by Nick D'Arienzo

Sure is hard not to be impressed with the Fordham Prep baseball program and how successfully integrated all three of the Bronx school's squads are. Players and coaches from all three levels communicate and share information on a regular basis, and the enthusiasm with which all three squads root for one another is tangible and something one of the last of the all-male high schools in our area can truly be proud of.

"In a lot of ways, we're really one big happy family," Varsity coach Pat Deane tells metroBASEBALL with a laugh. But he's serious, too.

In success, all roads for a Fordham Prep baseball player are going to lead to Coach Deane and to the Varsity, which make the '88 grad the pater familias of this happy family.

It's the kind of top-to-bottom connectedness that ensures not just consistent success for one of the top teams in the CHSAA "AA" Bronx-Manhattan-Westchester division, but also provides a fantastic window into the future for the school's eager young ballplayers. Even from an early age, Fordham Prep ballplayers are cognizant of the path that lies before them, and the high expectations to be met to ensure success along that path.

One of the hallmark examples of this kind of synergy is the school's annual Ripken Experience trip to Myrtle Beach, South Carolina every April, a spring training tournament of sorts especially for ballplayers from the northeast, that also provides something of considerable benefit beyond just getting some games in.

George Pisanti, Fordham Prep's JV Coach, clearly appreciates the rigorous opportunity the Ripken Experience affords, hardly a vacation: "It's Myrtle Beach - five days, Tuesday through Sunday, and we play four games in five days."

"Early in their season," continues Pisanti, "the guys are still getting to know me," having had the "Every. Game. Matters." mantra that the regular season will bring.

This year's Myrtle Beach trip was particularly rewarding, given how brutal the weather was this winter. "We actually got a whole week of baseball," says Pisanti. "We haven't really had that."

While a number of other schools take similar trips down south to start their seasons, to the best of our knowledge Fordham Prep is the only one to make sure that the Junior Varsity and Varsity squads both get to share the experience.

"All of that really comes from Coach Deane," Pisanti notes. "It's really important to him, and he's really the one who's made it happen. We do everything together down there, both JV and Varsity. Maybe one night they have a late game, we have an early game, the JV will go cheer them on at their game. And we all share our meals together, which is great."

Gary O'Connor as their Freshmen coach the year prior. Thus, a perfectly-timed experience like the South Carolina excursion allows important relationships to build - coach/player, player/player - without the pressure of perfect to ready themselves for the grind that is CHSAA Baseball, one of the most competitive leagues in the country, it just might be the Junior Varsity who derive the greatest benefit from the experience.

[As a coach] you want to know your younger players, they're your future," says Coach Deane. "It really does give these younger players a taste of what's in store for them." "The kids, they really look up to the Varsity guys," echoes Coach Pisanti. "And it's great to see that our Varsity players really look out for our JV players," adds Deane. "They're big brothers and little brothers in a way."

That "one big happy family" again...

What Deane is most proud of once each season starts is when he attends a JV game or a Freshmen game to check on how certain players are doing there, how often he encounters his Varsity players there as well to cheer their younger counterparts on. "We never make attendance or that sort of thing mandatory... but it's always nice to see how many of our guys show up to cheer the younger players on."

It's all part of the culture Deane continues to strengthen at the school, having taken over the reins from longtime mentor Steve Pettus in the spring of 2010.