

GRIDIRON

ambassador

by Elena Ferrarin

Alfred Zappala, the new general manager of the Elephants Catania football team in Sicily, has come full circle from a youth spent playing football in a town of Sicilian immigrants north of Boston.

He played in high school and college and then coached at the high school, college and semi-professional levels. He also coordinated a tryout for the Canadian Football League. “My experience as a player and coach and the lessons I learned on the field, I try to pass on,” he says.

Zappala, 66, a lawyer by trade, took the helm of Elephants Catania — at no

his focus is on stabilizing the organization financially. He created a board of advisors based in the United States to help garner donations and launched a GoFundMe campaign.

“We want next to start a teen flag program for under-20 girls,” he says. “The boys’ programs serve as our feeder system, as they are taught basic skills that high schools should. Plus, we advertise with fliers, billboards, in the university and gyms, and for the teens we visit the schools.”

More than 40 percent of teenagers and college graduates in Catania are un-



▲ ALFRED ZAPPALA

A football coach on the high school, college and semi-professional levels in America, he is dedicating himself to resurrecting a former pigskin powerhouse in the land of his ancestors.

players a bagged lunch, and after the game, we fly home. We use airlines that help us by giving the team discounted fares.”

Zappala lives most of the year in Acì Catena, about 4 miles outside Catania, and comes back to the United States for major holidays. His biggest challenge in Italy is the language, he says.

“As a Sicilian American, I was brought up using the ‘old’ immigrant language and not modern Italian,” he says. “However, I manage to get the point across.”

Football has grown in popularity in Italy, which counts 40 teams across four divisions. “It is growing by leaps and bounds,” he says. “Now, Europeans can purchase the NFL game pass and watch NFL games on their computer. The NFL has been playing games in London, which get heavy coverage, too. While football is far behind soccer, and there is not a single school with a football program, it is growing.”

Zappala keeps plenty busy in other ways, too.

He continues to practice law with his Sicilian partner of 20 years. He’s the creator of “You, Me and Sicily!” an internet-based video show, and founder and chairman of the non-profit Sicilian Project, which provides kids with free English-language instruction. He has written four books on Sicily and does small group tours locally.

“Basically,” he jokes, “enough to keep me out of trouble.”



pay — in July after being asked to do an assessment of the non-profit organization.

Elephants Catania has a men’s and women’s team and two teen flag football programs with a total of 80 to 100 participants each year. Its current head coach is Davide Giuliano, who also serves as soccer coach for Italy’s national football team.

The Elephants played for Italy’s division one Super Bowl championship in 2014, but then dropped to the second division. Zappala’s goal is to help raise his team back to the top.

Current costs are at \$80,000 annually, which will about double to \$150,000 in the first division, he says. Short-term,

employed, Zappala says. “That makes Catania one of the prime recruiting grounds for the mafia,” he says. “My view is that sports like football teach basic things like discipline, teamwork, character building and so on that are critical skills that can be used throughout life.”

None of the coaching staff of Elephants Catania gets paid, with all the money going to team expenses such as rental fees, equipment and travel, he says.

“This year, we will face three different teams from Rome, and that means three different flights for the team. We do not stay overnight. We fly in, take a bus to the stadiums that we play in, give the