen Specter as the incoming District Attorney. Republicans winning in a Democratic town! And your

campaign slogan for you and Mr. Specter no doubt caught ears and eyes. Does anyone here remember it? It was....“They’re tougher. They’re younger. And nobody owns them.” As they say in the sports world, “It ain’t braggin’ when you can back it up.” And you backed it up, Tom!

And whom did you idolize, Tom? Would it be Joe DiMaggio of the Yankees? I think so. After all, you said in the 1990s, “I respect him [DiMaggio] because he was quiet, worked hard, and always had class.” Doesn’t this sound like Tom describing himself? And is it coincidence that it was another Yankee who once dubbed Tom Gola as “the Joe DiMaggio of basketball.” And who was that Yankee who made this comparison? None other than that master of eloquence himself, Mr. Yogi Berra!

To your loving wife Caroline, we wish every blessing to a special lady who served as your guiding light, especially in those twilight years.

To your son, Tom, Jr. and to your grandchildren, you left a legacy of which any person would stand proud.

To your own siblings and to their children, we say how proud La Salle University—and the Christian Brothers—are of the great Gola family.

And Tom, you taught us something else....something you probably never saw coming at you. But it did. You taught us how to fight and to endure suffering without complaining. When each of us enters eternal life, God does not ask about how many titles or medals or diplomas or trophies we have accumulated. Rather, God is looking for our scars—and how we coped with them. And isn’t it great that we have a God who identifies so closely with scars and suffering? For 10½ years—one-eighth of your entire life—you persevered against the odds. How many of us here could have played the hand you were dealt? !

Thomas Joseph Gola, you got it right....And, for 81 years, you did it right!!

When you entered eternity on Sunday afternoon, it wouldn’t surprise me if St. Peter himself sang out your arrival, in the style of announcer Dave Zinkoff at the old Warrior games, “**Go-la Goal!**” “**Go-la Goal!**”

Tom, we’ll see you in heaven!

“Go-la Goal!”