

## Southington Sports Hall of Fame

# Passing the test

## Scott Otis defied the odds to make the NFL

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SPORTS WRITER

Scott Otis felt a twinge of satisfaction in the shadow of Fontana Field while track officials scrambled to measure his javelin throw in 1991. For three years of varsity quarterback maintained that his arm could beat most teams. This throw certainly proved it.

Former Blue Knight track coach Pete Sepko remembers that day because the record-setting throw should have been even farther. Officials had to reach up the hill at the edge of the soccer field because Otis had stuck the javelin into the hill like a dart in a bullseye.

### Hall of Fame

"I was going to throw the whole area back about 20 feet or so because I felt that Scott was going to start launching big ones pretty soon," said Sepko. "Unfortunately, I didn't have time to do that. The throw was 221 feet, 10 inches, but it landed part way up the bank for that upper soccer field. It would have probably gone about 230 feet if I had moved the mark."

Don't feel too badly for Otis. After more than 20 years, his throw still ranks as the best by any Knight. The team boasts a handful of 200-foot throwers, but Otis beat them all by more than 10 feet.

"He had a lot of natural talent. He has a great arm, great size, and good leaping abilities," said Sepko. "He never played baseball, so he didn't have any poor delivery problems that we had to correct when he was a sophomore, and then he got bigger and stronger as years went by."

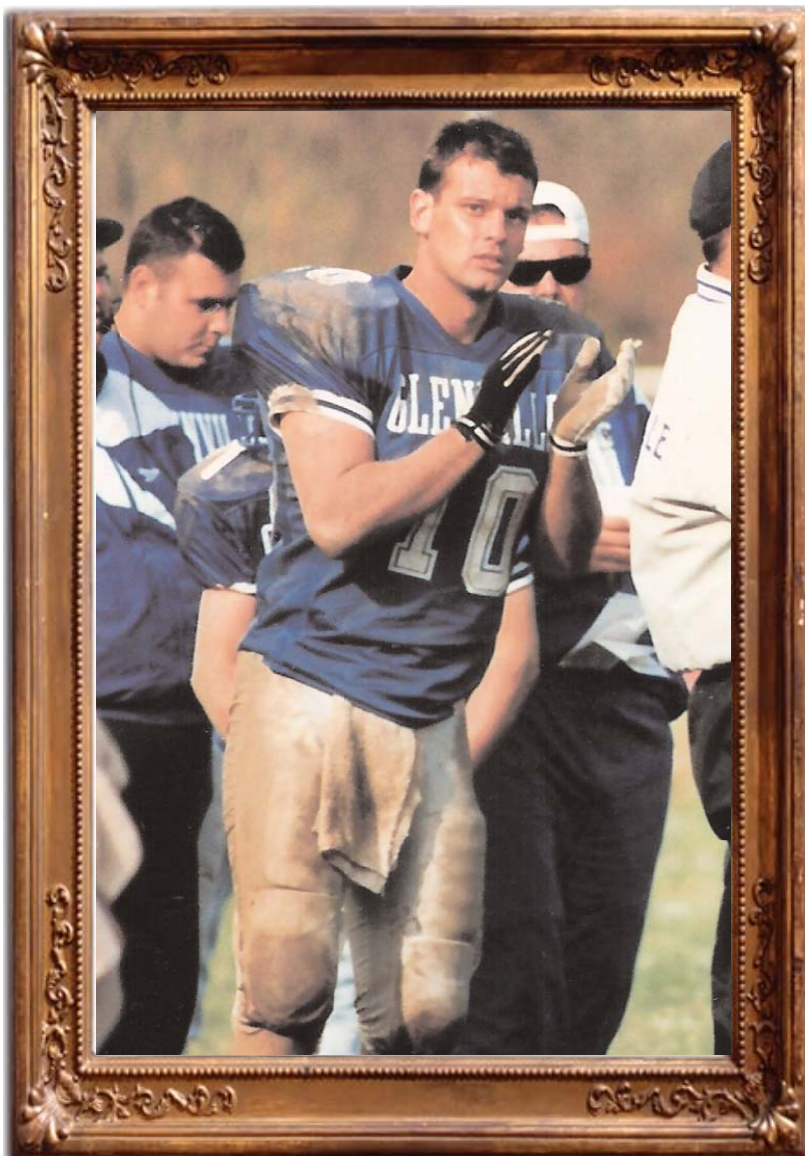
With an arm like that, how come he didn't set state records under Jude Kelly? Why didn't Otis shatter passing records in Kelly's air raid attack? How does a guy that can throw a javelin with precision over 200 feet manage just 12 touch-downs in three varsity seasons?

One word: Timing. The air raid didn't hatch until after Otis went on to college. In his early years, Kelly was focused on running the ball.

"As we progressed to a spread style attack, he certainly would have been one of the top quarterbacks," said Kelly, "but I had Scott in my first years at Southington, and we were running the wishbone, which is a system that I used before. We knew he had a strong arm, but we probably only threw 3-5 passes per game and ran the rest of the time. He was a big, strong quarterback, and he did okay, but we didn't end up throwing the ball until after he left."

That theme ran through Otis' entire career. He was the go-to guy for teams in transition. It hurt him in high school and as an underclassman in college, but it prepared him for two record breaking seasons that swung the spotlight toward a small, West Virginia college and landed Otis smack dab in the NFL. It's one of the most unlikely paths to the professional leagues that anyone has ever taken.

"It takes some urging or egging on just to get me talking about some of these things," Otis said as he shifted in his seat at a local coffee shop. "I sort of keep it close. I know in the back of my mind how much work I put into it. Sure, the ultimate goal is to get to the NFL, but with every little baby step I felt like I was getting close."



Otis wasn't bred to be a professional quarterback. He wasn't shipped around the country to high priced camps. Otis was just a local kid with a toughness fostered in the midget football leagues. He never considered himself a superstar until a growth spurt hit him in junior high school, and he tried out for the Kennedy team.

"All of a sudden, I was this 6'2" or 6'3" skinny kid with a decent arm," he said. "I always had some athletic ability when it came to sports, but I always thought that it would be basketball that I would play. As I began to progress with football, we found that I was able to throw the ball, and it came pretty natural to me."

Otis rose quickly through the ranks, but he still wasn't the obvious choice for quarterback when he arrived at the high school. The Blue Knights were in transition. Long-time coach Dom D'Angelo retired, and Kelly arrived with his wishbone attack.

"I was athletic, but we had a kid named Dave Green that was a much better fit for the position," said Otis. "I was tall and the center was only like 5'9", so it was almost like my butt was touching the ground when I took the snap. But because of the wishbone, we ended up utilizing Dave more as running back. That was good for me."

Still, Otis never had a chance to showcase his abilities in a varsity game. It wasn't until Kelly brought some players to a UConn football camp that Otis turned heads. The next year, he was invited to Duke University where he began to show some promise. Otis considered transferring to a school like Xavier to showcase his skills, but he wanted to compete with his friends.

"I played my whole life in Southington," he said. "Growing up, I played with them or against them in the midget leagues. I was looking forward to playing at the high school."

So Otis resigned himself to his

role in the running offense. The Knights limped to a 4-6 record in his sophomore year and dropped to just three wins the following year. As a senior Otis rallied his team to an 8-2 record, but scouts never came calling. Kelly decided to try a less conventional way to showcase his young thrower.

"We knew he had a strong arm, and we knew he had some college talent, so we videotaped our pre-game with him taking the snaps, the steps, and throwing all the different pass patterns that we had in our system," said Kelly. "The wishbone showed that he had some toughness and some size to him, but they also had a chance to see the strength of his arm."

The gamble paid off. The University of West Virginia signed Otis, but once again he found himself with a program in transition. The Mountaineers were coming off an undefeated season and a championship game in the Fiesta Bowl, but a new coaching staff wasn't as committed to Otis as the ones that recruited him.

"At the time, they hadn't really recruited that truly athletic quarterback, so I thought that I had a chance to go there and compete," he said. "Later, I found out that they signed five quarterbacks that year. They had a couple of incumbents, but after my red shirt year I actually ended up being the third string quarterback for my first couple of seasons."

Many switched to different positions or different schools, but Otis was determined to be a quarterback. He had a good spring camp as a sophomore and was a top prospect in the program, but coaches approached him before summer to tell him that they were going with their younger recruits. Otis as forced to play another position, transfer, or ride the bench.

"At that time, it wasn't about having any aspirations to play NFL football. I had just put in the time and the work. I just wanted to play

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Inside the Numbers

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**SHS Football**

- 93.0 career quarterback rating
- 133.0 quarterback rating in 1990
- Scored 40 career points (1988-1990)
- Captain (1990)

**RUSHING STATISTICS**

Year	No.	Yards	Avg.	Long	TD
1988	26	76	2.9	14	3
1989	50	18	0.4	15	0
1990	50	166	3.3	37	3
<b>Career</b>	<b>126</b>	<b>260</b>	<b>2.1</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>6</b>

**PASSING STATISTICS**

Year	Comp	Att	PCT	Yds	TD	INT
1988	7	23	30.4	87	1	3
1989	41	107	38.3	553	3	7
1990	25	65	38.5	465	8	2
<b>Career</b>	<b>73</b>	<b>195</b>	<b>37.4</b>	<b>1105</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>12</b>

**SHS Track (Javelin)**

- Holds the SHS javelin record (221'10")
- New England Championship (1989)
- All-conference (1989, 1990, 1991)
- Golden West Invitational in Sacramento, California (1991).

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**West Virginia Univ. Football**

- Earned Division I scholarship to West Virginia University (1991-1993)

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**Glennville State College Football**

- Transferred to Glennville State (1993-1995)
- Most efficient passer in WVIAC history (147.8 quarterback rating)
- Ranks 3rd in career offense (5,986 yards)
- Ranks 3rd in career TD passes (56)
- Ranks 3rd in single season TD passes (34)
- Ranks 4th (575 yds) and 5th (569 yds) in single game passing.
- Twice he threw 6 TD passes in a game.

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**NFL (Baltimore Ravens)**

- Signed as an undrafted free agent by the Baltimore Ravens (1996)
- Third string quarterback

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**Coaching**

- Cheshire HS assistant track coach
- Southington HS assistant track coach

on Saturdays," he said. "I just wanted to see the fruits of my labor from my time commitment. I wanted to see if my abilities truly were what I thought they were."

He considered returning home to play at UConn as they made the transition to NCAA Division I-A, but he settled into a small West Virginia school transitioning from an NAIA program to an NCAA division II team. Glennville State College had a young coach that shared Otis' excitement about the passing game. Rich Rodriguez is now coaching at the University of Arizona, but he got his start molding Otis into a professional prospect. Once again, Otis took a chance with a team in transition. This time, it paid off.

"It was the best decision that I could have made," he said. "It gave me a chance to learn a wide-open spread offense. Rich had an unbelievable mind for the game and all the little nuances that were all brand new to me. I was sort of learning it all on the fly and picking it up as fast as I could. Each week was a learning experience."

In his first season, he completed a pass to Chris George that broke Jerry Rice's all-time collegiate reception record. Otis went on to shatter school records and draw the attention of NFL scouts. Twice, Otis completed six touchdown passes in a game. He threw for 5,986 yards in two seasons with the

Pioneers and still ranks in the top three at the school in career offense and touchdown passes (34) even though he only played for two seasons.

He ranks fourth on the all-time list with a 575 yard passing performance in one game and ranks fifth in school history with a 569 yard game. He still ranks as the most efficient passer in WVIAC conference history with a 147.8 quarterback rating.

"Even if the NFL never came knocking, I would still be sitting her talking about Glennville with a grin on my face," said Otis. "That was the best way that I could have finished my college career—bar none."

But the NFL did come knocking, and Otis found himself showcasing his skills to NFL scouts at the University of West Virginia complex in front of the same coaches that felt he wasn't good enough to play.

Otis wasn't drafted, but he worked his way onto the lineup for the Baltimore Ravens behind Vinny Testaverde and Eric Zeier. He never played except for some preseason games. He only lasted one year, but he made it.

It's no surprise that the Southington Sports Hall of Fame committee selected Otis in their fourth class. On Thursday, Nov. 14, Otis was honored in an induction ceremony at the Aqua Turf.