

Hall of Fame



SUBMITTED

Joe DePaolo crosses the finish line of the 220 yard dash at the 1953 state meet.

Blue Knight bullet Joe DePaolo's still Southington's fastest

By JOHN GORALSKI
SPORTS WRITER

In 1953, Joe DePaolo stepped onto the West Hartford track and a hush swept across the crowd of 300 spectators. Olympic champion Lindy Remigino was stretching at the center of the pack like a lion preparing for a kill. DePaolo—a Southington High School senior—must have looked like a lamb being led to the slaughter.

Nearly six decades have passed since that day. DePaolo remembers the thrill of practicing with an Olympic champ. He remembers Remigino correcting a minor flaw in his start, and he remembers the rush of competition as they exploded from the gates.

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"I think I stayed with him—not neck and neck—but he gave me a good workout," said DePaolo. "When you were out on the track with someone like that, you knew that guy was going to be a tough competitor. Winning the Olympics, for him, must have been a big thrill. It was a big thrill for me to get to work out with him. Years later, I saw him at Madison Square Garden because I ran the 50 or 60 yard dash, and he remembered me."

Over the years, Southington has had more than its share of state champion speedsters. They've had record-breaking sprinters, all-New England runners, and national-level hurdlers, but they only had one Joe DePaolo. He was the only one to approach a world record. He was the only one to challenge an Olympian in a head-to-head race, and he was the only one nicknamed "The Jet" by Southington coaches. DePaolo is still the measure for greatness.

"He was beyond his time in track. Nowadays, you have a lot of guys that are running the 100, but he just blew down that track," said John Fontana, DePaolo's teammate

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Former SHS athlete and coach

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His name doesn't appear on any record boards, but that doesn't mean his times aren't still the fastest. Records are measured in meters now, not yards, but DePaolo's times are comparable once you make the conversions.

Compare DePaolo's time in the 440 yard dash (51.7) to Stuart Soboleski's current record in the 400m (49.66), and remember that DePaolo's distance is 2.3 meters longer. Compare his time in the 100 yard dash (9.6) to Ian Steele's record in the 100m (10.65), but remember that DePaolo ran almost 9 meters shorter.

The most impressive record might be DePaolo's 220 yard dash record (21.9). Konrad Stefanek has been the fastest local runner in the 200m race (22.1), but DePaolo ran 1.2 meters further and still finished faster. It can be argued that he still holds the record.

"Technique had a lot to do with it, and I had a good coach [John Rathburn], and he paid attention to the little things you could do to enhance your speed. I think that had a lot to do with it," DePaolo said. "When you're up there, you're pumped up. It's you, and you're running against every-

one. You're all alone, and I could really get energized for that. I was dedicated to it. I really was. I loved both sports that I played."

Over four seasons, basketball coaches tapped DePaolo's speed as the late coach Walt Lozoski implemented his zone traps at a time when teams relied on man-to-man defenses. With his ball-handling skills, he made the perfect one to lead the fast break, and DePaolo was able to make decisions at full speed as if he was running in slow motion. He was promoted to varsity by the tenth game of his freshman season, and he never returned to the bench. As a senior, he led the locals to their first undefeated regular season (19-0) in the Central Valley Conference.

"He wanted to win all the time, and he was driven by that force," said former teammate Ray Michanczyk. "If you were down, he was going to pick you up. He was very instrumental that way. He gave 100 percent. For being a small kid, he more than made up for it with his playmaking and speed. He set up everyone pretty well."

DePaolo scored 20 points just one time in his career and it was against Newington during his sophomore season. He managed to score 18 points one time in a regular season game and another during the annual sweater game against the Yale Divinity School, but DePaolo was instrumental in



Southington Sports Hall of Fame

Inside the Numbers

- Served as Director of Special Programs for the Southington Board of Education.
- Served as Principal at Beecher Street School and Lincoln Lewis Jr High School for 4 years.
- Head Varsity Coach for SHS track.

Basketball

- Four varsity letters (1950, 51, 52, 53).
 - Team Captain (1953).
 - Led Southington to their first undefeated regular season (19-0, 1953).
 - Colonial Conference champs (1951, 1953).
- 1951—49 field goals, 17 free throws, 115 points.
1952—44 field goals, 24 free throws, 112 points.
1953—64 field goals, 32 free throws, 162 points.

Cross Country

- Earned 2 varsity letters (1951, 1952).

Track & Field

- Set a school record in the 100 yd dash (9.7)*.
- Set a school record in the 220 yd dash (21.9).
- Set a school record in the 440 yd dash (51.7).
- Set a school record in the broad jump (21'0.25").
- Placed 2nd in New England in the 220 yd dash (1953).
- State champion in the 100 yd dash (1953).
- State champion in the 220 yd dash (1953).
- Team Captain (1953).

*Unofficially timed within 0.3 seconds of the 1953 world record (9.3) with a time of 9.6 seconds in the 100 yard dash.

Southington's offensive scheme.

"I learned very, very early on from Walt Lozoski, the importance of distributing the ball. He used to tell us that, if we make a pass to someone and they get a basket, he looked at it as if the scorer gets one point and you get one point," DePaolo said. "That gave me incentive, and I enjoyed basketball immensely. I used to call it 'The Thinking Man's Game' because it was an instrument for me. I had speed. I could play a little defense. I wasn't much of a scorer, but I knew how to distribute the ball. At that time, you could describe me as today's point guard."

Michanczyk agreed. "He was the playmaker of our team," he said. "He did a lot of things to help. He kept everyone up. He played very good defense. He had a little jump shot. He got a few points as the point guard, but he was a very good distributor and playmaker."

DePaolo earned four varsity letters in basketball, and he was named as the team's only captain during their undefeated campaign. He tried his hand at cross-country, earning a varsity letter as a junior and senior, but it was his short track speed that earned him fame throughout the region. He didn't lose a race in two years as an upperclassman until he was edged in the 220 yard dash on a day that wasn't his best at the New England meet in 1953.

DePaolo set school records in the 440 yard dash and the broad jump (21 feet, 0.25 inches) that stood for more than a decade before they fell in 1953. He set the state records in the 100 yard dash (10.1) and 220 yard dash (22.3) at the state meet. He won both races

by wide margins with nobody pushing him from behind.

Still, his best day came against Farmington on May 28, 1953 when "The Jet" shattered four school records in a single meet. By some timers' marks, DePaolo came within .3 seconds of the world record in the 100 yard dash, but it went into the school record books four tenths of a second from the world mark.

"I ran 9.7 in the 100, but two clocks had me at 9.6," he said. "There was a cross wind that day, so they decided that they would clock me at 9.7."

Because of his success, DePaolo had offers to play at almost every level. Scholarships to play two sports were presented, but DePaolo chose track at Providence College. He never reached his high school times, but he fell in love with his studies.

After graduation, he returned to Southington to serve in the school system as a middle school principal. He earned his doctorate, and served as a college professor until his retirement in 2010. DePaolo credits athletics for opening the door.

"I always feel blessed about my personal and professional life," he said. "This has been kind of like an opportunity for me to reflect on the things I accomplished in the 1950s in Southington. I have nothing but good thoughts about all the kinds of things I participated in and the sorts of people that I affiliated myself with."

On Wednesday, Nov. 9, DePaolo will have one more item to stuff into his resumé when he is inducted into the Southington Sports Hall of Fame in a ceremony at the Aqua Turf Club in Plantsville.