

Sports Hall of Fame



1955 CHRONICLE YEARBOOK COURTESY OF THE SOUTHTONINGTON PUBLIC LIBRARY

The Southington High School football team went undefeated in 1954 and outscored opponents, 329-57. Front, from left, H. Ursone, D. Lachelt, R. Thorpe, T. Kirkland, J. Palmieri, J. Clements, J. Llodra, M. Terry, J. Lombardo, D. Perry, J. Flynn, and W. Zakrewski. Middle, P. Cassella, M. Rabis, J. Berg, D. Bender, M. Ungaro, J. Geloso, B. Ludecke, B. Stankowski, A. Meade, J. Porter, B. Celella, and A. Tarfano. Back, B. Shepard (mgr), Coach Joe Fontana, J. Orsone, D. Jones, D. Zdunczyk, E. Fish, R. Frain, B. Carruth, B. Flynn, C. Merriman, Coach Walt Lozoski, and F. Henderson (mgr).

Gridiron greatness

1954 football team was the best of the best

By JOHN GORALSKI
SPORTS WRITER

Tom Kirkland centered himself over the football in 1954 like a con artist with a handful of gullible tourists. Now you see it. Now you don't. Kirkland's snap would disappear into a swirl of Southington players.

The offensive line charged forward. The quarterback swept out to the flanks behind an all-state guard, while a pair of banzai running backs charged into the center of the defense. Receivers swept to all corners of the field waiting for their all-state passer to unleash his cannon.

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Running plays and passing plays looked the same. Every player seemed to be carrying the football as he charged into the defense, and by the time that the defense figured things out...the official was already signaling the score.

This was the way that Coach Jay Fontana envisioned the single wing offense when he brought it to the Southington High School gridiron, but this was the team that perfected it. They could run. They could pass. They kick and play defense. Maybe that was the real reason why the storied coach decided to retire at the end of the 1954 season. Fontana knew that it couldn't be done any better.

"There was deception to it, and with the quality of guys that we had, if the outside wasn't working the inside would open up," said Ray Thorpe, one of three all-state athletes in Southington's arsenal. "We had options because we had the ability to run and throw. If the block was in front of you, you'd take off and run. If the offensive line would break down, we had Jerry Clements out there so we were able to throw the ball."

Teams never knew what hit them.

"The caliber of players on that team was just outstanding," said Andy Meade, the team's junior quarterback. "As far as I'm concerned, there wasn't a weak link

anywhere. We had tremendous running backs. Ray Thorpe did a tremendous job passing. Jerry Clements and our ends were outstanding pass catchers. It was just a combination of all the guys with Jay Fontana, Walt Lozoski, and the rest of our coaching staff. They were determined. They worked us hard, and it paid off."

Nowadays, Southington High School is always in the conversation amongst the larger schools in the state, but the town looked much differently in the mid-1950s when the Knights were scrambling through programs two and three times their size. Southington was a small blue-collar community with big lineman and a precision attack. Even the city school coaches screened their calls when they filled out their calendars. Nobody wanted to add the "Fontanamen" to their schedule.

"One of Fontana's motivations for retiring was because he had such a hard time finding teams to play us because we had such a find tradition," said Thorpe. "We had to play up, but we didn't pay that much attention to it at the time. We just went about and did our jobs. I can remember going out to warm up, and he didn't want us even looking at the other team because they always had more guys. And some of them were bigger than us."

Southington set out to fight for the little guys with a schedule that included a pair of Class A schools, a list of perennial powers, and two open dates. At early practices the coach barely had enough players to field both an offense and a defense, and he used it as motivation with the press. With fewer than two dozen players at early practices, the coach warned reporters that the program was in jeopardy.

He even argued that the team might have to abandon a varsity schedule and adopt an intramural schedule if things didn't change quickly.

"Don't get me wrong," he told reporters at the Southington News in early September. "The boys we have are good, and I'm not worried about our first team. But I want depth—got to have it. We've got to

have it to carry us through a season."

On opening day the joke was finally revealed, and Southington steamrolled East Haven, 32-13. Thorpe went 8-for-11 with a pair of touchdown passes. Joe "Bronco" Palmieri and Thorpe rushed in for scores. Clements caught a pair of touchdown passes. Walt Zakrewski returned an interception for a score, and Meade completed a pair of extra-point conversions. As it turned out, Southington was just getting started.

"We had a passing attack and a real running game with Corky Cassella and [Mel] Terry," said Thorpe. "We had great runners like Bronco Palmieri. We had a tremendous passing game, running game, and defense. We had guys like Joe Llodra on the line. We had Clements and other guys that just dominated."

Each week, the team found different ways to score.

Cassella scored twice in week two and added a pair of extra point conversions as Southington cruised past Woodrow Wilson, 47-7. Six different players scored and another four scores were called back by penalties as Southington began a four-game home stand that carried them past Darien and Milford Prep. It culminated in Southington's first Class A opponent, a 40-7 win over Torrington in late October that pushed Southington into the second spot in the state rankings.

"It was talked about all over the place," said Meade. "I look back on it now, and it was such a good experience. Every game that we played, the place was sold out. Everywhere we went, we had a big following. Even when we went out of town, everybody came with us."

The wins kept coming. Palmieri kick-started November with three scores in a 32-6 win over Staples. Thorpe ran into the end zone twice in the following game, passed for two more, and scored a 105-yard interception return and six extra points during a 60-12 rout against Plainville.

Then came Thanksgiving Day, and Southington rushed for 156



Southington Sports Hall of Fame

1954 SHS football team

Overall Record: 8-0

- Class B state champions.
- Three all-state players.
- Outscored opponents, 329-57.
- Outscored opponents in every quarter but one.
- Averaged 41 points per game.
- Coach Jay Fontana's final season and 4th undefeated season of his career.

SEASON RESULTS

Date	Opponent	Site	Score
Sept. 25	East Haven	Away	W 32-13
Oct. 2	Woodrow Wilson	Home	W 47-7
Oct. 9	Darien	Home	W 33-6
Oct. 16	Milford Prep	Home	W 39-6
Oct. 23	Torrington	Home	W 40-7
Nov. 6	Staples	Away	W 32-6
Nov. 13	Plainville	Away	W 60-12
Nov. 25	Meriden	Home	W 46-0

yards and passed for 106 on their way to a 46-0 shutout that ended the holiday rivalry with Meriden.

"They came over with a big team. When we got down to the football field, they were already warming up. They stretched from the 50 yard line to the end zone. They must have had over 70 players on the team, and we had maybe 30," said Meade. "The place was just jammed with people, and we rolled right over them."

The Thanksgiving game highlighted Southington's defense and special teams as the locals scored on a blocked kick, a kickoff return, and an interception.

"One area that didn't get enough notoriety was our defense and special teams," said Thorpe. "I don't know the actual numbers, but I'd say that one thing that allowed us to score as many points as we did was that our defense was so effective."

This team was as close to perfect as any in town history. With 10 different players scoring touchdowns and five players combining for 28 extra points, it was probably Southington's deepest group of skilled players. The team was able to survive an early injury to Cassella and a pair of serious injuries to Terry and Zakrewski to finish with 31 rushing touchdowns, 11 passing touchdowns, and six

interceptions returned for scores.

In the final state poll, Southington received five first place votes but finished second to Notre Dame-West Haven. Jerry Clements (end), Joe Llodra (guard), and Ray Thorpe (back) accounted for one quarter of the all-state roster. The perfect 8-0 record was the fourth in Fontana's career, but it might have been the best.

That has sparked a debate that has spanned the last six decades. What is the best football team in Southington's storied history? Most historians say that it comes down to the 1949 and 1954 teams. Fontana never said publically which team was better, but it has been a favorite topic amongst players for either team.

"There's always been a debate about which team was better. Was it the '49 team or the '54 team? That debate will go on forever," said Cassella. "I've always thought that we could have beaten them, but if you ask the players on the 49 team they'd say that they would have won. I think that the true winner in that debate is Southington High School."

Now, both teams will be recognized by the Southington Sports Hall of Fame. On Thursday, Nov. 8, the 1954 team was inducted in a ceremony at the Aqua Turf Club in Plantsville.

Southington Sports Hall of Fame

Crushing the opposition

'87 softball charged to a state title and a 52-game win streak

By JOHN GORALSKI
SPORTS WRITER

Nobody knows what the Danbury girls were thinking when they stepped onto Falcon Field for the 1987 girls softball championship, but they couldn't have been happy. Just a few months earlier Kris Mach had dashed the Hatters' hopes for a girls basketball title with a last second basket, and there she was swinging her bat. Tracy Ciosek was on that hoops team, too, and there she was warming up as Southington's ace.

Sports fans love stories about redemption. Movies have been made about comebacks and retribution. This story is not one of them.

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Dwight Moore, a sports reporter for the *Southington Observer* in 1987, remarked, "The results turned out the same, with but one difference. There'd be no close game...no last second heroics...and things would be decided quickly, early, and decisively."

This is a story about dominance, winning streaks, and state titles. This is a story about Southington softball in the middle of its 1980s heyday.

"We had a small group of kids on this team that played softball and basketball," said former Lady Knight softball coach and an assistant coach Ron Piazza. "They were a part of five state championships in their six possible seasons. It was amazing."

In retrospect, nobody should have been surprised. After all, the 1987 title was Southington's third state championship in as many years and their eighth title in 11 seasons, but it wasn't a sure thing when practice began in mid-March.

"We lost four seniors off the 1986 team, and all four of them were all-staters," said Piazza. "Those four accounted for 140 runs, 129 hits, 120 RBI. They had nine of our 12 homeruns and 65 of our 71 stolen bases. We lost a lot... We knew that we were going to have to switch some people around, and we were lucky that we got some young kids that stepped up."

Of course it helped to have one of the most successful pitchers in Southington history on the mound. Senior co-captain Tracy Ciosek was a shortstop-turned-pitching ace that was just as deadly with her glove as she was with a pitch. Behind her was an all-star lineup, including seasoned seniors like Melodie Johnson, Cheryl Danko, Cheryl Bradley, Chris Zimmer, and the one that really upset Danbury—Mach.

Still, Piazza had a lot of questions at the start. Those would be answered early. Right out of the gates, Southington batters took charge. Southington outscored 80-3 to race out to a quick 6-0 start. During that stretch, Ciosek bookended a perfect game with a pair of



COURTESY OF JOE PIAZZA

The 1987 Lady Knight softball team rallied to a perfect 24-0 record to claim the program's fifth consecutive state title and a state record with 52 consecutive wins. Front, from left, Cheryl Danko, Melodie Johnson, Kris Mach, Tracy Ciosek, Cheryl Bradley, Chris Zimmer. Middle, Colleen Steinnagel, Robbie Lipetz, Kristin Wilcox, Mary DeBisschop, Ann Bouchard, Dawn Lantiere, Andrea Gormley. Back, Coach Jim Lindsay, Coach Rob Brown, Manager Heidi Lindquist, Tami Soovajian, Kerry Sweezey, Chris Gombotz, Lisa DePaolo, Corrine Greco, Head Coach Joe Piazza, Coach Irene Mach, Coach Dan Dembinski.

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1987 Lady Knight softball team

Overall Record: 24-0

- Class LL state champions.
- Outscored regular season opponents, 220-15.
- Outscored postseason opponents, 47-5.
- Set a state record for consecutive victories (52) that was broken by Seymour (78) in 2005-7.

REGULAR SEASON			
Date	Opponent	Site	Score
Friday, April 10	Norwalk	Rec Park	9-0
Tuesday, April 14	Platt	Away	6-1
Thursday, April 16	New Britain	Rec Park	10-0
Monday, April 20	Bulkeley	Away	21-0
Thursday, April 23	Mercy	Away	22-1
Saturday, April 25	Westhill	Away	1-0
Tuesday, April 28	Bristol Central	Rec Park	11-1
Wednesday, April 29	Maloney	Rec Park	13-2
Friday, May 01	Bristol Eastern	Away	3-2
Friday, May 08	Platt	Rec Park	5-3
Monday, May 11	New Britain	Away	16-0
Tuesday, May 12	Newington	Away	19-0
Thursday, May 14	Bulkeley	Rec Park	20-0
Friday, May 15	Berlin	Rec Park	6-3
Monday, May 18	Maloney	Away	10-0
Wednesday, May 20	Bristol Central	Away	6-0
Friday, May 22	Bristol Eastern	Rec Park	3-0
Tuesday, May 26	Newington	Rec Park	20-0
Wednesday, May 27	Holy Cross	Away	7-1
Monday, May 28	Cheshire	Rec Park	12-1

POSTSEASON		
Round	Opponent	Score
First Round	Bye	
Second Round	Cheshire	8-0
Quarterfinals	Holy Cross	6-3
Semifinals	Windham	24-1
Championship Game	Danbury	9-1

no-hitters. The Knight knocked off a Norwalk powerhouse to start the streak and dropped the No. 2 team in the state with an 11-1 victory over Bristol Central.

"There were an awful lot of questions going into that 87 season, but they all got answered," said Piazza. "When we beat Norwalk, 9-0, in that first game, I knew we were okay. Norwalk was always a really good team back then. We were scoring runs. We had a good group. Sure, there were teams that gave us trouble along

the way, and it was those teams that had pitchers that weren't throwing hard."

Southington never slowed and they picked off opponents like a marksman at the range. The team rallied for 12 shutouts. They outscored opponents, 220-15, and finished the regular season with a perfect 20-0 record.

The Knights had strong hitting throughout the lineup. Johnson led the attack with a .456 batting average, but Kristin Wilcox (.444), Zimmer (.430), Bradley (.405), and

Dawn Lantiere (.410) each broke the .400 barrier. As a team, Southington batted .340 with a slugging percentage approaching .500. The girls combined for 191 hits and 60 were extra base hits.

"That 87 team stands out for me because of the way that they were able to regroup in the beginning of the year," Piazza said. "Kids were called upon to step up. The kid that was the second base on the 86 team was moved to first base. Our shortstop shifted to second base and we brought in a sophomore, Dawn Lantiere, to play shortstop. We brought in a sophomore third baseman. They just gelled together and ran the table. They made a consistent run and never let down. They were a proud group of kids."

As it turns out the regular season was just a warmup for the tournament because this may be one of the most dominant postseason teams in Southington history. They beat Cheshire, 8-0, in the second round. They surged past Holy Cross, 6-3, in the quarterfinals, and advanced to the championship game with a 24-1 rout over Windham that quieted even the staunchest of critics.

Colleen Steinnagel went 4-for-5 with a homerun and five RBI to pace Southington's 16-hit attack, and Windham never knew what hit them.

"Windham expected to win. A lot of people gave them a good chance to beat us, and I did too," Piazza said, "But after the second inning you could see that Windham was totally deflated. They were just going through the motion. Balls were dropping in that they probably should have caught because they had just lost their drive. I almost felt bad for them because we never tried to run the score up. When you look at our scores that year and you see a 29, it could have probably been 40."

That set up the rematch with Danbury in the finals. Once again, Southington hit the ground run-

ning. Ciosek held the Hatters to five hits with one walk and nine strikeouts, including five strikeouts in the last two innings.

Seven of Southington's starting nine contributed to the lopsided win with Zimmer leading the way at 3-for-4. Mach, Lantiere, Ciosek, and Bradley had two hits apiece. Johnson had four RBI with two sacrifice flies and a double. The Knights finished with 14 hits in the game.

When the dust had settled, Southington had earned another state title. More impressive was a 52-game winning streak that stretched back to the 1985 state tournament. It was a state record at the time, and one that would take 20 years to break.

"It was amazing," Piazza said. "It only takes a ball hitting a pebble. It takes a walk or an error to break a streak like that. To have one go that long was great for our program. Every time we won, it was a headline. We got national attention. They started a national women's fastpitch magazine at the time. It's no longer in use, but they featured us on the cover."

Once again, the Lady Knights had raised the bar for future Southington teams, but Piazza said that their legacy was their resilience. This wasn't a team that was expected to race through the schedule so easily. This wasn't a team that was expected to win, but they did it with ease.

On Thursday, Nov. 8, the team will finally be honored in an induction ceremony at the Aqua Turf Club in Plantsville.

"The legacy of that team was their resilience. They put themselves together at the beginning of the year, not knowing what they were going to do, and they got better as the year went on," said Piazza. "We caught breaks. We made breaks for ourselves. The pitching was good, but the defense was just as good. The hitting—what can you say? They came through when we needed them to come through."

“ There were an awful lot of questions going into that 87 season, but they all got answered.

” Joe Piazza, Former SHS girls softball coach

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Representing the town

Andy Meade was always the true team player

By JOHN GORALSKI
SPORTS WRITER

Running through an old picture album, Andy Meade brushes past the headlines to point out his teammates. He brags about them one by one, and the list reads like a Who's Who of Southington sports.

Of course, he fails to point out that it's his name that's scrawled across the headlines. He looks puzzled when asked about all-conference and all-state nominations. Meade was never one to search out the spotlight. Whether he was serving on the town council or on his high school football team, Meade was a natural born leader that was as happy as a role player or a star.

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"Andy played all three sports—football, basketball, and baseball—and he was good at every one of them," said former SHS coach Joe Orsene. "He was a good athlete and a really nice fellow to begin with. He was a really nice fellow to coach. They really don't come any better than Andy."

The town looked much different when Meade was growing up in the 1940s, and sports was a way of life for the young athlete. Southington was a small town, filled with open spaces and small neighborhoods. There were no youth leagues, but Meade battled his neighbors in pick-up games or played basketball and a make-shift baseball game in the YMCA gym.

It wasn't until Meade was 10 years old that the town finally opened its doors to Little League baseball, and Meade outlasted dozens of hopefuls to earn a spot on one of the Southington four teams.

"At that time, Little League was the only thing going," he said. "We didn't have midget football. We didn't have farm leagues, and we didn't have anything else. Of course, I played sandlot ball and everything, but it was Little League where I started to come into my own."

Meade quickly rose to the top, hitting .571 in his second year. Over three seasons, he averaged over .500 at the plate and earned mention among sports writers as one of the best young players in the state. He was already beginning to show signs of his versatility. In eighth grade, he joined a CYO basketball team at St. Thomas and helped them to the state semifinals.

Then came the high school, and Meade jumped at a chance to test his skills against the top athletes in a number of sports. In all three seasons, Meade threw himself into competition. In all three seasons, he fought his way to the

varsity roster. He earned nine varsity letters over three years at the high school, and spent most of his career in the starting lineup.

He was the quarterback for the football team, a guard for the basketball team, and a pitcher and fielder in the spring. As a junior, Meade helped his team secure the Class B football title. That spring, he helped lead the baseball team to the championship game where they lost to Woodrow Wilson.

"It was a dream for me to get up there and play," he said. "There was a lot of pride and a lot of fight for the reputation of Southington no matter what sport you played. We were quite well known, and we probably had the best coaches in the state with Jay Fontana, Walt Lozoski, and Joe Orsene. Those coaches were great, and they didn't pull any punches. They were out to win ball games."

Meade's football team in 1954 is considered by many to be the best in Southington's history. As quarterback in the single-wing offense, Meade was a blocker and runner. The Blue Knights knocked off a pair of Class A schools on their way to a perfect 8-0 record and a Class B title.

"For me, it was more about being a team player than being out there for myself," he said. "The greatest thing was being a part of that team and going undefeated. Even in our senior season, we did pretty well even though we lost a lot of players. It was a team effort. We were all friends, and everybody played their hardest."

Meade managed to convert seven extra point plays as a junior in 1954. He didn't score a single offensive touchdown, but his blocking and leadership helped set up a passing game that was ahead of its time and a running game that dominated Southington's competition.

"He was an outstanding blocker and an excellent defensive guy," said Ray Thorpe, the top scorer on the team. "He was a leader. He was level-headed, and he had the respect of everybody. He was the commensurate player, and he could play any position in the backfield. He was the general, and he was a mature guy at a young age."

As good as Meade was on the offensive side of the ball, it was his defense that helped secure his spot in the center of the lineup. He led the team with three interceptions, including a 60-yard touchdown return during a 60-12 victory over Plainville.

"I played offense and defense, but I think I did even more on defense because I was able to intercept a pass or recover a fumble," he said. "As a single wing quarterback, you work your butt off. You're either blocking or touching the ball, but it wasn't the sort of posi-



SUBMITTED

Former Blue Knight quarterback Andy Meade crashes through the defense during a Southington home game in the mid-1950s.



Southington Sports Hall of Fame

Inside the Numbers

- Invited to try out with the Cincinatti Reds and Philadelphia Phillies (1956).
- Played baseball for Villanova University.
- Earned the Elks Award Scholarship for sports, leadership, and academic achievement (1956).
- Inducted into the Southington High School Baseball Hall of Fame (1986).

Football

- Member of the SHS Class B championship team (1954).
- Captain (1955).
- 3 Varsity Letters (1953, 1954, 1955).
- Collected 8 career interceptions.
- Scored 6 touchdowns and 10 extra point conversions.
- Captured 3 conference titles.

Basketball

- Captain (1955-56).
- 3 Varsity Letters (1953-54, 1954-55, 1955-56).
- Averaged in double digits (1954-55, 1955-56).
- Captured 3 conference titles.

Baseball

- Member of the SHS Class M runner up team (1955).
- 3 Varsity Letters (1954, 1955, 1956).
- Batted over .400 in 1955 and 1956.
- Captured 3 conference titles.
- Batted over .400 with Southington Post 72 American Legion baseball team (1952-1956).
- Named as the outstanding hitter for Post 72.

LITTLE LEAGUE

- Lifetime batting average over .500.
- Named as one of the best Little League players in CT.

tion where you scored. I had some plays where I ran, but I was primarily running pitchouts and passing. I was determined to do everything I could because I didn't want to let those guys down."

His efforts helped him secure a co-captain nomination as a senior. Southington returned just four seniors from their state championship team, but Meade helped lead them to a 5-2 record. Over three years, Meade's teams went 19-2.

"The quarterback was called the blocking back, and Andy did a great job as a blocker with that 1954 team. Then, he moved to tailback the next year, and that is a really key spot in the single wing," Orsene said. "He played good defense and good offense. He really just did a solid job all around, but he was a great all-around athlete."

After Thanksgiving, Meade shifted his attention indoors where

he led the offense at guard. Once again, Meade wasn't the top scorer but he helped distribute the ball to prolific scorers like Dick Lorenzo and Corky Casella, and Southington rallied for three consecutive titles in the Central Valley Conference and a trio of postseason appearances, including a rally to the quarterfinals in 1955.

"He was such a good athlete," said Casella. "I've known him since my sophomore year, and he's always been a good athlete at everything. He was very competitive at everything."

Of course, baseball was his best sport. He dominated in Little League, and that carried over to the high school. Meade alternated from pitcher to left fielder, but it was his bat that really set him apart. In both his junior and senior seasons, Meade batted over .400, and he helped lead Southington to

the Class B state championship game in 1955.

Over the summers, he batted over .400 in four seasons with the local American Legion team. In 1956, he was named as the outstanding hitter for Southington Post 72. In 1992, Meade was inducted into the Southington High School baseball hall of fame.

"He was good at basketball and football, but baseball was probably his best sport," said Orsene. "He was a good hitter, a good fielder, and I really felt that was his best sport."

Soon, scouts began to appear on the sidelines. Meade received invitations to try out for both the Cincinatti Reds and the Philadelphia Phillies, but his mother waved off both offers. Instead, the small town star went to Villanova University and he walked onto the baseball team to earn a trio of varsity letters.

"There were a lot of scholarship players. I played, but those scholarship guys had preference over guys like me," he said. "I did have three letters because I played varsity, and it was great. We played Navy. We went to Annapolis. We traveled all over, and it was a great experience."

After college, Meade returned home to marry his high school sweetheart. He began a successful business in town and served on the town council and a number of local boards. He said that his experience in sports helped pave the way for everything that followed.

"I told my own kids as they were growing up and now my grandkids that you win some and you lose some," he said. "There isn't any place better than sports to teach you to be aggressive. It's a challenge. You're out there to win, but in the same token you take your bumps and bruises."

It was no surprise that Meade was selected to represent the town in the Southington Sports Hall of Fame. On Thursday, Nov. 8, he was inducted in a ceremony at the Aqua Turf in Plantsville.

"I consider it a real, real privilege. We've had so many good ball players, and I almost feel that there are a lot of guys that deserve it before me," he said. "We had a reputation to uphold, and I feel good that I was a part of it. That's one of the reasons why, later on, I went on to serve the town council. It was great to work for the town or play for the town. I really owe so much to this town, and I always felt good to represent them."

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Open season

Bill Lee was the first to capture the state crown

By JOHN GORALSKI
SPORTS WRITER

A video camera captured Bill Lee in a close-up as he walked off the championship mat at the 1999 state open, and its grainy image captured the key to the Southington grappler's success.

Lee had just dismantled his opponent in the final bout to capture his second consecutive division title. He scored his first points in the opening moments and spent the next few minutes chasing his opponent around the mat like a kitten playing with a ball of yarn.

When the officials signaled the end, Lee earned a 17-2 win and another state title, but he can be seen on the video shaking his head in obvious frustration.

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"I just couldn't finish him," he said with a hint of disappointment more than one decade later. "I never let a guy off his back, but I just couldn't pin that kid. It was weird. It took no effort to get him to his back, but as soon as his shoulders hit he was a wild man."

Lee still remembers the match vividly. He can recall every play, every move, and every point as if it was unfolding in front of him. He never trailed, and his opponent never threatened. It capped an easy run to his second straight division title, but he still seems haunted about missing the pin. Perhaps it's because few wrestlers ever managed to avoid one.

"For my money he was the best kid that I've ever seen wrestle," said Blue Knight wrestling coach Derek Dion. "He was just about as strong and fast a kid as I've ever had. Nobody with his size could hang with his strength or his speed. There were kids that went on to have better college careers, but we'll never really know how his college career would have panned out [if he didn't get injured]. When you look at high school wrestlers, he's one of the best that I've ever seen."

As the last century came to a close Lee exploded onto the scene but it was a long journey just to step onto the high school mat. Lee was a proven soccer player at a private school, but he longed to wrestle. His father was Southington's first captain in 1974 and 75.

Lee switched to homeschooling as a freshman to try to qualify for the high school team. When that didn't work because of new rules changes, Lee convinced his parents to enroll him in the public schools. It was his first win as a high school wrestler.

"I knew that he was the type of kid that you could build a program around, and we did that," said Dion. "You make one kid better, and it seems to make everyone around them better. They go on to make everyone else around them better, and it made us a pretty successful program for a while."

Lee was an instant hit as a sophomore, and finished his career without a single regular season

loss. He amassed an incredible 122-6 record that still stands as No. 17 on the all-time list of state wrestlers. He won 67 by pin and 15 by forfeit. Most of his matches were over in seconds.

"He wasn't really one to make mistakes," said Dion. "It was difficult to get good matches for him because he was so dominant. Everyone just tried to get away from him. Sometimes, I would try to weigh him in at a weight class above and wrestle him up to the weight class above that just to try to get him into a match that could get him ready for a state tournament. He seemed to pin or tech fall just about everyone he wrestled."

Lee credits his preparation and aggressive attack. He started his day with three-mile runs before school. He finished his practices with five-mile runs or long trips on the bike. Since most of his matches finished so quickly, his drive had to come from within.

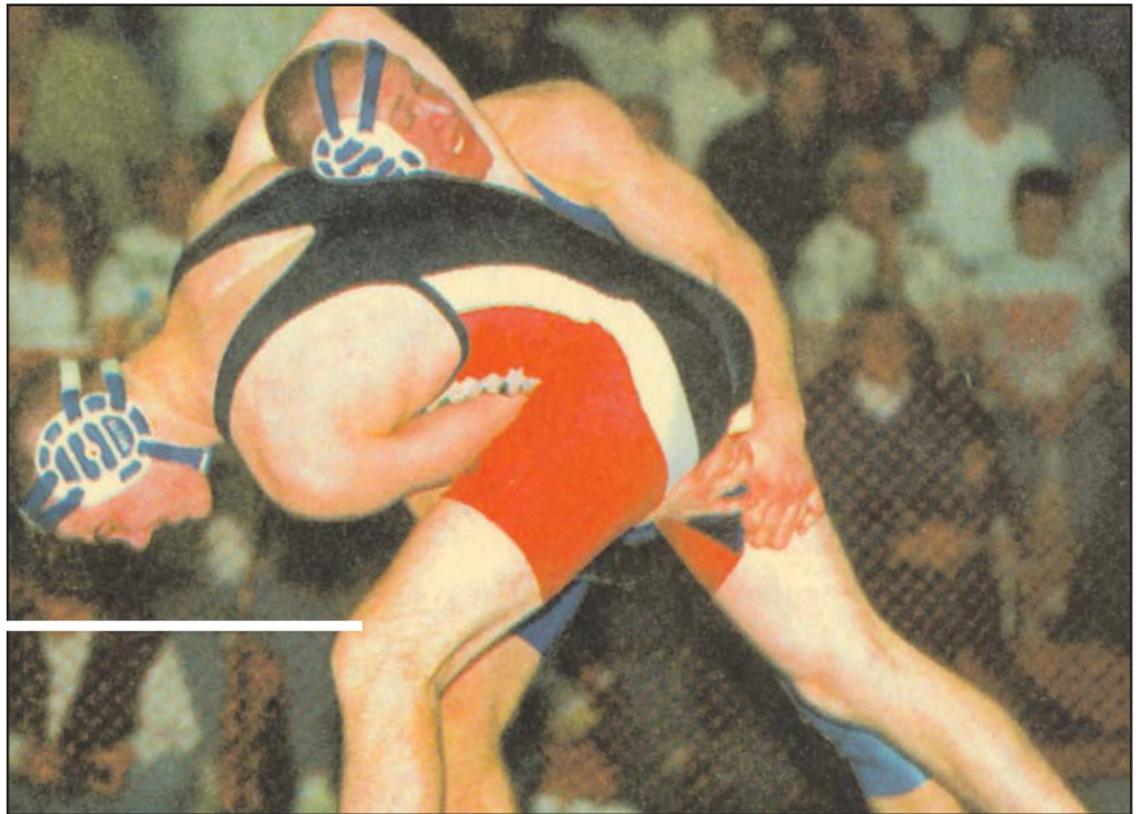
"You have to be disciplined, but that's one of the things that's great about wrestling," he said. "When everybody else is chowing down on garbage, you have to eat that salad. You might really want to eat that cookie, but you can't have it. It takes discipline to go to bed at 8:00 at night when your friends are going out, but that's because you have to run at five in the morning. It's all about discipline."

It paid off. His first varsity loss came in the Class LL quarterfinals in his sophomore year. His second loss came at the state open in a 2-1 decision against an opponent that went on to the finals of the New England championships. His third loss came as a result of an injury default that ended his state open run.

Over his three year varsity career Lee's only losses came in postseason bouts even though he found himself battling against bigger wrestlers, state champions, and New England powers. Two losses were concussion-related. One was a disqualification for an illegal slam in a bout that he was dominating. One came against the eventual state open champion. Another came against a New England finalist. It was only his last one—the sixth one—that was avoidable.

"It's very rare that you get a kid that comes in and is that dominant at such an early age, and he was dominant all the way through," said Dion. "It was a combination of strength or speed, but it was mainly his positioning. You just couldn't get him out of it. There are kids that are strong in the weight rooms, but he wrestled strong. He did that with good position."

It also came from an iron will. As a junior Lee said that he was more tentative, consciously guarding his undefeated season, but he managed to cruise into the postseason as the No. 2 seed in the 152-pound weight class. He cruised to the finals and captured his first of two division titles with a 36-second pin in the championship round. He went on to the semifinals at the state open, losing to New Fairfield wrestler Jeff McAveney in a 6-5



FILE PHOTO

Bill Lee wrestles New Fairfield wrestler Jeff McAveney on his way to capture the 152-pound title at the 1999 State Open championship. With the victory Lee became the first Blue Knight to win at the open meet.

Southington Sports Hall of Fame

Inside the Numbers

Overall record 122-6

- Dual meet record 87-0 (Undefeated in the regular season).
 - 67 pins, 15 forfeits
- Career winning pct. of .953 (School record, 17th in CT).
 - Class LL champion (1998, 1999).
 - State Open champion (1999).
- 3 varsity letters (1997, 1998, 1999).
- All-Conference (1997, 1998, 1999).
 - All-State (1998, 1999).
 - All-New England (1998).
- Highest finish at New England meet for any Southington High School wrestler (2nd, 1999).

College

- Wrestled at Sacred Heart University.
- Went 5-5 as a freshmen but suffered career-ending injury.

Coaching

- Assistant coach at Southington High School (2002-present).

decision.

"I wrestled him three times in high school, and it was always at the state opens. He was the one that I lost my first match to, and it was a close match in my junior year, too," said Lee. "It was tied with something like 40 seconds left in the third. I was on top, and I let him up. I wanted to take him down, but he was able to fight it off."

McAveney and Lee remained as arch-rivals throughout their careers. Lee avenged the state open loss with an overtime win in the New England tournament during a campaign that carried Lee into the final bout of the regional meet. At the time, Lee was just the second Blue Knight to win a bout at the

regional meet and his second place finish still remains as the best for any Southington wrestler.

Lee was just getting started. As a senior, he dispatched his regular season opponents with relative ease. He cruised through the brackets to win his second straight Class LL title, and he zeroed in on McAveney for their final match-up in the state open championship bout.

"At that point, I didn't think that my career meant anything until I won the opens," he said. "There were a lot of guys that fell in the finals. I wanted to be the first one. I didn't think it meant anything unless I did."

This time, Lee left no question. He tossed McAveney all over the

mat, nearly pinning him twice to earn an 11-5 win before he leapt into the arms of his coach. The state open title was the first by any Southington wrestler.

"We had worked together, one-on-one, quite a bit to try to develop a shot to add to his upper body assault," said Dion. "He went out there and hit it immediately. He got him onto his back for five [points]. He did it again a few minutes later, and got him onto his back for five more and pretty much dominated from there on out. It was a fun night. It was one of the best nights that we've ever had as a coaching staff."

Lee was never able to duplicate that 1999 run. He was upset in the opening round at the New England championship. He went on to Sacred Heart University, worked his way on to the varsity roster as a freshman, and battled to an early 5-5 record before ending his career with yet another concussion on the mat.

But he never strayed too far from the sport. He returned to the Southington High School gym as a practice opponent and moved into the coaching ranks where he's served since 2002. Now, he tries to instill his sense of discipline and goal-setting to the next generation of Blue Knight wrestlers.

"It doesn't matter what kind of wrestler they become. It matters what kind of men they become," said Lee. "I want them to have a good head on their shoulders and know how to work hard. That's what I got out of this sport, and that's what I want for them."

Perhaps that's why the Southington Sports Hall of Fame selection committee chose Lee as the youngest member to be inaugurated the local sports hall of fame. On Thursday, Nov. 8, he was honored in an induction ceremony at the Aqua Turf Club in Plantsville.

"I'm still excited about it because it means something," said Lee. "I've seen the guys and the teams that have been inducted before me. You know the names. You know what they did. To have only two classes ahead of me, to be in the third one, is pretty incredible. I'm extremely honored."

Sports Hall of Fame

Living here in 'Allen'-town

Cris Allen fought for respect and shattered records

By JOHN GORALSKI
SPORTS WRITER

When a coach discovers an athlete with an extraordinary work ethic, it's like striking gold. Finding an athlete with superior talent can be just as rare. Ask any coach what it's like to find both in the same player, and he'll probably shrug his shoulders and sigh.

It's a one-of-a-kind athlete for sure, and that's how former Southington High School baseball coach John Fontana describes third baseman Cris Allen.

Hall of Fame

"Some people are born with it. Look at Carl Pavano. Nobody could have taught him to do what he did for us. He came out of his mother's womb being able to pitch," he said. "Cris Allen was something else. He had some God-given ability, but he had an incredible work ethic, too. Nobody could have worked harder than he did."

Allen arrived at the high school in the mid-1980s at a time when Southington was changing fast. It was no longer a small farming community. Housing developments were already choking open spaces. Southington was becoming a blue collar town, and Allen was the perfect blue collar Knight.

When scouts called him slow as a high school junior, he trained as a sprinter. He spent the off-season running 80 yard sprints and running up the hill on Lanning Street. He spent hours in the gym and practicing drills.

When the scouts returned for his senior season, Allen had chipped almost two seconds off his time in the 60-yard dash.

"I struggled my whole life," he said. "I did start as a sophomore at Southington High School, but it didn't really come easy. I think that the hard work just started to pay off for me."

Few athletes trained as hard. Long before athletes started to focus year round on a sport, Allen turned his focus to baseball. He gave up football after the midget leagues and gave up basketball when he left DePaolo Junior High School.

For the next three years, Allen became a fixture on the high school diamond. He spent every day honing his craft. His father, a former minor league pitcher with the Boston Braves organization, would throw batting practice until the shadows settled on the field.

"He'd come down with his father and they used to be in the batting cages all day. That kid used to wait all day for his father to come home," Fontana said. "He was the only one that I ever gave a key to our shed because he used to come here every day with his father. They'd grab the baseballs and helmets, and they'd go right over to the batting cages for hours."

Fontana wasn't one to promote underclassmen to his varsity team, but it was impossible to ignore Allen's skills. As a sophomore, he could drive rockets into



Southington Sports Hall of Fame

Inside the Numbers

- Member of USA Pan-American Games Team (1987).
- Silver medalist with Team USA at the International Harbour Tournament in Taiwan (1987).
 - Played in the Cape Cod Baseball League
- Drafted by the Toronto Blue Jays (1985), the Baltimore Orioles (1988), and the California Angels (1989).
 - Signed with the Angels (1989).
- Inducted into the SHS Baseball Hall of Fame (1992).
- Inducted into the FSC Athletics Hall of Fame (2006).

SHS Baseball

- Earned 3 varsity letters (1983, 1984, 1985).
 - Captain and Team MVP (1985).
 - All-conference (1984, 1985).
 - All-state (1984, 1985).
 - All-American (1985).
 - Senior All Star Game (1985).
- Batting average of .420 in 1984 and .443 in 1985.
- Finished with 15 doubles, 7 home runs, and 136 runs.
 - Holds SHS record for career RBIs (74).

Southern Florida College Baseball

- Earned 4 varsity letters (1986-1989).
- Member of 1988 NCAA Division II Championship team.
- Sunshine State Conference Champs (1986, 1988, 1989).
 - American Baseball Coaches Association 3rd Team All-American (1987).
 - First team All-South Region (1986, 1987).
 - Second team All-South Region (1988, 1989).
- First Team All-Sunshine State Conference (1986-1988).
 - Second Team All-SSC conference (1989).
- Holds the NCAA Division II record for walks (200).
 - Owned 10 school records at graduation.
- Currently holds the career records for runs (258), doubles (67), triples (25), RBI (245), total bases (483), and walks (200).
 - Currently holds single game record for hits (6).
 - Career Batting Average was .348.

the outfield no matter who was pitching. He would line up behind the grass at third base during fielding warm-ups, and Fontana said that his throws to first base would whistle through the air.

"It was incredible," he said. "He would throw long toss with Rob Dibble when Dibble would come to town, and they would stand with one on the left field foul pole and one on the right field foul pole. They would throw the whole width of the field, and they would throw bullets—no lobbing."

Success came quickly. He earned a spot on the all-conference roster in all three years with the Knights. He was named as an all-state infielder in his junior and senior seasons and was named all-American in 1985.

"He was one of the bright stars, for sure," said Jim Senich, a former sports writer for *The Southington Observer*. "He had a gun for an arm, and he could really hit the ball solid. He'd hit line drives in the gaps. He could run, too. He had the whole game."

Allen batted .420 as a junior in 1984, and went .443 at the plate as a senior. He finished his high school career with 15 doubles, seven home runs, and 136 runs scored. He still holds the Blue Knight record with 74 career RBIs.

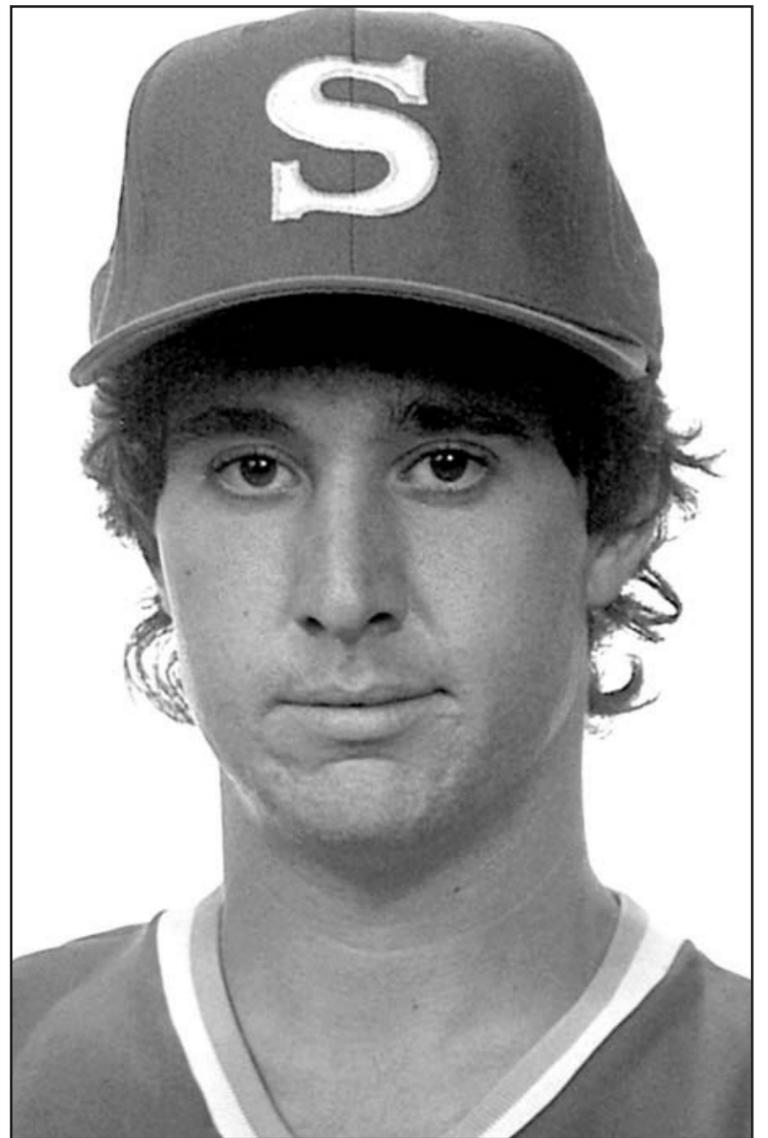
"The worst thing about Cris Allen was that nobody wanted to pitch to him. Most of the time, he would never see a fast ball, so sometimes he would have a tendency to go out of the strike zone to try to get his pitch," said Fontana. "He's the type of guy that, if you got him out three times in a row, he'd get up there and hit the fourth one 385 feet. He'd make you pay for any mistake."

Allen shrugs off the compliment. Instead, he gives credit to his teammates.

"I can't tell you anything about those records, other than the fact that the first and second hitters were doing their job," he said. "I can remember Mike Majeski was the first hitter, and he could fly. If he got a hit, I can bet that he was on second or third by the time that I got up to bat. I don't think that hurt a lot."

On the other hand, Allen was so dominant it took just one call from Fontana to secure a full scholarship at Florida Southern College. The Moccasins were coming off of an NCAA Division II national championship in 1985 and went on to beat the division I champion in a best-of-three series. Without even seeing him swing a bat, they offered Allen a full scholarship.

"I remember my father telling



COURTESY OF FLORIDA SOUTHERN COLLEGE

Former Blue Knight standout Cris Allen still ranks among the top 10 in Florida Southern College history in 16 different individual categories.

me that a small school was a good thing, and I don't think I would have done as well in one of those 30,000 or 40,000 student schools," he said. "When you look for great opportunities, this was one from the best baseball school in the country. It was a small school, and I wasn't paying anything to go there. I didn't need to look any further."

Once again, Allen said that it didn't come easily. Once again, he worked his way onto the varsity lineup as a rookie. He led the team in hitting during his freshman pre-season. On opening day, he was named to the starting lineup.

"You're either 100 percent in, playing that sport and working every day on it, or you're just playing to have fun," he said. "I think you're born with some of the abilities, but over a period of time you can work really hard to accomplish it. To make it at the next level, you have to be beyond dedicated."

Once again, success came quickly. Along the way Allen set 10 school records, and he still holds the program record for runs (258), doubles (67), triples (25), RBI (245), total bases (483), and walks (200). He still holds a single game record for hits (6), and his 200 career walks still stands as the the NCAA Division II record.

Along the way, Allen helped lift his team to three conference titles. He was an all-conference selection in each of his varsity seasons. Allen averaged .348 as a college player and helped lift his team to national title in 1988.

"In the first two games, we pretty much conquered our competition. Before you knew it, we were playing a team from

[California Polytechnic State University]. They were a tough team, but we beat them to win the World Series," he said. "It was a great moment that I'll never forget. It was probably one of the best sports moments I've ever experienced."

During the off-seasons, Allen continued to hone his craft. In the summers, he played in the prestigious Cape Cod Baseball League. He was a member of the 1987 USA Pan-American Games baseball team and won a silver medal as a member of Team USA at the 1987 International Harbour Tournament in Taiwan.

It was no surprise that he was drafted by the Orioles after his junior year. In fact, he was drafted three times by a Major League Baseball organization. After high school, he was drafted by the Toronto Blue Jays. After college, he was drafted by the California Angels. He signed with the Angels in 1989 before walking away from the game.

"I look back and, boy, when things were going great in my junior and senior years in high school and through college, it was fun," he said. "I would love to go back and relive those five or six years. It was just a great time with the competitions and friendships. The coaches, the recognition, and everything else were something that I won't forget."

With his dominance in high school and college, it was no surprise that Allen was selected to represent the town in the Southington Sports Hall of Fame. On Thursday, Nov. 8, he was inducted in a ceremony at the Aqua Turf in Plantsville.

Sports Hall of Fame

Majestic Majeski

Dave Majeski still loves the challenge

By JOHN GORALSKI
SPORTS WRITER

It's been more than 25 years since Dave Majeski called John Fontana back to third base during a regular season game, but the former high school coach still smiles when he tells the story.

Majeski topped a baseball but beat the throw to first base. On the next one, the sophomore stole second. On the third pitch, he stole third. Fontana signaled timeout to talk to his brash underclassman. "I told him to stay put at third base, but he called me back as I walked back to the dugout," said the coach. "What is it?" I asked.

Majeski smiled a devilish grin. "Even a long fly ball for a base hit?"

Hall of Fame

"That was him. He was a joker, but he was just a great athlete," said Fontana. "People might dispel this, but he was the only guy—the only guy—that I never put a steal sign out for. I let him decide for himself. I had a lot of good runners, but this kid was something else."

Majeski remembers their relationship differently. Sure, his coach allowed him to run. Why wouldn't he? Majeski set a single season record with 30 stolen bases as a sophomore and graduated with a record 63 steals, but Majeski doesn't remember any freedom when it came to stealing.

"Sure, I had the green light to go haphazardly, but when I'd come into the dugout Coach Fontana and Coach [Joe] Daddio would be there asking me why I went on that pitch," he said. "They'd tell me if I should have gone on another one. It was such a teaching situation even though I had a green light."

From the start Majeski was a student of the game, and Fontana said he would have made a good coach long before he graduated high school. But Majeski wasn't ready to hang up his glove. He was the rare mix of intensity, talent, knowledge...and a good sense of humor. The 155-pounder might not have turned heads with his size, but facing him at the plate was like trying to stop a runaway train.

"He could run. He could field, and he had just a hell of an arm from the outfield," said Fontana. "He was a guy that was so baseball knowledgeable that you never had to tell him anything. If he came up and there were no outs with a man on first and second, you would never have to put a bunt on. He would bunt on his own because he would do whatever he was supposed to do to win a game. He always made good decisions."

In an era of upperclassmen, Majeski worked his way into the lineup as a sophomore. He worked his way into the University of Florida lineup as a freshman. He credits his 'Little Man Syndrome.' Opponents credit his talent, but it came down to dedication.

As a kid, Majeski would play pick-up games with his siblings. He'd travel to New Britain in the winter to take batting practice at the YMCA. In college, he would steal down to the field every chance he got. His success in the steroid era was no accident.



Southington Sports Hall of Fame

Inside the Numbers

- Drafted by Clevelan Indians and Milwaukee Brewers.
- Signed to the Milwaukee Brewers (1992).
- SHS Baseball Hall of Fame (1994).

SHS Baseball

- Three varsity letters (1985, 1986, 1987).
- All-State (1988).
- All Conference (1987, 1988).
- Team MVP (1988).
- Selected to the Senior All Star Game (1988).
- Ranked 2nd in single season batting avg. (.560 in 1988).

SET 4 SINGLE SEASON SCHOOL RECORDS

- Holds records in runs (42 in 1988), doubles (18 in 1988), total bases (218 in 1988), and stolen bases (30 in 1985).

SET 5 CAREER SCHOOL RECORDS

- Holds records in runs (80), doubles (28), total bases (442), stolen bases (63), and consecutive times on base (15)

SHS Basketball

- Three varsity letters (1984-1985, 1985-1986, 1986-1987)
- Led the team in offensive rebounds, steals, and turnovers in 1985-1986.

University of Florida Baseball

- Four varsity letters (1989-1992).
- Member of the 1992 NCAA tournament runner up team.
- Ranked 5th in games played (242), 8th in at bats (812), and 10th in runs scored (186).
- Career batting average of .323.
- Increased his batting average every season (.258 in 1989, .314 in 1990, .333 in 1991, and .342 in 1992).
- Second team all-conference in the SEC (1992).
- SEC all-tournament team selection (1992).
- Holds the school record for most career hits in the SEC Tournament (21 from 1989-92).
- Tied for school record for most career runs in the SEC Tournament (13).
- Holds the school record for most runs in a single season of the SEC Tournament (7 in 1991).

Coaching

- Owner of the Sweet Spot Hitting Facility in Greenville, SC.
- Gainesville Sun Coach of the Year (1998).
- 1995-1998—Baseball coach at Eastside HS, Gainesville, FL.
- 1998-2001—Baseball Coach at Santa Fe HS, Alachua, FL.
- 2002—Volunteer Assistant/Interim Assistant Softball Coach at the University of Florida.
- 2001-2003—Assistant softball coach at the Univ. of Florida.
- 2003-2011—Softball coach at Presbyterian College.

"On my lunch hour, I'd grab the towel boy and have him put balls on the tee for me for hours on end. On midnight study breaks, I'd got down to the field with my college roommate and hit over and over," he said. "It didn't come easy, but I wouldn't change a thing. I was at a place where the weather was great. You could play year-round, and Florida had the type of money to provide everything you needed. I was always a skinny kid with something to prove."

His statistics serve as proof. In high school, Majeski set 4 single-season records and 5 career marks. He set the single season steals record as a sophomore. He set the record for runs (42), doubles (18), and total bases (218) as a senior. Nobody collected more total bases (442), runs (80), doubles (28), or stolen bases. As a junior, he reached base 15 consecutive times—another record, and his batting average in 1988 (.560) was the

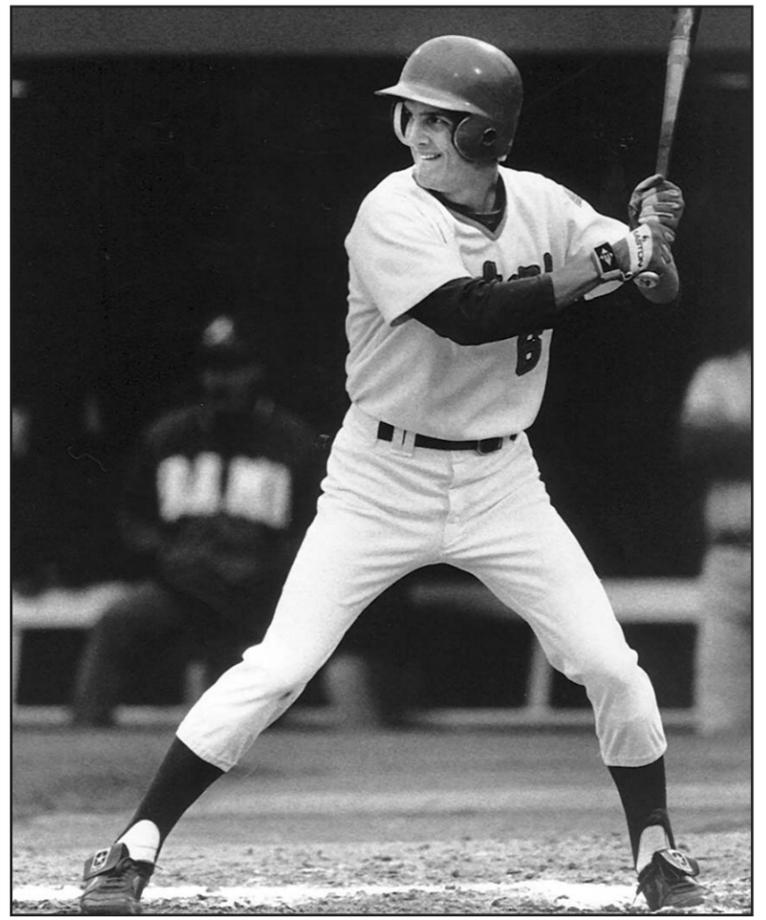
best by any Southington player except for Mike Mauro (.567).

It was no surprise that college coaches beat down the door. Fontana said more than 70 programs offered scholarships. The Gators won the bidding war, and Majeski secured a rare five-year contract from a division one program coming off the program's first College World Series appearance.

Once again, Majeski made a quick rise to the top. In his freshman year two senior outfielders left the field with injuries, and Majeski was thrust into the upperclassman lineup. He held his own as Florida battled atop the NCAA rankings.

"It was trial by fire. The seniors were used to so much success, and here comes this smiling kid from Connecticut," he said. "I had to learn quickly and produce quickly."

Majeski embraced the challenge and worked his way up to leadoff as a junior. He led Florida back to the NCAA tournament and



COURTESY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

Since exploding onto the local scene as a sophomore in 1985, Dave Majeski, above with the University of Florida, has never been too far from the diamond.

still ranks in the top 10 for games played (242), hits (262), at bats (812), and runs (186). Each season, his average improved from .258 in 1989 to .314 as a sophomore, .333 as a junior, and .342 as a senior. He finished his college career with 90 RBI, 34 doubles, eight triples, 116 walks, and six home runs.

He still holds three postseason records for the Gators with most hits (21) and runs (13) in the SEC Tournament. His 7 scores in the 1991 SEC Tournament is still the most for a Florida player in a single year. It was no surprise that Majeski was drafted by the Cleveland Indians and the Milwaukee Brewers in different Major League drafts, and it was no surprise that he signed to a minor league contract with the Brewers in 1992.

The surprise came when Majeski—at the top of his game—decided to leave his playing days behind him. He said it was a tough decision, but he has never really questioned it. He chose family.

"There were a couple of years after I left that I'd be watching the pros and see some of the guys I played with or against," he said. "I'd think that I was better than that guy. I worked harder than that one, or I could hit better than that one. But I didn't really second guess myself."

Majeski didn't really retire. This was the start of his second career that has carried him to the present. His high school coach said that Majeski was would have made a good coach as a teenager, and he was ready to fulfill that promise. He led Eastside High School to their best record in 12 years before moving to Santa Fe High School and leading that program to district titles from 1998-2001. In 1998, Majeski was selected as the coach of the year by the Gainesville Sun.

"I liked to help other kids develop and chase their dreams," he said. "I was lucky enough to find a new way to enjoy the sport."

Once again, Majeski's star was on the rise. Once again, his strong commitment to family caused him to reassess his goals. He left coaching to spend more time with his

family but was called back to the diamond six months later when a newspaper notice for a charity softball tournament caught his eye.

The Gators were challenging local sportscasters and players to a celebrity game. Majeski registered for the contest and settled himself into a spot late in the order to study the pitcher. He noticed that she made each batter swing foolishly at a few pitches before lobbing a hittable ball. By the time he stepped to the plate, Majeski had a plan.

He launched the first pitch over the outfield fence and into a distant lake. The coach invited him to a practice and soon offered him a position on her staff.

"I just jumped right in and taught the kids everything I know," he said. "It didn't take long for us to start seeing some results, and that's how I got into it. It was the right place at the right time I guess."

He spent a few years on the Gator staff before a one-year stint in Memphis. In 2003, he was hired as the head softball coach at Presbyterian College. He led the team to a 30-16 record in his first season and helped the team jump to NCAA Division I competition.

Armed with his threefold coaching philosophy designed to help his players become better people, learn the game, and raise expectations, Majeski led the team to 21 wins in 2010 and eclipsed that mark with a 28-20-1 record and an overall record of 112-120-1 when he resigned from Presbyterian College at the end of the 2011 season.

Since then, Majeski has switched his focus to his growing business, the Sweet Spot Hitting Facility in Greenville, S.C.

"It's a lot of work, but there are a lot of kids that want to be good hitters," he said. "I'm having fun. Where else do you get to act like a two-year-old and kids keep coming back? Life is good. The hours and money are good, but most importantly I get to see my girls play ball."

It's no surprise that Majeski was selected to be inducted into the Southington Sports Hall of Fame. He was inducted at the Aqua Turf on Nov. 8.

Sports Hall of Fame

Hall of Fame announces Class of 2012

Eleanor DellaVecchia will receive special recognition as a fan of the Knights

By JOHN GORALSKI
SPORTS WRITER

For more than a century, Eleanor DellaVecchia followed her beloved Yankees as they collected 27 World Series titles, but family and friends find it more than just a coincidence that the Bronx Bombers haven't won a single title since she passed away in 2009.

If it wasn't for fans, sports couldn't exist. Without their cheers, there'd be no home field advantage. That's why members of the Southington Sports Hall of Fame committee decided to recognize the efforts of the town's biggest supporters.

This is the third time that the committee will honor the town's best athletes, coaches, media members, and boosters, but this will be the first time that they'll give a special honor to a Southington fan.

Hall of Fame

As much as DellaVecchia loved her Yankees, she loved her Knights even more. This fall, the committee will honor the town's biggest supporter with a special letter of recognition.

"We have some committee members that are 15 years out of high school and others that are over 50 years out of high school, and each one of us seems to have a story about how we used to see her on the sidelines," said Southington Sports Hall of Fame Chairman Dennis J. Stanek, Jr. "She used to love to watch sports—all sports across the board in every season—so we wanted to recognize the fact that we appreciate the support that our fans have given us over the years. And we want that recognition to be public."

DellaVecchia was born in Southington in 1908, passed away at the age of 101, and followed athletics until the very end. She was a Blue Knight fan before they were even called the Blue Knights. She was a fixture at sporting events from basketball

“We thought it would be a great way to recognize somebody outside the normal scope of a hall of fame. She was an unabashed fan—a true fan—that supported both men and women's sports through thick and thin.”

”

Dennis J. Stanek, Jr.,
Southington Sports Hall of Fame Chairman

to soccer to wrestling. She was an avid fan during her childrens' varsity careers but cheered just as loudly for her grandchildren, her great grandchildren, and their neighbors. She was a fixture in the crowd when she had no relatives playing the game, and at her funeral donations were made to the Eleanor DellaVecchia SHS Athletic Scholarship fund.

There was no question that she would be the first recipient for this special award.

and women's sports through thick and thin. She supported teams in good seasons and bad seasons. She wasn't one of those people that only came when a team made a run at a title. I can remember her back in the 1980s. She would come out to see field hockey when that was a new sport. She was everywhere.”

DellaVecchia will join a list of eleven former athletes, a coach, a booster, two teams, and a posthumous inductee when the committee inducts its third class to the Southington Sports Hall of Fame. The list of athletes includes Jen Gombotz-

Mikowski, Tracy Ciosek-Beloin, Rob Thomson, Andy Meade, Frazer Pehmoller, Bill Lee, Dave Majeski, Chris Allen, Rick Black, Joe Llodra, Peter Gulli, and the late Phil D'Agostino. Joe LaPorte will be recognized for his off-field contributions.

Former Southington High School softball coach Joe Piazza will be inducted along with his 1987 championship team, and the undefeated 1954 football team will become the second gridiron program to be entered into the hall of fame.

Stanek said that this group stacks up well with the last two classes.

“It might have been even more difficult to pare down the field this year because there are still so many deserving people,



SUBMITTED

Players came and went. Coaches arrived and retired, but Eleanor DellaVecchia was always there. The Southington Sports Hall of Fame would be incomplete without Southington's biggest fan.

but we went through each sport and looked through the statistics to find those athletes, coaches, boosters, and media members that are on the upper crust of local sports,” he said. “Because teams like football have a much longer history than other sports like volleyball, we're still playing catch-up with some of the athletes from the last 50 years, and that proves to be quite challenging.”

The class was inducted on Thursday, Nov. 8 at an award dinner at the Aqua Turf Club in Plantsville. Once again, fans get

to cheer for their favorite players. Now, the players get to cheer for their favorite fan.

“This is a great thing and a great asset to the town,” said Stanek. “I've heard the comment many times that this is something that's long overdue with the rich history and tradition that we've had over the decades. We have people that have contributed in all aspects to our town's success. From starting athletes to coaches or trainers or fans, many people have contributed to Southington sports.”

Even the fans.



“We thought it would be a great way to recognize somebody outside the normal scope of a hall of fame,” said Stanek. “She was an unabashed fan—a true fan—that supported both men

Sports Hall of Fame

Southington's strongest man

Frazer Pehmoeller started with the shot put and finished with a stone

By JOHN GORALSKI
SPORTS WRITER

The thunder from 30,000 cheering fans seemed to fade into white noise as Frazer Pehmoeller took his first step across the New Hampshire field. His arms strained from the 670-pound load that hung from his clenched fists. His vision narrowed to his eldest daughter in the distance as she waved him toward his goal.

The first step was for the doctors that helped him overcome a debilitating bone disease in his youth. The second was for his Southington coaches that nursed him back to health at Memorial Pool. He took a steps for his high school teammates, his college teammates, his parents, his friends, and his daughters, but the last one he took for the world.

It was one small step for mankind, but it was a giant step for Pehmoeller. With a 99-foot walk, the boy that spent two years on crutches in elementary school had walked into a new world record at the Scottish Highland Games.

Hall of Fame

For a brief moment in the mid-1990s, Pehmoeller was the strongest man on earth.

"If I knew that I was that close to 100," he said with a laugh, "I would have probably broken a finger trying to make it there."

Few athletes are as accomplished or as relatively unknown as Frazer Pehmoeller. He holds the two oldest track & field records at the high school, but it's only been a couple of years that his records were displayed in the high school cafeteria. His records at the junior high schools have been long lost in the decades since the 1970s. His indoor track records at the high school still eclipse the record holders by feet rather than inches, but his exploits aren't official since they predate the official varsity team.

He set town records in discus and shot put. He set college records at UConn and set world records in the Scottish Highland Games. Pehmoeller is in a class of his own.

"He is the best kid ever," said former Blue Knight track & field coach Pete Sepko. "He is a really nice human being. He's a gentleman, and I've always been really proud of him as a kid and with what he did. It didn't come easy. He was such a hard worker, and he's the best thrower we've ever had."

Pehmoeller never set out to topple records. In fact, sports weren't a big part of his youth. Stricken by a rare bone marrow condition in his youth, he spent his time recuperating while his friends were honing their skills in local youth leagues. When he tried out for the junior high teams Pehmoeller didn't make the cut, but he didn't let that stop him.

"I actually tried out for the baseball team but that didn't go too successfully," he said. "Then, I saw these big guys running around the old football field at DePaolo, and I figured I might as well try what they were doing. I had no idea what a shot put was or a discus or



SUBMITTED

Frazer Pehmoeller climbed to No. 5 in the world in the Scottish Games. Pehmoeller still owns the two oldest track & field records at Southington High School.

anything."

At the time, Southington was already known for their throwers with Dean and Danny Angels setting records at the high school while Pehmoeller was chasing their records in the junior high. They were approaching the 60-foot barrier, and Pehmoeller was closing in.

By the time he arrived at the high school, Pehmoeller was ready to challenge their standards.

"I just got through a good group of throwers that were throwing 58'8" and 57'7"," said Sepko. "I remember thinking, 'How am I going to top that?' In through the door walks Frazer Pehmoeller, and he threw 60 feet within two or three years of them."

Few athletes trained as hard as he did. Pehmoeller's practices stretched until sunset. He spent the off-season in the gym and running sprints on the track. As a sophomore, he caught the shot put competition by surprise with a second place finish in the state competition. That was the start of his dominance in the sport.

"We worked out a lot together in the weight room, and he kept getting better," said Sepko. "Every year he got stronger, and he got faster. A lot of people think that you just have to be strong to throw that far, but you have to be fast, too. He always took pride in bringing down his 50 yard dash time. He came down every year. He wasn't just getting stronger. He was getting faster."

As a senior, Pehmoeller finally broke through. He snapped the 60-foot barrier in the shot put. He shattered the school records in shot put (60'10") and discus (175'3"). When the smoke cleared, he had earned two state titles in shot put and one in discus. Suddenly, scouts from across the

college ranks descended upon the Southington native.

"It was pretty cool. I grew up in a family where my grandfather, my father, and even my brothers were electrical contractors, so there was a path set for me in the electrical business," he said. "What throwing allowed me to do is be the black sheep and go out to do what I wanted to do."

Pehmoeller took the process seriously, interviewing the coaches as much as they were interviewing him. He settled upon UConn because they offered him a course of studies that held his interest, and the coaches stressed kinetic training rather than chemical shortcuts.

"One of the biggest concerns for me as a thrower was steroids," he said. "Back then, they were so prevalent in the college realm, and I didn't want to have anything to do with them. You really had to question coaches and feel them out because there was a lot of pressure if they took an athlete like me."

It turned out to be a good decision. Pehmoeller went on to letter eight times with four years on the indoor and outdoor teams. He became one of the most versatile throwers in school history, competing in all four throwing events.

"I ended up being more of a jack-of-all-trades in college even though I wasn't much of a javelin thrower in high school," he said. "Basically, with the shot you don't want to throw the javelin, but since I had some decent throws in high school, they ended up having me throw it in college. I remember being at a Big East championship in Villanova, and I threw the shot put, discus, hammer, and javelin."

Along the way, Pehmoeller collected four Big East titles in the throws. In the training room, he set



Southington Sports Hall of Fame

Inside the Numbers

- 1979 graduate of Southington High School.
- Earned a full track & field scholarship to UConn.
- Won 2 gold medals in discus at the Empire State Games (2005, 2007).

Southington High School Outdoor Track

- Earned 3 varsity letters (1977, 1978, 1979).
- Track Captain (1978, 1979).
- Placed second at Class LL meet in shot put (1977).
- Won shot put at Class LL championships (1978, 1979).
- Won discus at Class LL championships (1979).
- Owns the 2 oldest track records at SHS.
- Holds the school record in discus (175'3" in 1979).
- Holds the school record in shot put (60'10" in 1979).
- Had state record in shot put in 1979 (since broken)

Southington High School Basketball

- Earned 2 varsity letters (1976-77, 1977-78)

UConn Track & Field

- Earned 4 varsity letters in indoor track (1979-80, 1980-81, 1981-82, 1982-83).
- Earned 4 varsity letters in outdoor track (1980, 1981, 1982, 1983).
- Won 4 gold medals at the Big East Championships.
- Set a school record in shot put (since broken).
- Set the UConn squat record (1,250 lbs, since broken).

International Scottish Highland Games

- Held the American record in the Sheaf toss.
- Held the World record in the Strong man walk.
- Ranked No. 5 in the world in the overall competition (1995)

Coaching

- Arlington High School (NY) throwing coach (2003-2009).
- Coached two nationally ranked athletes (2004, 2005).

a school record in squats, and a record in the shot put that stood for more than a decade.

"I had a great coach in college, and he was a kinesiologist. He would say that an event like the shot put had about 5,000 things that you could do right or wrong on every single throw," he said. "The goal was to do more things right than wrong. If you did that, you were a really good thrower."

Pehmoeller didn't quench his thirst for competition by the end of his NCAA career, but it was a couple of years later that he finally found a way to compete. His cousin told him about the Scottish Highland Games, and he packed his car for a road trip to Loon Mountain in New Hampshire.

"I had no idea what I was in for. I didn't even know what kind of shoes to wear. I had never even seen it before," he said. "I showed up and found out the first day was for professionals and the second day was for amateurs. I was there for the first day with a borrowed kilt from my secretary."

In his first competition, Pehmoeller captured the stone throwing event, but he quickly learned that the other six events were more of a challenge. Slowly but surely, he began to rise in the rankings. By the mid-1990s, he was ranked fifth in the world.

Along the way, he set a new American record in the Sheaf toss,

an event that requires a pitchfork to hurl a burlap bag stuffed with straw over a horizontal bar. He set the world record in the Strong Man walk (99 feet) that shattered the former record (80 feet). A few years later, he decided to retire.

"You were moving something like two tons of weight on any given day," he said. "It used to take me two days to recover. Once it got to two weeks, I called it quits. I never had an injury, so I felt I was pretty lucky. The younger guys were coming up with sponsors like Power Bar. Here I was an executive doing this as a weekend warrior."

Since his retirement, Pehmoeller turned his attention to coaching. With his daughter's high school track team, Pehmoeller developed a pair of nationally ranked throwers. Between meets, he captured two gold medals at the Empire State Games, and he's been competing as a cyclist in races up to 600 miles.

It was no surprise that Pehmoeller was selected to represent the town in the Southington Sports Hall of Fame. On Thursday, Nov. 8, he was inducted in a ceremony at the Aqua Turf.

"It's totally humbling," he said. "So many people had a lot invested in me over the years. I'm sure everybody says it, but I really mean it. You can't get to a point where you're recognized like this without a lot of help and support."

Sports Hall of Fame

A league of her own

Jen Gombotz-Mikowski raised the bar for every athlete at Southington High School

By JOHN GORALSKI
SPORTS WRITER

Coach Joe Piazza will never forget Jen Gombotz-Mikowski's first at bat against varsity pitching. It came in the mid-1980s during a summer travel game. With only eight players, he scanned the sidelines for a volunteer.

"There was no way that we were going to forfeit that game," said the former Lady Knight coach. "I said, 'Come on, Jen. You're playing.' We put her in the outfield, and she was only about five years old."

In the bottom of the inning, the terrified toddler stepped to the plate and fouled off a pitch or two before striking out against a varsity pitcher. "I knew right then that she was going to be good," said Piazza.

Hall of Fame

For fans, that was a fitting start to one of Southington's most storied sports careers because, right from the start, she was ahead of her time. By the time she arrived at the high school, the Lady Knights had already established a long line of female pioneers, but nothing could have prepared them for what was going to come next.

"She's probably one of the top five athletes to ever go through that high school, without a doubt—man or woman," said Lady Knight softball coach John Bores. "How many people make all-state eight times? And she would have done it more but the freshmen weren't at the high school yet. Every now and then you hear about someone who excels at two sports, but three sports? She was unbelievable."

The young superstar was in a league of her own. In elementary school she was driven away from the local softball league for being too good. She threw so fast that parents worried about the safety of other players.

"I think it worked out to my advantage because I ended up playing baseball all the way up through the town leagues," she said. "Until softball was offered at DePaolo, I played baseball with the boys."

She still worked on her pitching in the basement, throwing to her father and her siblings with wild pitches ricocheting through the rafters.

"I broke many lights in that basement, but that was my parents," she said. "They made sure that I could do whatever I wanted."

It wasn't just softball. In the winters, she worked her way up through the town basketball leagues to earn a place on the elite AAU rosters before picking up volleyball in junior high and returning to the softball circle.

"She's got just an incredible will to win, and she's just very determined," said Bores. "Back then they didn't have all those pitches like curveballs, drop curves, sliders, or screwballs. It was just fastballs spotted—high inside, low inside, outside. She was very powerful. There was no finesse. She just blew it by them."

At the end of each season, she moved on to the next one. She didn't need to specialize.



COURTESY OF PROVIDENCE COLLEGE

Jen Gombotz-Mikowski earned all-state honors in eight of nine varsity seasons before earning all-rookie honors in Big East basketball at Providence College.

"She was just a winner," said Piazza. "She had a natural ability and a competitive mindset. She always wanted to be the best at everything she did, and she worked as hard as anybody else during that season. Really the only sport that she put work into during the off-season was basketball."

As a freshman, she quickly leapfrogged upperclassmen for starting positions. She quickly rose to the top of scouting reports and the accolades came quickly.

In her first winter season, she was all-state in basketball. That spring, she was an all-state pitcher. In her nine high school seasons, she was all state in all but one. She did it twice in volleyball and three times in basketball and softball.

After graduation, she was recognized by the State of Connecticut as the Athlete of the Year because nobody—male or female—had ever received eight all-state awards.

"I was surprised when they contacted me that first time," she said. "Then, it set the goal for the next two years. How could you not be there the next year? You had to make sure you kept your numbers up. You didn't want to be the person that got it two years and were left off on their senior year."

The only thing that eluded her was a state title. Volleyball fell short in the 1995 state championship game. The 1996 Lady Knight basketball team came within one victory of the state title. It wasn't until the spring of her senior year that Gombotz-Mikowski finally broke through with a 24-0 record on the mound and a Class LL softball title.

"That was the level of expectation. Nothing less was accepted," she said. "The coaches instilled that in you, too. You weren't going to just win a game. You were going to dominate a conference or make

a run in the state tournament. First round or second round wasn't acceptable. You had to get to the semifinals and finals."

It's no surprise that college scouts began to appear on the sidelines and offers poured in from as far away as Hawaii. She pared her choice to Providence College and chose basketball as her sport.

She stormed into the NCAA division one community. Once again, she fought her way to the top as a freshman.

"College basketball is a job. They controlled everything in my life from what I ate to what I did," she said. "They weighed me in every week. They took body fat measurements every week. We had 4 o'clock in the morning workouts, and I'm not joking. If you wanted to be a guard, you had to run the mile under five minutes. That's tough when you're six feet tall. I had to train an extra hour and a half each day before my teammates showed up on the track."

Once again, she embraced the challenge. Once again, it didn't take long for her to claw her way to the top. As a freshman, she led the team in four categories, including points (308), rebounds (134), field goal attempts (283), and steals (44) on her way to being named to the Big East all-rookie team.

Over her four-year career, she averaged 10.4 points per game, 5.4 rebounds and just under two assists per game.

"Sometimes, I can't believe I actually played," she said. "Sometimes, it feels like it was so long ago. Other times, it feels like it was yesterday."

She even had chances to play multiple sports at the top collegiate levels. For her first two years at Providence, the softball coach offered to fly her down to spring



Southington Sports Hall of Fame

Inside the Numbers

- Named as the CT Athlete of the Year (1997).
- Earned a full scholarship to Providence College for women's -basketball.

Southington High School Volleyball

- Member of the Class L runner up volleyball team (1995).
- All-Conference (1994, 1995, 1996).
- All-State (1995, 1996).

Southington High School Basketball

- Recognized by Street & Smith as a pre-season all-American basketball player (1996-1997).
- Member of the Class LL runner up basketball team (1996).
- All-Conference (1994-95, 1995-96, 1996-97).
- All-State (1994-95, 1995-96, 1996-97).
- Team MVP (1995-96, 1996-97).
- Captain (1995-96, 1996-97).
- Scored 1,135 points (15.9 ppg) for her career.
- Set school records for rebounds (514), steals (234), and blocked shots (92).

Southington High School Softball

- Pitcher for the Class LL champion softball team (1997).
- All-Conference (1995, 1996, 1997).
- All-State (1995, 1996, 1997).
- Team MVP (1996, 1997).
- Captain (1996, 1997).
- Went 56-5 from 1995-1997 and went 24-0 in 1997.

Providence College Basketball

- Big East all-rookie basketball team (1997-98).
- Started in all but 2 varsity contests (1997-2001).
- Scored 1,133 points (10.4 points per game).
- Earned four varsity letters.

CAREER STATISTICS

YEAR	G/GS	FG	PCT	3P	PCT	FT/FTA	PCT	A	B	S	RB	PTS
1997-98	27/27	119	0.405	33	0.32	47/67	0.701	33	13	45	138	318
1998-99	27/25	78	0.299	18	0.217	46/65	0.708	49	13	39	137	220
1999-00	27/27	108	0.331	33	0.287	41/62	0.661	70	10	42	193	290
2000-01	28/28	108	0.352	25	0.225	64/97	0.66	63	15	49	124	305
Total	109/107	413	0.347	109	0.265	198/291	0.68	215	51	175	592	1133

Coaching VOLLEYBALL

- 2001-2003—Plainville High School (Varsity).
- 2004-2011—Newington High School (Varsity).

BASKETBALL

- 2001-2009—Plainville High School (Freshman).
- 2009-PRESENT—Plainville High School (Varsity).

SOFTBALL

- 2002-2007—Southington High School (Junior Varsity).
- 2008-PRESENT—Plainville High School (Varsity).

training the day after the basketball season came to a close.

"That's probably my biggest regret that I didn't try to play two sports," she said. "In my junior year, I had an opportunity to walk on to the volleyball team and I came this close to trying it. I don't regret not trying to play professionally. After four years, I was pretty much done psychologically with basketball. I still enjoyed it, but not as much as I did when I went into it. I was happy to be done and start teaching and coaching."

More than a decade has passed, and Gombotz-Mikowski is still active as a coach in multiple sports. She began her career coaching volleyball at Plainville after graduation before moving on to coach at Newington through the end of last season. She worked as an assistant softball coach at Southington High School for five years before taking over the reigns as head coach in Plainville. She still coaches basketball and softball at Plainville, and it probably won't be long before she returns to the sidelines in volleyball.

"I love coaching because you can see an athlete struggling with something, and you can help them to overcome it," she said. "You get an athlete as a freshman, and you

can see that they either don't know the game or they don't have confidence in themselves. Then, by the time they're a senior, you've watched them get awards like all-Conference. It's almost more rewarding to see your athletes do it than by doing it yourself."

It comes as no surprise to Bores. "She's a really good teacher. In Plainville, she didn't always have the best talent, but she was always patient and ready to teach them fundamentals," said Bores. "You would think that a kid with so much success as an athlete would not be able to lose. I give her a lot of credit. She's very, very patient."

With her career in high school, college, and coaching, Gombotz-Mikowski was an easy choice for the Southington Sports Hall of Fame. On Thursday, Nov. 8, she will be honored in a ceremony at the Aqua Turf.

"It's a great honor because you grow up in a town with such a great traditions past. You get to hear about all the athletes that came before you that have made such an impact. To be listed with some of them is just a great honor," she said. "I was crying when they came and told me. It was such a big part of my life, so it's nice to be recognized for it."

Sports Hall of Fame

If he builds it, they will come

Joe LaPorte has spent 4 decades building youth sports

By JOHN GORALSKI
SPORTS WRITER

One question can change your life. Just ask Joe LaPorte. In the late 1960s, he was standing in the shadows at Memorial Park, minding his own business while his son Dan raced around the bases during a Little League tryout. The coach sidled up to LaPorte with a devilish grin. "Can you help out?" he asked.

LaPorte watched the two dozen boys running around the field. Did he know what he was getting himself into? Probably not, but he rolled up his sleeves and jumped in.

"I said that I wasn't going to be one of those fathers that gets all involved, but then Danny got picked as a nine-year old," said LaPorte. "I didn't even want to get involved."

Hall of Fame

Two weeks later the coach was reassigned to second shift, LaPorte was thrust into the head coaching role, and it set in motion a career that has changed the town's landscape with countless construction projects, hundreds of fundraising drives, and thousands of meetings. He's spent 30 years on the Board of Park Commissioners and two terms on the Town Council.

That coaching job set the foundation for thousands of local athletes, and it all started with a simple question posed by his son's coach.

"Joe's the most amazing person that I've ever seen in the community. He's always giving of himself, and he's never afraid to challenge you," said John Fontana, a former classmate, teammate, and fellow park board member. "If he thinks that it's good for the kids of this town, he'll go to bat for them. You just can't stop him."

LaPorte quickly looked past his own players to the many other local kids that didn't have a chance to play Little League. With just two local programs, the competition for positions was fierce. Cutting players was heartbreaking, so LaPorte did what any good volunteer would do. He started another league.

He joined forces with Don Stepanek and Bill DellaVecchia. A small baseball field became available on Mill Street, and the trio scrambled to form a third local Little League. In 1970, the Western Little League opened its doors to create even more opportunities for Southington's kids.

Soon, the league outgrew their small field. LaPorte and DellaVecchia spearheaded a campaign to acquire a parcel of town land on Spring Street to develop a state-of-the-art complex. Armed with just \$6,000, the pair began the process of raising funds, gathering volunteers, and building the facility that houses the league today. LaPorte rolled up his sleeves and led the crusade.

"I thought he was retired back in those days because he was always around. I found out later that he was in sales, so he had the



SUBMITTED

For the past 40 years, Joe LaPorte has been orchestrating building projects and starting up leagues.

time to do it, but every afternoon he was there working," said DellaVecchia. "What can you say about Joe? When he gets into something, he's totally involved. That's what makes him what he is. When he takes on something, he doesn't do it half. He's 100 percent no matter what it is."

It quickly became clear that LaPorte was a great organizer, an excellent motivator, and wasn't afraid to jump in to any project. When his sons reached the high school, they turned to soccer. Once again, LaPorte saw a need for Southington's kids, and he began to talk about it with anyone who'd listen.

"I saw how far behind we were in soccer because we had no feeder program," he said. "Al Lederman was the Superintendent of Schools, and he had a kid growing up. He said that we should start a youth league. We went to West Hartford and sat in on some of their soccer league meetings. We got some ideas, and we started a soccer league in 1975."

It didn't bother LaPorte that he wasn't an expert at soccer or any other sport for that matter. He still championed himself as an all-conference batting practice catcher for his two years as a backup to the backup catcher in the early 1950s. It didn't matter that his sons were too old to benefit from a feeder program. It was a good idea, and that's all that mattered to LaPorte.

"Our rules were meant to get everyone involved," he said. "We shortened the fields because they were kids. We had substitutions, and we played quarters. Everybody had to play at least half the game provided that they went to the practice. There were no championships. There were no standings. There were no all-star games and no banquets. We got criticized. Some people told us that the kids deserved trophies, but what kind of trophy did they deserve? They deserve to play, have a good time, and have good coaching. That's what's important."

The recreational league grew by leaps and bounds on five make-

shift fields behind Derynoski Elementary School. The first year attracted almost 180 kids, aged 9-14. The next year, the league swelled to more than 300 boys and girls. The next year drew 400 kids. The fourth year drew more than 600 boys and girls.

"I never expected it to grow to the extent that it did, but I knew that it would grow because we had girls playing and a lot of other leagues didn't allow that yet," he said. "Football was the only game in town, but this allowed our kids another outlet. You didn't really need to know a lot. If you were willing to run and put in the effort, you could play soccer."

It didn't take long for the start-up league to outgrow the small facility. On Sundays, it was standing room only from dawn to dusk. Once again, LaPorte's league needed a new home. Once again, he rolled up his sleeves. This time, he was able to secure an old dumping ground at the back of Recreation Park.

"It was just a big pile of junk, but we got it all removed. We got it graded, seeded, and developed," said LaPorte. "The cost to the town was only \$20,000, but it took a lot of work. Jiggy Egidio helped me out. Gene DeRosa lent us a bulldozer, and we did it. The engineering department would come down and give us the grades. Everyone helped out."

Soon a soccer complex took shape with four playing fields with parking and room for spectators. Bob Swanson was one of the league's first coaches before he took over the reigns years later. He's seen the local soccer program continue to grow with a club house, more fields, a travel soccer league, and a feeder program that helped lift the Lady Knights to a state championship in 2002.

Swanson credits LaPorte as the catalyst for all that followed.

"He was the godfather," he said. "He's just a great guy, and he's very interested in kids. He wants them to have fun and learn how to play a sport. They don't have to be involved in a having-to-win-at-all-



Southington Sports Hall of Fame

Inside the Numbers

- **Southington Board of Park Commissioners (1979-1984, 1989-present).**
- **Chairman of the Board of Park Commissioners (2000-2009).**
 - **Town Council (1985-1989).**
- **Recipient of a CT General Assembly citation for his public service work (June 18, 2012).**
 - **UNICO Gold Letter recipient.**
 - **YMCA Person of the Year recipient.**
- **First Annual Southington Chamber of Commerce Public Service Award (2009).**

Coaching

- **Northern Little League coach and manager (Grey Sox, 1969).**
- **Served as manager of the Rotary Club Little League team.**
 - **Coached the Rangers Babe Ruth baseball team.**
 - **Served as President of the Western Little League.**
- **President of the Southington Youth Soccer League (1975).**

Projects

- **Construction of the Western Little League sports complex.**
 - **Construction of the Recreation Park soccer complex.**
 - **Construction of the all-purpose field at the drive-in site which serves as an additional field for the Southington Valley Midget Football League.**

Leagues/Clubs

- **Co-founded the Western Little League (1970).**
- **Co-founded the Southington Youth Soccer League (1975).**
 - **Founded the Southington Soccer Association (SSA) which now serves as the booster club for the high school soccer team.**
 - **Co-founded Southington Youth Wrestling (1985).**

costs kind of thing. They don't have to worry about titles or all-star teams or anything like that. He just wanted to form a program where they could learn to play soccer. If they got to a point where they wanted to go further, that's where the travel club came in."

With that project finished, LaPorte turned his sights to something new. Dave Kanute envisioned a wrestling program as a feeder program for Southington's youth, so he turned to LaPorte. Once again, there was no hesitation.

"He's probably one of the best supporters of sports, especially since it's all been volunteerism," said Kanute. "He didn't run paid clinics. It was never to further his kids or anything else. It's easy to get volunteers in kids sports when their kids are involved, but to have parents stay after they leave is unusual. That's Joe. He's a tireless worker. It doesn't matter if it's physical work, organization, or helping to raise some money. When you talk about it and it needs to be done, there's Joe."

That's one reason why LaPorte was drawn into local government. He served his first stint with the park board from 1979-1984. He took a five year break before he was pulled in again, and he continues to serve through the present. LaPorte was appointed as chairman from 2000-2009.

When the town purchased the former drive-in site, town officials turned to LaPorte once again. He spearheaded the project to create an all-purpose field to be used as an additional field for one of the town's midget football leagues. Last June he was awarded a CT General Assembly citation for his public service.

"I just want to be remembered as a guy that really loved this town, loved the people that were working for it, and did the best I could to make it better," he said. "I've never been one to attend a meeting once a month and approve the minutes. I've always been involved. Maybe that's one reason why I've been around for so long. I've been reappointed by Democrats, Republicans. It doesn't matter."

It was no surprise that committee members selected LaPorte into the Southington Sports Hall of Fame as a booster. He was inducted during a ceremony at the Aqua Turf on Thursday, Nov. 8.

"I'm sort of disappointed that I didn't make it on my athletic ability," he said with a laugh. "I'm honored. It puts me in with a lot of really great athletes, and I never was a great athlete. Being associated with them is a great honor for me."

Of course, without his contributions, many of the other hall of fame honorees might never have had the opportunity.

Sports Hall of Fame

Follow the Leader

Joe Llodra went from the O-line to the sideline

By JOHN GORALSKI
SPORTS WRITER

Defenders knew that Southington would come out throwing in the mid-1950s, but nobody could stop them. Opponents knew that Southington's runners would be circling around the off-balanced line, but no one could contain them. Southington's opponents knew who they had to reach to stop the single-wing offense. The question was, how to do it?

Joe Llodra was always in the way. He led the rush as the pulling guard and rolled over defenseman as running backs sprinted into the open field. He battered back blitzes to free up the pass, but his name never graced a headline.

Llodra was Southington's secret weapon.

Hall of Fame

"If he didn't make a play, any run to the outside was not going to be successful," said former Southington High School standout Ray Thorpe. "That pulling guard position was probably the most significant position in the single wing, especially with our unbalanced line. We always favored running to the right."

Joe Llodra was the key to everything that happened on the field. An all-state guard on offense and defense, Llodra was the unsung hero on every single play. Southington went undefeated in 1954, and Llodra was the reason. His teammates knew it. The fans knew it, and by the end of each game the losing team would know it.

"Joe was a real leader," said Andy Meade, the quarterback on Southington's 1954 team. "Whether it was practice, a game, or whatever, he would just play his heart out. He was very vocal to stir the team on. It was constant. He played hard in practice and the game. He was just dominant."

Llodra said that he fell in love with the game of football long before he arrived at the high school. He remembers scrambling through a make-shift game with his childhood friends using a potato for a ball. He dreamed of playing at the high school, and he still remembers fighting for the right to play at his very first high school practice.

"Every day Jay Fontana would open a bag and dumped a bunch of helmets out on the ground, and all the freshmen went in and started fighting for them," he said. "There weren't enough helmets for the freshmen, so if you got a helmet you got to play at practice that day. At the end of the day, you put it back in the bag. There was a message there. If you wanted to play, you had to be hungry."

Llodra rarely missed a practice. By mid-season, he had worked his way into the starting lineup as a special team player. At the end of his freshman season, he had already earned his first varsity letter.

"To my knowledge, he was the only four-year letter guy at the time. He won a starting spot as a



Southington Sports Hall of Fame

Inside the Numbers

Southington High School Football

- Member of the Southington High School Class B champion team (1954).
- Earned 4 varsity letters (191954).
 - Co-captain (1954).
 - All-State (1954).

Southington High School Track & Field

- Earned 3 varsity letters (1953, 1954, 1955).

UConn Football

- Earned 3 varsity letters (1957, 1958, 1959).
- Went undefeated in the Yankee Conference (1957-1959).
 - Co-captain (1959).
 - All-Conference (1958).

Coaching

- Western Massachussets State Champion (1973).
 - Retired on December 31, 2000.
- 1960—UConn freshman line coach (football).
- 1961—Southington High School assistant football coach.
- 1962-1964—Greenwich High School varsity football, JV basketball, varsity baseball.
- 1965—Adams High School (MA) football coach.
- 1966—Drury High School (MA) football coach.
- 1967-1969—Columbia University defensive line coach.
- 1970-1980—Chicopee Comp High School (MA) Head football coach (10 years), Girls track & field coach (6 years), Swimming coach (6 years).
- 1990-1995—Faculty Manager at Chicopee HS.
- 1995-2000—Athletic Director for Chicopee public schools.

freshman, and I think that speaks volumes about him," said Thorpe. "He was a pretty big guy, but he had a great understanding of the fundamentals. He was a tough player, and he was strong. Then, he was a smart player and a good leader."

Llodra didn't care what he had to do. He just wanted to play. As a sophomore he served as quarterback, a blocking position in the single wing offense. As a junior, he moved up to center because he could spiral the ball better than any blocker in the shotgun-style offense, but it was his senior season as captain and pulling guard that drew scouts to the small, blue-collar community.

At 5 foot, 10 inches and approaching 200 pounds, Llodra was the perfect size and speed for most college programs. An assistant coach from Boston University showed interest. He was contacted by alumni from Brown and Holy Cross. Llodra had never considered going to college, so the upperclassmen threw himself into freshman classes just to catch up. He attended morning and afternoon classes during Southington's split sessions, and earned himself a scholarship to Fordham University in New York.

"Rose Hill is a neat looking campus in the middle of the Bronx. You'd never know that you were in a borough of the city, and I said that this was where I wanted to go," he said. "Shortly after that, they dropped football. Where the heck was I supposed to go? I decided to go to UConn."

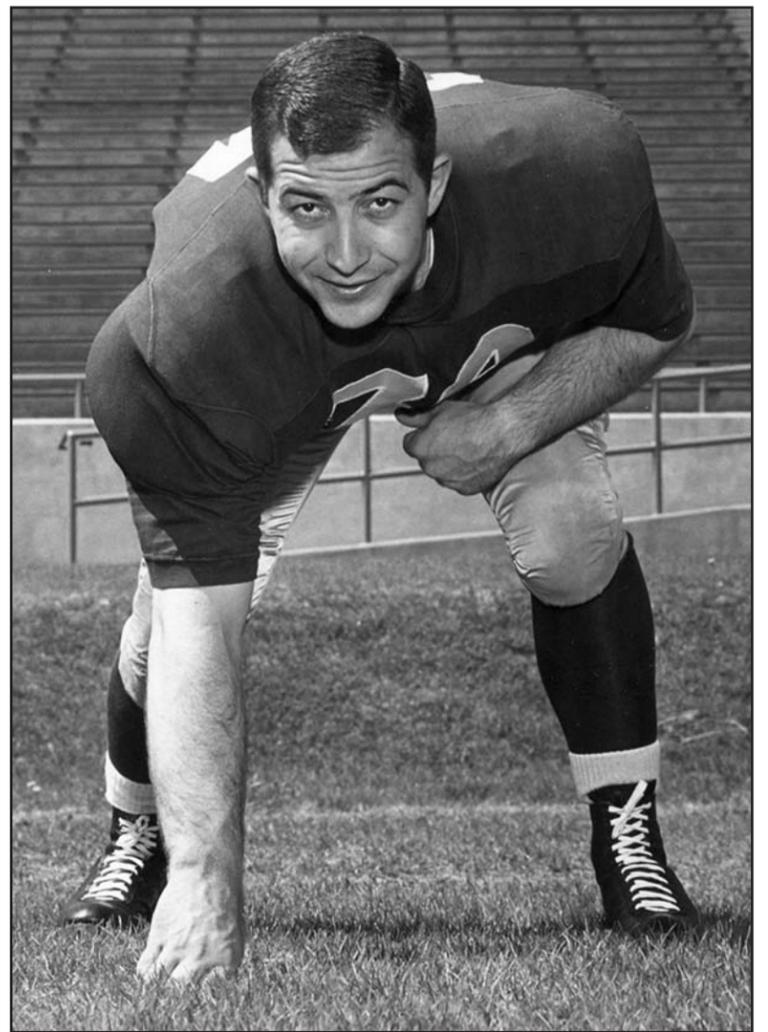
It was a decision that changed Llodra's life. As a sophomore, he

battled his way into the starting lineup as UConn rallied for three undefeated seasons in the old Yankee Conference. Once again, Llodra blocked for the skill players. Once again, he rose past them to be named captain. Along the way, he continued to study the game of football from his perspective on the offensive line. When his playing time came to an end, Llodra wasn't ready to walk away.

"I liked football. I loved sports, so I thought I'd become a teacher and a coach," he said. "I thought that coaching would be a neat thing to do. It was something I liked to do. I always figured that I should do what I loved and love what I do. And I did."

In 1960, Llodra was named as the freshman line coach at UConn under former head coach Bob Engels. Over the next five years, he coached at Southington High School, Greenwich High School, and eventually moved to Massachusetts when a head football coaching position opened up at Adams High School, but Llodra began to stretch his skills beyond the gridiron. At Greenwich, he coached the baseball team to their first and only state title. In the winters, he coached their freshman basketball team.

It didn't matter what sports he embraced, Llodra had a knack for coaching. "It's how you relate to people," he said. "Whether it's coaching or being an athletic director, if people you are working with know that you're sincere and really care about them, you are going to have some success. If you're a phony baloney, people will see



COURTESY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CONNECTICUT

Joe Llodra's career at Southington High School earned him a scholarship to UConn which led to a coaching career that spanned four decades.

that."

By the mid-1960s, Massachusetts lured the Southington native across the border. He served as head football coach at Adams High School for one season. He served as the coach at Drury High School in North Adams the following year. Soon, college coaches came calling again, and Llodra left the high school ranks to try his hand at college football.

"I really wanted to be a college coach. That way, I could spend all of my time on football. That was my love. It was the other woman in my life, but once I got up there I hated it," he said. "You couldn't have warm feelings for a kid that couldn't help you to win because, if you didn't win, you'd get fired. In my third year, I knew that something was wrong. I mean, I love football, but I hated that job. I was so unhappy that I decided to go back to high school."

Once again, he packed up his family and returned to Massachusetts. In 1970, he was hired as the varsity coach at Chicopee Comprehensive High School, and he served with the Chicopee school system through his retirement in December 2000.

Boston Red Sox sports writer Ron Chimelis was a student at Chicopee Comp in 1970. "He came in with a tough, no-nonsense, but fair reputation that under the circumstances was very well received," he said. "Llodra built a winning attitude at Comp and encouraged quality athletes to play the sport. In the early 1970s, he reached one high school Super Bowl and nearly another, and also defeated Chicopee High twice after Comp had lost to its cross town rival seven years in a row."

Once again, Llodra stretched his coaching skills beyond the football field. When school officials threatened to disband the floundering swimming program, Llodra

stepped in to save it.

"They were going under water. I think we only had something like three swimmers, but we knew that once you lost a program you'd never get it back," he said. "I had them work hard, and we kept attracting other kids. We even won the division a couple of times—both the boys and the girls, and that was neat. It's really all about the kids. They keep you young. You develop relationships, and that's the best part about it."

Llodra spent six years as the swimming coach at Chicopee Comp. He spent six years with the girls track team and 10 years with the football team. His reputation as a jack-of-all-trades helped open the door for Llodra's next career—administration.

Llodra moved across town to serve as faculty manager at Chicopee High School from 1990 to 1995 and rose up to the level of athletic director for both Chicopee programs in 1995.

"The interesting part of Joe is how he changed with the times," said Chimelis. "As years passed, he became more accepting of a different philosophy among his kids—hair length is one example that comes to mind—yet without sacrificing the values of hard work and the expectation of commitment. From an 'old school' coach, he became a respected modern coach, not an easy transition to make."

It's no surprise that the selection committee chose Llodra for induction into the Southington's Sports Hall of Fame.

"Once you're a Blue Knight, you're always a Blue Knight," said Llodra. "It feels very good to be inducted into the hall of fame, but I'm really honored that they're inducting the 1954 football team. That was certainly a special year in all of our lives."

On Thursday, Nov. 8, he will be honored in a ceremony at the Aqua Turf.

Sports Hall of Fame

All in the family

John Fontana's legacy goes beyond the wins

By JOHN GORALSKI
SPORTS WRITER

John Fontana voice caught in his throat as he began to talk about his first heart surgery and the overwhelming helplessness he felt as he scanned the channels on his tv. But a loud knocking at his front door drew his attention, and he craned his neck to see who was visiting.

Into the room stepped Carl Pavano. Just a few hours earlier the former Blue Knight was pitching on a Florida mound, yet here he was in the living room of his high school coach. Fontana's eyes welled up as he recalled that day.

"His mother told him that I was sick, so he flew up," Fontana said. "He stayed with me for two and a half hours, and we talked baseball. Then, he had to hurry back to the airport for a 5:00 flight. People can talk about Pavano all they want. He was great to me."

Hall of Fame

He's gruff. He's opinionated, and he's stern. He's been criticized, battled, and revered. Critics have charged that the former Blue Knight was only concerned about winning, but his players tell a different story. Record books are filled with his accomplishments on the field, but it's the ones that happened behind closed doors that he cherishes.

When asked about his legacy, Fontana shrugged off his record. He waved off his state titles, honors, and designations. Fontana pointed to a small array of photographs that line the wall of his basement of former players dressed in college uniforms and major league attire. Not a single one of them is wearing the familiar Southington blue and white.

It's what they did after graduation that Fontana is most proud about. In his 41-year career, Fontana secured scholarships for 192 Southington players. In 1991, he watched seven former Knights competing in college world series games. Former players like Rob Dibble and Carl Pavano have become household names, but Fontana points out that 17 of his Knights went on to compete in the professional ranks with four advancing to the major leagues.

"That lets me know that we did something right," he said. "I know that there are people out there that think that I would have done anything for a win, but I hope that there are people that will remember me as a guy that cared about my kids—all of them. Did I have some guys that were upset with me? Yeah, but I hope the majority of them think that I was there to make them better as men. We tried to stress the right things to do, and that was more important than the victories."

Mike Lantiere worked as an unpaid assistant to Fontana for almost half his career, and he said that Southington's success at the next level was no surprise. Nobody worked harder to promote their kids. Fontana distributed almost 300 Blue Knight programs to colleges across the nation. Each spring, he orchestrated trips to Florida to showcase his talent.

"He did it all just so the kids



SUBMITTED

John Fontana still ranks among the top 20 in the nation for wins as a baseball coach.

had a chance to play in other areas. I think it helped give our kids the perspective of looking at other schools," said Lantiere. "We used to draw coaches from colleges in the area like Florida Southern, Tampa, and others. They'd come to watch us practice and talk about some of his players. Even some professional scouts would come out to see people like Carl Pavano and Rob Dibble. He gave the kids a great opportunity to show what they had. Immeasurable good was done, and it was all for the kids."

It didn't matter if it was his player or not. Other coaches would call for help. Parents would seek him out, and opponents would call him up between seasons.

"People didn't know that he spent just as much time with kids that weren't his players, particularly with girls softball," said Lantiere. "All you had to do was go to him and ask for help. He had contacts everywhere. He even helped my daughter to get into college to play softball. If you were an athlete, he knew somebody you could talk to."

"John has connections all over the country. He knows everybody. I mean everybody," said Jim Senich, former sports writer and editor at *The Southington Observer*. "He could call any school, and they'd listen to him. He had connections with major league scouts. He knows every reporter from around the state. He knows their home phone numbers. He knows their extensions, and he's always on good terms. Everybody knew about Southington. In New London, they knew about Southington. In Greenwich, they knew about Southington. He was an expert, and he's still going today like nuts."

Of course, none of that marketing would matter if Fontana wasn't a winning coach, and Fontana seemed to back up every outlandish boast. Right from the start, his cockiness raised eyebrows. Even the established coaches at Southington High School raised eyebrows at their young hot-shot newcomer.

But Fontana's biggest accomplishment was his ability to turn critics into fans. He remembers addressing the athletic director in

his first days on the job. It was his uncle, a legendary coach in football and baseball. The rest of the coaches in the high school had resumes that listed multiple state titles and coaching honors, but the young Fontana threw down the gauntlet.

He remembers boasting that people were going to forget about football in this town now that he was the king of the diamond. Baseball would be No. 1. A smile spread across his uncle's face, but Fontana remembers a brusque compliment hurled his way in a car ride a few years later.

The baseball team had just enjoyed a huge crowd for a night game. The stands were packed. Concessions were jumping, and the parking lot was full.

"I never thought I'd see it," his uncle started...

Fontana always gave his critics reasons to condemn him. From the brash boast to his uncle to his quotes in the press, Fontana would ruffle feathers, but he always seemed to back it up. When Tom Garry pitched a perfect game in his coaching debut, Fontana was quoted as saying, "What's so tough about this?" When his team failed to make the tournament the following year, he answered that with a streak of 39 straight postseason appearances that continued through his retirement in 2003.

"When John took over the baseball team it didn't take him long to get it going, but it took him a long time to win a state title and people held that against him," said Senich. "I remember that there was a luncheonette downtown with a real wise guy. Every time I'd go down there for breakfast he'd ask me, 'How's that great coach doing? How many state titles has he won?' John said that it didn't bother him, but it had to."

Fontana said that it never crossed his mind. He was only worried about his players. He committed himself to being demanding but fair. He made them sign responsibility contracts in the start of the season, and he would kick his best player off the team if they didn't behave well off the field.

"Nobody was stricter discipline-wise. I threw kids off the



Southington Sports Hall of Fame

Inside the Numbers

Coaching (Baseball)

- SHS varsity baseball coach (1962-2003).
- Overall record was 668-157.
- Ranked 20th nationally for career victories.
- Was ranked 5th nationally for winning percentage (.810).
- Qualified for the state tournament 40 times.
- 24 conference titles, state championship appearances.
- 2 state titles (1994, 1999).
- 192 players received college scholarships.
- 24 conference titles.
- Had seven former players competing in the National Division I & II College World Series (1991).

Professional Affiliations

- National HS Coaches Assoc. (President from 1992-1993, Chairman in 1988, 1996, 2002-2004).
- CT HS Coaches Association (president from 1978-1979, Executive Board from 1966-1988, Executive Director since 1988).
- CT High School Basketball Referees Assoc.
- Chairman of CHSCA All-State baseball/softball (since 1980).
- Collegiate Basketball Official Association.
- Southington Park & Recreation Commission (Since 2008).
- Co-chairman for the CT Special Olympics (1974-1979).
- Muscular Dystrophy Fund Raising Drive for CT (1962-1969).

Honors

- CT Jaycees State Physical Fitness Award (1969).
- CT Umpires Association Award (1974).
- CT High School Coach of the Year (1975).
- American Assoc of College Baseball Coaches Association Coach of the Year (1976).
- Outstanding Service Award CT Basketball Officials Association (1980).
- District and National HS Baseball Coach of the Year (1983).
- Coached Team USA vs. Japan (1987).
- CT High School Coaches Hall of Fame (1987).
- SHS Baseball Hall of Fame (1988).
- Gold Key Award from the CT Sports Writers Alliance (1989).
- Gatorade Coaches Care Award (1992).
- Outstanding Contributions to HS Baseball Award from MLB scouts (1990).
- American Baseball Coaches Association National Coach of the Year (1993).
- NHSCA Dwight Keith Award (1996).
- American Baseball coaches Association Hall of Fame (1999).
- CIAC Merit Award (2003).
- NHSCA citation for contribution to HS sports (2007).
- CIAC baseball tournament dedicated to him (2008).
- American International College Sports Hall of Fame (2011).

team. I suspended them, and did everything else. On the other side of the coin, when you came to our practices we'd have more laughs than anybody else," he said. "I think that if I needed help, 99 percent of my ballplayers would be here tomorrow. I believe that. I have faith in them. I had faith in them then, and I still do now."

Like him or not, you didn't want to face his teams. That's because few teams were as practiced on game day. They ran trick plays. They hit in pressure situations, and they rarely made mistakes. That's one reason why college coaches flocked to his practices just to get a look at his up-and-coming talent.

"I got to Florida Southern without them even having a chance to see me play, and to get the kind of scholarship that I got was a tribute to how great he really was as a coach," said former Blue Knight Cris Allen. "If he said that a guy was good, they took it to heart. Either things have changed really dramatically, or we're talking about one of the greatest high school icons in the country. I believe that because of what he did for me and some of the other players that I played with. We had one kid go to LSU. One went to South Carolina.

Those aren't second class programs."

Fontana approached the game as if it was a puzzle that only he could solve. He took risks in the outfield to give his teams a chance to throw out runners on the bases. He drew up trick plays with misdirection that caught runners in their tracks. They'd practice until it became second nature. On game day, they'd execute to perfection.

At retirement, Fontana had a career winning percentage (.810) that was ranked fifth in the nation. He still ranks in the top 20 for wins as a varsity baseball coach (668) with 24 conference championships and a pair of state titles.

He was an easy choice for the selection committee for Southington's Sports Hall of Fame. On Thursday, Nov. 8, he was inducted at the Aqua Turf.

"When I get awards, it's because somebody recognized that we did something right," he said. "That's why I worked so hard to get kids into college. Those kids played for me. They gave it their all because, to play for me, you had to work your tail off. We drilled the hell out of them seven days a week. I appreciated all of it."

Now they get to return the favor.

Sports Hall of Fame

Chief of the diamond

Phil D'Agostino set the standard for Southington baseball

By JOHN GORALSKI
SPORTS WRITER

At 16 years old, Phil D'Agostino sat on his front porch and cried as two men destined to be major league general managers walked away with his dreams. D'Agostino's mother still stood guard at the front door, and his father never left the kitchen table.

The scouts had come with a contract for Southington's future chief of police, but D'Agostino's parents never let them in the door.

Hall of Fame

"I remember her standing in the doorway, and saying, 'No. No way. He can't play. He's got to work,'" said Lou DePaolo, a childhood friend. "That was the immigrant style. You had to work, and baseball was just a game. It just broke him up. I sat with him on his outside steps. I tried to comfort him, but he just cried..."

It might seem ludicrous by today's standards to let a major league contract slip from your fingers. But as young men traveled overseas to fight in World War II, it was a decision that D'Agostino's parents never questioned. Since it took both of their signatures to enroll their son in the minor leagues, the scouts were forced to return to Brooklyn empty handed.

Baseball's loss was Southington's gain. After trying his hand at construction and other pursuits, the young D'Agostino traded his baseball mitt for a badge, and the rest was history.

Still, the debate lingers on...

"Had he had the opportunity, I think he would have been a very good ballplayer," said DePaolo. "How great I don't know, but I'm sure that he would have been good. Whenever you matched him up against the teams he played, he was outstanding. The guys that he played with were all good ballplayers, but he always stood out."

	Southington Sports Hall of Fame
Inside the Numbers	
January 16, 1929 - January 1, 2008	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offered major league contract by the Brooklyn Dodgers. • Inducted into the Southington High School Baseball Hall of Fame (1983). • Founder and player for the Southington Sotons in the 1940s. 	
SHS Baseball	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Earned 4 varsity letters (1944, 1945, 1946, 1947) • Career batting average over .350. 	
SHS Football	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Earned 2 varsity letters (1945, 1946). 	

“

Phil D'Agostino could do it all.
He could hit, field and run.
We had some great teams
in those years,
and Phil was a major reason.

”

Jay Fontana,
Former Lewis HS
baseball coach

D'Agostino grew up in the 1930s, and Southington was yet to be known for anything other than baseball. These days, the town boasts the distinction of being the only community in the state to graduate a pair of World Series champions. Last year, Southington was the only town in Connecticut to boast two players in the major leagues.

It was D'Agostino that set that standard in the 1940s.

Former sports writer and Southington native Art Secondo remembers over-hearing conversations as a child, and D'Agostino's name was always mingled amidst a long list of football stars. Lewis High School

was a football powerhouse, knocking off big schools as if they were midget teams. Local sports fans championed NFL players like Jack Zilly, but D'Agostino began to turn the conversation.

"In that era, it was all about football," said Secondo. "Everybody would talk about the football players. Nothing else really mattered, but Phil was an exception. He came before Mike Mauro and all the rest of those great guys in baseball. He was the first to get a lot of attention for baseball, and everybody used to say that he was such a natural athlete."

The Southington shortstop was described as a jackrabbit on the bases with a shotgun arm. He

could go to his left and his right. He could hit and run the bases. It was no surprise that the Brooklyn Dodgers wanted to snatch up the Southington phenom. D'Agostino was one of the best in the state.

"Phil D'Agostino could do it all," former Lewis High School coach Joe Fontana told *The Southington Observer* when D'Agostino was inducted to the high school baseball hall of fame in 1983. "He could hit, field and run. We had some great teams in those years, and Phil was a major reason."

Nobody would have known if to speak to him. D'Agostino built a baseball diamond in the back of his parent's house. He taught all three of his sons to play the game and sat quietly on the sidelines as they fought their way onto all-star teams. He loved to watch the game. He could quote statistics on almost any player in the major leagues, but D'Agostino rarely spoke about his own days on the diamond.

His sons learned about their father when old timers would approach them in town.

Pat D'Agostino remembers hearing the comparisons each time he drove a long ball past the outfielders at Recreation Park. "I'd hit one all the way to the trees, and I remember people saying, 'You hit like your dad,'" he said. "I never knew how good he was, but I can remember him hitting that ball in the back yard. It would go way, way out to the outfield."

Pete D'Agostino remembers searching through old scorebooks from the Southington Police Department's softball teams, and his father's statistics were always some of the best.

"My father never bragged or told us any big stories about how he hit," said Pete. "We'd always hear from some of the coaches or the older guys about how good our dad was. They'd always tell us how good of a shortstop he was. They'd always say that he could have played for the



COURTESY OF THE SOUTHINGTON POLICE DEPT

Long before Phil D'Agostino worked his way up to Southington's police chief, he earned interest from Major League Baseball scouts.

Yankees, but he never really pushed us to go out for the team or anything. He never bragged about himself."

D'Agostino let everybody else do the bragging, and he let his own performance do the talking. He was known from driving long homeruns onto the house at the back of Pexto Field during Southington pickup games. He batted over .300 in each of his seasons at the high school, although most of his exploits are lost to history because coverage of the war and rationing of resources made high school baseball articles scarce in the 1940s.

Still, his legend grew.

Even today, the former Chief of Police is known more for his stolen bases than for catching people stealing. That's why it's no surprise that members of the selection committee selected D'Agostino to be inducted into the Southington Sports Hall of Fame.

He was inducted posthumously in a ceremony at the Aqua Turf on Thursday, Nov. 8.

"He would have liked this. It would have brought a smile to his face," said his son, Pete. "My mother's really excited about it. It's an honor."

“

In that era, it was all about football.
Everybody would talk
about the football players.
Nothing else really mattered,
but Phil was an exception.

”

Art Secondo,
Former Southington sports writer

Sports Hall of Fame

The Leader of the Pack

Rick Black set the pace for a cross country title

By JOHN GORALSKI
SPORTS WRITER

The Greek god Hermes was said to streak across the heavens in a barely visible blur. The Romans called him Mercury and lent his name to our fastest planet. In paintings and sculptures, he's shown with wings upon his feet. In myths and poems, he's described as having the wind at his heels.

Southington's version was Rick Black, and his stories are just as legendary. He blew through town in the early 1980s, collecting four varsity letters when track was a three year varsity program. He captured two Class LL titles in cross country and paced his teammates to Southington's only state title as a long distance team.

Wings on his feet? Not quite. Legend has it that Rick Black didn't need them.

Hall of Fame

"He was just a great kid, and it was almost pathetic he was so easy to coach. He was serious about what he was doing, and it was his passion," said former Blue Knight track and cross country coach Wayne Nakoneczny. "There's no question that he was talented. He couldn't have done what he did without the physical ability, but he would have probably just been an average runner if it wasn't for his diligent work. He worked so hard."

In fact, Nakoneczny said that Black was one of the only athletes that he ever had to send home to rest. Black had just tied a state record at the Class LL meet as a junior, and he showed up on the track the following Monday to prepare for the state open race. The heat continued to build, but Black wouldn't quit. Nakoneczny remembers throwing in the towel on that Memorial Day practice.

"I actually told him that he had to back off a little bit," the coach remembered. "It was a hot day. It was a tough workout. We were on the track, and it was right before the outdoor state meet. He did some reps, and I'm talking about half mile reps that were incredible. He was sucking eggs at the end of the workout, but he was eating it up. He wouldn't quit."

Black was a runner. He wasn't interested in anything else. As a kid he played baseball and tried soccer, but it was the running that really captured his imagination. By the time he reached DePaolo Junior High School, Black had committed to his long

“I hope kids say that, if I could rise up to those levels and reach outside myself, they can do it too.”

Rick Black,
2012 Hall of Fame
inductee

distance dreams. For two years, he competed with the Patriots until the town slashed the junior high school program at the start of his ninth grade season.

Not one to give up, Black petitioned the school board to be allowed to compete with the high school team. He begged them through the fall and pleaded his case all winter. Finally, they relented. In the spring of his freshman year, Black joined the Blue Knights one year ahead of schedule.

That was the spring where he met his cross country teammates, a group of long distance runners from St. Thomas Junior High School. They had risen to the top of the Catholic school ranks, and Black was the final piece of the puzzle. It set the stage for their rise to the top of the varsity ranks.

"I actually got to meet the coach and train with him in ninth grade, so when I actually went up to the high school we already had the same core of runners—the Cavaliers, the Theriaults, and Marty Burns," Black said. "We had run together as freshmen even though they had gone to St. Thomas Junior High School, and I went to DePaolo. They were actually faster than I was, so I was lucky that they didn't really run my event. Had I ran the distance races they did, they would have probably beaten me."

Even if that was true, it didn't take long for Black to rise to the top. He earned a varsity letter in the 1500m as a freshman and swept into the lead by start of his sophomore season. Black captured all-conference titles in each of the next three seasons and claimed all-state titles as a sophomore, a junior, and a senior.



FILE PHOTO

Rick Black paced the Blue Knights to their only cross country state championship in 1984.

As a sophomore he won the Class LL title in the 1500m (4:09.8) and as a member of the 4x100m relay team. As a junior he captured the Class LL title in the 3000m (8:43.24) and eclipsed his winning time in the 1500m by nearly 30 seconds (3:54.08) to set a new state record in the final year of that event. As a senior, Black fought off early season injuries to place second in the 3200m in both the Class LL and state open races.

Almost three decades later, his time in the 3200m (9:12.5) is still the school record.

"Set your goals high. Break down your goals into small steps, and do it," he said. "Stay focused because, if I can do it, there are plenty of kids that can do it. That's the key thing. I hope kids say that, if I could rise up to those levels and reach outside myself, they can do it too. That's the most important thing that coach taught us. He taught us to set goals, dig deep, and strive for things that are bigger than ourselves."

Black graduated as one of the most accomplished track runners in school history, but it was his cross country accomplishments that really pushed him over the top. For three years, he

paced a group of runners to the top of the state rankings.

As a sophomore, Black broke into the top 20 at the Class LL championships and pushed past a big field of upperclassmen to claim 13th at the state open. As a junior, Black captured the Class LL cross country title (15:27). In his senior season, Black won the Class LL race again, paring almost 30 seconds off his time (15:01) to claim back-to-back titles.

He finished in the top five at the state open in each of his last two seasons.

"I think what sometimes happens with runners is that you get into the off-season, and you kind of get lazy or lackadaisical after a good season," Nakoneczny said. "He wasn't like that. He just kept running. He trained, and he had a great attitude. He wanted to work, and he did it."

Black said that he was surprised by his success, especially in his first season when he overtook runners that he had looked up to for years.

"One of the trickiest things to do is to beat people that are heroes for you," he said. "It takes a certain mindset, and it's as much mental as it is physical. You have to overcome the barrier, so that you can actually



**Southington Sports
Hall of Fame**

Inside the Numbers

Cross Country

- Class LL Cross Country Champion (1983, 1984)
- Member of the 1984 Southington High School Class LL championship team.
- Member of the 1984 Southington High School state open championship team.
- Earned 3 varsity letters (1982, 1983, 1984).
 - All Conference (1982, 1983, 1984)
 - All State (1982, 1983, 1984)
- Set home course record (15:35) in 1983.
- Competed at the Kinney Cross Country regional championship (1984).
- Competed at the Cross Country national championship (1984).

Outdoor Track & Field

- Holds the SHS record in the 3200m (9:12.5).
- Set the state record in the 1500m (3:54.08) in the last year the distance was run (1984).
 - Earned 4 varsity letters.
- Captured Class LL titles in the 1500m (1983) and the 3000m (1984).
 - All Conference (1983, 1984, 1985)
 - All State (1983, 1984, 1985).

Northeastern University

- Earned 4 varsity letters in cross country (1984, 1986, 1987, 1988).
- Earned 4 varsity letters in indoor track (1984-85, 1986-87, 1987-88, 1988-89).
- Earned 4 varsity letters in outdoor track (1985, 1987, 1988, 1989).
- Finished 3rd overall at the 1989 Amerca East Conference Championship (25:23).
- America East Indoor Track & Field champion in the 1500m (3:56.09 in 1989).
- Qualified for 2 NCAA Division I finals in cross country (1987, 1988).

beat a person that you might have thought was untouchable before. That was my biggest challenge."

Barriers never stopped Black. As a senior, he paced his teammates to Southington's first and only team championship at the Class LL race. He continued into the state open, where he led them to the Blue Knights' only cross country state title. When the dust had settled on his high school career, Black's teams had earned an impressive 39-1 record in dual meets and finished as No. 1 in the state.

"People said that we were the best team in about 20 years. Our score was a 99, and that was unheard of at the time," said Black. "It was a great team. In fact, I would argue that I wasn't the best runner on the team. I ran the fastest, but there were some really talented guys on that team. There were a couple of them with more raw talent than I had."

Black wasn't done after graduation. The Southington harrier earned a scholarship to Northeastern University where he collected 12 varsity letters over his college career. An injury sidelined him as a sophomore, but Black made up that season in his fifth year at school to finish with four letters in

cross country, indoor track, and outdoor track. In 1989, his team was devastated by injuries. Despite the challenge, he narrowly missed qualifying for his third national championship, missing the cutoff for the finals by less than one second.

"I had a good college career," he said. "It wasn't as good as I wanted, but I ran some good races. I ran some bad races, and I ran everything in between. It was a good experience. I finished my eligibility. It was pretty grueling, but I did it."

With his long distance success in high school and college, it was no surprise that Black was selected to represent the town in the Southington Sports Hall of Fame. On Thursday, Nov. 8, he was inducted in a ceremony at the Aqua Turf in Plantsville.

"I was kind of surprised. My first thought was that I wish my legs were in as good shape as the memories of the guys on the committee," he said. "I hope that people respected me as a competitor. As an athlete, I gave it all I could. I would have always loved to have done better, but I put all that I had into it. I don't have any regrets. I'm just amazed that people remember it."

Sports Hall of Fame

Blitzing Bobby

Rob Thomson was always hard to stop

By JOHN GORALSKI
SPORTS WRITER

It's hard to believe, but the Knights had gone almost a full decade without back-to-back winning seasons when coaches welcomed the sophomore class in 1983. That didn't escape the notice of coaches as they surveyed prospects in the preseason.

Suddenly, a deafening crash echoed across the field, and former assistant coach Brian Stranieri still remembers seeing Rob Thomson hovering over a fallen teammate.

Hall of Fame

"We were doing a defensive drill, and here was this skinny young man sneaking into the line to make hits," said Stranieri. "A few minutes later, he gets a hit again. A few minutes later, he did it again. That's when I started thinking, how does a skinny kid like that keep getting to the line?"

Southington was in transition when Thomson arrived at the high school in the mid 1980s. Memories of the storied teams of the 40s and the 50s were fading, and the small, blue collar town was expanding by leaps and bounds. Practice fields were disappearing with housing developments taking their place.

Then came Thomson. "Rob had a drive right from that first day in preseason camp. He was the consummate student-athlete. He was great at academics, a great athlete, and a great human being," said Stranieri. "When I look back at the student-athletes we've had over the last 30 years at Southington High School, Rob Thomson is one of the best."

That doesn't come as a surprise to his teammates. Few players have matched Thomson's success at any level, and success seemed to follow him from the start. His midget teams won. He led a string of hard-hitting squads at DePaolo Junior High School as the quarterback and the leading blitzer. Others switched sports with the changing seasons, but Thomson never strayed far from the gridiron.

"I think it was a lot different than it is today. We just seemed to play the three main sports—football, basketball, and baseball," he said. "When I got older there was track, but my focus was always football. The other sports were really just something to do in the off-season to help me train. Football was always my primary sport."

It didn't take long for the lanky sophomore to earn his starting spot, and by the end of his sophomore year Thomson was already a crucial part of an emerging defense. The team struggled to a 3-6-1 record, but they'd already turned the corner.

"It was almost all seniors on offense and all underclassmen on defense," he said. "That really set the stage for our defense in my junior year. We all sort of went both ways that year, and we had a very, very dominant defense."

It didn't take long for the press to start making comparisons to Southington's storied teams of the past. The Knights opened the season with shutouts over Rockville, Bulkeley, Fermi, Newington, and Bristol Eastern. No previous team had been able to collect three



Southington Sports Hall of Fame

Inside the Numbers

•Earned a free agent tryout with the NE Patriots (1991).

Southington High School Football

- Member of the SHS Class L-I runner up team (1984).
- 3 varsity letters (1983, 1984, 1985).
- Captain (1985).
- All-conference (1984, 1985).
- Scholar Athlete Award (1985).
- Most Valuable Player (1985).

Career (1983-85)—136 points (22 TDs). 19 rushing TDs, 2 blocked punts returned for TDs, 1 interception for a TD, 2 extra-point conversions, 9 TD passes.

Basketball

- Varsity letter (1983).
- Starting forward as a sophomore (1983).

Outdoor Track

- Varsity letter (1983).
- All-conference (1983).
- Qualified for state meet in 100m, 200m (1983).

Syracuse University Football

- 4-year varsity player (1987, 1988, 1989, 1990).
- Captain (1990).
- Defensive MVP of East-West Shrine Game (1990).
- UPI All-America Honorable Mention (1989).
- District II Academic All-American (1989).
- Ranked 10th nationally with interceptions (7 in 1989).
- Walter Camp CT College Player of the Year (1990).

CAREER STATISTICS

1987—1 tackle, 2 assists, 3 total tackles, 1 forced fumble, 1 fumble recovery.

1988—7 tackles, 4 assists, 11 total tackles.

1989—46 tackles, 34 assists, 80 total tackles, 7 interceptions, one forced fumble, one blocked kick.

1990—50 tackles, 29 assists, 79 total tackles, 1 interception, 3 recovered fumbles, 1 blocked field goal.

Coaching (Football)

1992-1993—Univ. New Haven. Regular season record 20-0. Postseason record 3-2. 2 undefeated seasons (1992, 1993).

1994-2001—Bristol Central. Head coach for 4 seasons, Assistant coach for 3 seasons.

2010-Present—Southington High School Assistant Coach

straight shutouts at the start of a season, but Thomson's defense started with five. With a 27-6 win over Maloney in week six, they moved to No. 1 in the state polls.

Once again, Thomson was the starting quarterback and the one leading the blitz.

"We were very aggressive, and we blitzed a lot. We put a lot of pressure on teams. We had a pretty good secondary, so we were able to man-up teams to send the pressure," he said. "We had good speed, and guys just flew around to the football. It was fun. We created a lot of turnovers and sacks, and we weren't on the field too long."

Then, it all came crashing to a halt. In a match-up against Bristol Central, Thomson was twisted up on an offensive play. He ran up the middle, fell back on his hand, and left the game with a dislocated and fractured wrist. At the time, he accounted for 50 percent of the team's offense, and the Knights never recovered from the loss.

Southington held on for the win against Bristol. They overwhelmed a pair of lesser opponents to finish the season with a perfect

10-0 record, but they were outlasted by Glastonbury in the state championship game.

"I've often wondered if we would have won if Rob Thomson was able to play defensive back that day," said Stranieri. "He was always in on the tackle. If anybody got past our front seven, I was always confident that Rob would make the play. I think we could have won."

Southington wasn't able to get back to that level the following year, but the 6-5 record finally broke the drought with Southington's first back-to-back winning season in 10 years and started a new winning era that continues today. With success came the scouts, and it didn't take long for the 6-foot-3 senior to announce his decision to play for Syracuse in a year that saw only three other Connecticut players recruited to a division I program.

"It's a really tiring process. You want to talk to all the schools. I even got involved with the Ivy League schools even though they didn't offer scholarships," he said. "I really wanted to challenge myself to go to a division one school, and Syracuse had such a phenomenal



COURTESY OF SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY

Former Blue Knight football player Rob Thomson leads a Syracuse blitz during his All-American season in 1989.

history of football just like Southington High School did. I really wanted to be a part of that as they tried to rebuild."

At the time, the Orangemen were at a low spot with nine losing records over the last 15 seasons and just two bowl appearances in 20 years, so Thomson was the perfect fit. Once again, he would help a team return to prominence.

He worked his way into the lineup as a freshman and Syracuse rallied to an 11-0 regular season and a tie against Auburn in the Sugar Bowl. As a sophomore, he helped the team rally to a 10-2 record and a win over Louisiana State in the Hall of Fame Bowl. Thomson wasn't a star yet, but he earned a varsity letters both years.

"I played behind an All-American, Markus Paul, but I was able to get enough playing time to letter all four years," he said. "That doesn't happen too much up there."

Once again, Thomson's broke out as a junior. In 1989, he finished fourth on the team with 80 tackles and was ranked 10th nationally with 7 interceptions. Syracuse rallied to an 8-4 record and a victory over Georgia in the Peach Bowl on New Year's Day. Thomson was named as a UPI All-America Honorable Mention and was a District II Academic All-American.

Suddenly, he was thrust into the spotlight with postgame interviews and magazine covers, but the Southington native took it all in stride. He spent his mornings in class, his afternoons working out in the weight room and the practice field, and his evenings watching films and going to study hall.

"I think that your first couple of years sort of preps you for it. You see the other guys going through it, and you learn from them," he said. "There is so much game preparation at that level that people don't really understand it. We were working six days a week in the off-season. During the regular season, you're working seven days a week."

Thomson was now a leader. As a senior, he was the one calling out the checks and formations in a sophisticated defensive scheme. He didn't match his interception total from his junior season, but he collected 79 tackles to help lead the

team to a 7-4 record and another bowl appearance. Thomson graduated as the first Orangeman to compete in four bowl games.

"We went 3-0-1," he said. "We only had that one tie in my sophomore year. We capped it off by beating Arizona, 28-0, in the Aloha Bowl, and that was pretty special."

With his dominance at Syracuse, it was no surprise that Thomson was recruited to many of the top senior bowl games. He played in the Japan Bowl and was crowned as the Defensive MVP in the East-West Shrine Game. Brett Favre was the offensive MVP.

"It was fun. Every four players shared a rental car for the week, and I shared my car with Brett Favre, Browning Nagle—a guy that played for the Jets—and John Flannery who played in the NFL for a long time," he said. "It was great. I got to hang out with those guys all week."

His performance earned him a tryout with the New England Patriots, but he was cut as a free agent at the start of the season. Rather than give up on the sport, Thomson turned to coaching. He led the University of New Haven football team to a pair of undefeated seasons before taking the helm at Bristol Central where he helped develop Tim Washington into a record setting rusher.

Thomson coached Mike Drury during his high school tenure, and that was one reason why Drury recruited his former coach to the sidelines last year when he took over the Blue Knight football program. Now Thomson has come full circle.

"One of the things that makes him such a great coach is that he has the ability to find ways to do things that are intricate but easy for a high school kid to understand," said Drury. "He came in during the preseason of my junior year, and he installed an offense in something like three days. It was so intricate, and we had a 3,000 yard rusher. All the blocking schemes and everything were put in over just three days, and that was incredible."

Thomson was an easy choice for the Southington Sports Hall of Fame selection committee. He was inducted at the Aqua Turf on Thursday, Nov. 8.

Sports Hall of Fame

Pitching Perfection

Tracy Ciosek-Beloin never lost as a Knight

By JOHN GORALSKI
SPORTS WRITER

Tracy Beloin—or Tracy Ciosek as she's remembered by Lady Knight fans—almost missed the 1986 championship basketball game with a severe back problem, so nobody expected her to carry the team on her shoulders.

Rockville's game plan was working. A box-and-one defense held Tracy to just one basket in the opening quarter. A relentless attack held her to just three scores in the opening half, but Southington opened an almost insurmountable lead by the break.

Nobody thought they needed her scoring until Southington's collapse after the break. The lopsided lead shrank to just three points. Coaches screamed for Ciosek. Fans screeched for their junior scorer, and her teammates begged her to score. Ciosek called for the ball.

Hall of Fame

"She fired four times. Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang," wrote former Southington Observer sports writer Jim Senich. "Rockville was history. Southington High School's girls basketball team was a state champion in the Class LL division."

Tracy was crowned as the tournament's MVP. Her photo was splashed across the state's media, and her name was scrawled across the headlines. SHS coach Joe Daddio bragged about his star.

"The girls sensed right away Tracy would win the game for them when she hit her first shot," he told reporters as she climbed the ladder to cut down the net. "Hey, we have so much confidence in Tracy, we had a play where we set a pick for her 18 feet from the hoop. And she hit it. Beautiful."

Most athletes would champion a moment like this when they start to weave stories about their glory days as an athlete. Actually, most would have to choose a moment much smaller than Ciosek's buzzer-beating performance in a championship game, but Tracy never mentioned it during a 45-minute interview about one of Southington's greatest female careers.

More than a quarter century has passed since her last-second heroics, but it's the loss in 1985's championship game that Tracy remembered the most.

"It still irks me today that we only won five of our six state championships," she said about the Lady Knight storied runs in softball and basketball in the mid-1980s. "We should have won. We were winning the whole game and killing them in the state championship game at halftime, but we lost by two points. That was disgusting. I really think that was the best team we had, and we didn't win... We should have been 6-for-6."

The sports landscape was much different when Tracy arrived at the high school before Title IX forced schools to catch up to Southington's lead. Some schools didn't even offer high school sports to their girls, but Southington was already a state power. Wins and titles were expected, and players almost felt like rock stars as they stepped onto the field.

"I can remember our gym being filled, not only with parents



Southington Sports Hall of Fame

Inside the Numbers

Southington High School Softball

- Member of 3 Class LL championship teams (1985-87).
- Three varsity letters (1985, 1986, 1987).
- All-conference (1985, 1986, 1987).
- All-state (1986, 1987).

PITCHING STATISTICS

- Overall record, 48-0.

CAREER—0.39 ERA, 10 no-hitters, 30 shutouts, 2 perfect games, 10 no-hitters, 329 strikeouts, 320 innings pitched.

BATTING STATISTICS

1985—.386 average, 44 at bats, 17 runs, 13 hits, 2 doubles, 3 strikeouts, 14 walks.

1986—.333 batting average, 34 RBI.

1987—.286 batting average, 77 at bats, 37 runs, 22 hits, 4 doubles, 6 triples, 2 homeruns, 8 strikeouts, 16 walks, 4-for-4 stolen bases.

Girls Basketball

- Member of 2 Class LL championship teams (1986, 1987)
- Captain (1986-1987).
- Class LL Tournament MVP (1986).
- All-state (1987).
- All-state honorable mention (1986).
- All conference (1986, 1987).

University of Hartford

- Hartford Hawks Athletic Hall of Fame (2008).

Softball

- Captain (1990).
- 4 varsity letters (1988, 1989, 1990, 1991).
- TOP 5 IN 2 SINGLE SEASON CATEGORIES
- Ranked 2nd in shutouts (24 in 1989).
- Ranked 4th in games started (24 in 1989).
- TOP 5 IN 6 CAREER CATEGORIES
- Ranked 4th in starts (58) and shutouts (11).
- Ranked 5th in triples (6), appearances (63), innings pitched (385.2), K/BB ratio (2.63).

Golf

- 1 varsity letter (1990).

but with the students and all our friends. Everybody used to come out to watch Southington," she said. "The gym was filled. We used to play softball, and all of our home games were under the lights at Recreation Park. I can remember having huge crowds cheering for us, and that was amazing. We had such huge support, and I guess I thought that everybody had that. I kind of took it for granted."

For fans, it was worth the price of admission. Tracy was among a list of multiple sports athletes that raised the bar, even for Southington's expectations. To this day, there are very few athletes that can compare to Southington's success when Tracy was at the center.

She was a guard/forward on a team that rallied for back-to-back titles. She was a shortstop during her a title run in her sophomore year, and stepped to the mound to lead them back for two more titles during a pair of undefeated state title runs. Tracy seemed to excel when the game was on the line.

"She was just a great athlete. Tracy was a natural, and she seemed to enjoy everything about her high school experience," said former Lady Knight coach Joe Piazza. "I don't think you're ever going to find another pitcher that started 48 games and won 48 games in her career. For a high school kid

to say that they won 48 games in a row is something, but for Tracy to say that she never lost is incredible. That means that she didn't have a bad day. Even if she had an off-day, she pitched well enough to win."

For Tracy, it was just about the competition. She grew up at a time when there were no girls softball leagues. There were no girls travel teams or summer camps at the high school. If she wanted to compete, she had to beat the boys. And that's exactly what she did. Tracy joined pick-up games in the neighborhood. She practiced with her father in the back yard and earned her way onto the Northern Little League Braves where she outplayed the boys to earn a starting position as a shortstop.

"I was the only girl on the team, and I think I may have been the only girl in the league," she said. "I actually had to purchase my own pants because I was the tallest on the team. The boys pants weren't long enough. They wouldn't have gone past my knees. I still laugh when I see the old pictures. My pants are a slightly different color and I'm the tallest one."

It wasn't until seventh grade that Tracy was able to compete as a part of a girls team, but the results were the same. She quickly rose to prominence at St. Thomas Junior High School in volleyball, basket-



Tracy Ciosek-Beloin still ranks among the top five at the University of Hartford in two single season categories and six career categories.

ball, and softball. It was here that she began to mingle with other female athletes to lay the foundation for their high school dominance.

"She didn't really get a lot of instruction," said Piazza. "There wasn't a lot of summer activity back then, and kids like Tracy were involved in two or three sports. Tracy was the type of kid that would play basketball during basketball season, play softball during softball season, and if she decided to play volleyball, that's all she would do during volleyball season. She didn't do all that extra work. She was just a natural athlete, but you'd never know it by looking at her."

When she arrived at the high school, Tracy quickly rose to the top once again. She battled her way onto the varsity basketball roster as a sophomore and worked her way into the main rotation by the end of the season. Piazza shuffled her throughout the infield in the spring to get her into his softball lineup, and she settled into the shortstop position during her first of three title runs.

She shifted to pitcher as a junior, and that catapulted her to a different level. In the days before opening day, doctors cleared her from back injuries from the winter season, but Piazza said he still didn't believe them. He sent her to practice against the wall of the school and returned to his infielders.

"I kept hearing, 'Ba-boom. Ba-boom.' I looked over, and she was throwing like she had been throwing all year," said Piazza.

"She just kept getting better and better and better. Defensively, there wasn't anybody better. She was a shortstop, and you don't get a lot of shortstops that pitch at the high school level. It gives you a lot of leeway. You can play your third baseman back a little bit. You can keep your first baseman back a little bit. It allowed us to do different things because Tracy could cover so much ground and throw overhand."

Nobody could stop the Knights with Tracy on the mound. The Lady Knights already had a 4-0 winning streak from their championship run in 1985, and Tracy added 48 straight victories to the rally. Her teams won two more state titles and the winning streak set a new state record.

"We had a lot of great teams, and I had a lot of good friends on the team," she said. "We had a lot of fun playing, and that's what it was about. I had a lot of help. Melinda [Silva] helped me behind the plate. We had a great defensive team and

a great hitting team. My parents were very supportive, and we had great coaches. It wasn't just me."

Scouts began to appear in the crowd as Tracy continued to man-handle opponents. She worked her way into a pair of all-state rosters in basketball and a pair of all-state rosters in softball. Ciosek-Beloin could have her pick of division one programs, but she settled on the University of Hartford. The Hawks were a struggling division one program at the time, but Tracy chose it for academic reasons.

"Do I regret not going to UConn or one of the schools down south? Yeah, a little bit," she said. "I wish I had a little bit more of that athletic experience, but I never regretted going to the University of Hartford. It's a great school, and I ended up getting a full scholarship. I didn't have to pay a dime and I got a great job and great career out of it."

Although her statistics never matched her high school career, her impact might have been greater. She joined teammates in an effort to attract anybody with playing experience just to field a competitive team, and she went on to lead them into a competitive program despite their lack of talent.

Tracy still ranks among the top five in eight different categories including a pair of single season lists and six career categories. She is ranked second in single season shutouts (24 in 1989) and fourth in games started (24 in 1989). She ranks fourth in starts (58) and shutouts (11) over her career. She is still ranked fifth in triples (6), appearances (63), innings pitched (385.2), and strikeouts-to-walks ratio (2.63).

Tracy still shies away from taking credit for all of her accomplishments.

"You can't say that I was a great pitcher, and I have the stats to prove it. You have to have a good team around you," she said. "If routine balls aren't caught and routine ground balls are not fielded and you can't score runs, you aren't going to win. No matter how good the pitcher is. You can't strike everybody out, and you can't do it with one person. It takes a team. That's what Southington softball is all about. It was never about just one person."

Tracy was an easy choice for the selection committee to be inducted into the 2012 Southington Sports Hall of Fame. She was honored at a ceremony at the Aqua Turf on Nov. 8.