

Three Cheers for the Cheese

FOR ALBANY'S JIM SANO, IT'S ALL ABOUT ATTITUDE

By Randy Howard

When shopping for a really swank hat Bergdorf Goodman or Harrod's in London might be the place to start. If your name is Jim Sano, however, you might just take your money to Hickory Farms.

Everyone knows the chapeau du fromage that Jim Sano plunks on his head for every River Rat home game is not really made of cheese. It's just a getup. And most people know him simply as the "Cheesehead Guy" who leads cheers with his two daughters, Cheddar and Nacho. But underneath the yellow wedge there is a story to tell.

"Guys the bell's about to ring," Sano hollersthrough the mist in a hoarse tone. "Let's get ready. Put the towels in the cart."

He's talking to the last few students who are scrambling around the boy's locker room at Philip Livingstone Middle School. Behind Sano's desk is a poster of Mo, Curly and Larry holding irons and donning knickers and Argyle socks. The caption reads: "Golf With Your Friends."

The kind of quirkiness in the poster seems the norm for Albany native and 17-year physical education teacher Jim Sano. It makes sense that the same guy who wears a cheese hat at hockey games corrals pre-adolescents and advises them where to put all their energy.

"I like inner-city kids," Sano says frankly.

He grew up in the shadow of the Governor's Mansion and understands what it's like to be a kid growing up in the city.

"This is another cheesehead," he says, placing his hand on the shoulder of a student who has wandered into his office.

On this particular day, Sano walked out of the swimming pool a bit agitated. One of his students decided to pull a distasteful prank and hide in the showers until everyone went in to dress. He will definitely get suspended for hopping back into the pool when no one was looking.

"It's a classic case of how people drown," Sano says.

As a physical education teacher Sano says it doesn't matter to him what the kids actually do with the activities.

"It's the life skills they learn and how to carry themselves. If they can learn

something here that maybe they don't get at home, they'll remember it and use it in the future."

Sano's involvement with the River Rats started three years ago when the

out into the crowd and get attention. A devout Albany sports fan, Sano has found that complimenting the work of Rowdy the Rat allows him to keep his sense of humor. He especially enjoys the

The River Rats don't pay Sano for the work he does. In the beginning he told them he would do his thing when he wanted to and when he didn't want to do it he'd stay home. They agreed and three years later he hasn't missed a game yet.

"He's a great guy to work with," said General Manager John Weisbrod, who spotted Sano in a San Jose Sharks jersey three years ago. "If what he does adds to the environment of the game then it's alright by us."

At the games, Sano's persona turns him into a benevolent Pied Piper. He enjoys being loud in public. He enjoys working with his slingshot partners between periods. His wife, Nancy, is also a physical education teacher at Hackett school. Together, with his wife and two daughters, Sano has introduced local hockey fans to the Cheesehead Family.

Still, it is teaching that "provides a high like no other" for Sano. He contends Philip Livingstone is just like any other school. Somebody's got to take care of the local kids, he says.

He's just the man to do it.

With an attitude like his, he could do almost anything.



Photo by Randy Howard

Jim Sano and two daughters Katie and Michelle, aka: "The Cheeseheads."

Times Union ran a headline that read "Rats Grate Romano." It was nothing more than a dare from his cousin to go

interaction with the kids.

"There are kids that come looking for me. I don't understand it, but it's nice."

Rats Stats

PLAYER	POS	GP	G	A	PTS	+/-
Steve Sullivan	C	52	33	42	75	40
Scott Pellerin	LW	63	29	41	70	40
Bobby House	RW	65	32	36	68	28
Denis Pederson	C	57	24	37	61	31
Pascal Rheume	C	59	22	36	58	22
Patrik Elias	C	62	26	30	56	19
Steve Brule	C	68	26	19	45	1
Bryan Helmer	D	68	10	28	38	31
V. Sharifjanov	LW	62	13	24	37	24
Ricard Persson	D	55	13	23	36	28
GOALIE	GP	AVG	W	L	T	PCT
Mike Dunham	37	2.52	26	8	2	0.907
P. Sidorkiewicz	26	2.84	17	5	3	.903