

Southington Sports Hall of Fame

The Blue Knight

After 3 decades Ernie Blue remains the measuring stick for Southington scorers

By JOHN GORALSKI
SPORTS WRITER

Bloomfield raced to a 26-17 lead in the first quarter of the 1971 season opener, so Blue Knight coach Ed Nardi gave Ernie Blue 'the signal' at the break between quarters. Blue had already scored nine of Southington's 17 points against the fast-breaking Bloomfield squad, but the first year Southington coach let his senior captain loose. Bloomfield never knew what hit them.

Hall of Fame

Blue converted eight of his first nine shots from the three point line like a long range sniper. He scored 15 baskets in 25 attempts like a cowboy in a gun-fight. Blue missed the target just three times in his 18 free throw attempts, but even he was surprised when officials whistled a stop in the action midway through the third period to signal his record-setting day.

Six years earlier, Greg O'Connell set a single game scoring record for his 36 point effort. As the 1960s came to a close, Tom Leahy matched that varsity effort.

But in the first game of his senior season, Blue had shattered the former measure with a 45-point barrage in Southington's opening day loss.

"What a shooter he was," said Art Secondo, a former sports writer at *The Southington News* and *Southington Observer*. Three decades later, Secondo can still recall Blue's scoring barrage. "He was an intense player, and we weren't used to anybody like that. Ed Nardi was an outside shooter when he played. We had a few other scorers, but nobody like Ernie Blue. He just popped up in Southington and started shooting."

Some say that Ernie Blue is the reason why Southington High School teams are called the 'Blue' Knights.

"He could score from just about anywhere," Nardi said about his former all-state scorer. "He had extraordinary moves inside. He had a good outside shot, and he was very hard to handle. After that first game he saw a lot special defenses to contain him, but he was such a prolific scorer. We didn't have a very good record that year, but he was outstanding."

Blue was never left unguarded for the rest of the season, but that didn't seem to slow Southington's

top gun. He averaged 22.6 points per game as a senior. With five games left on the schudel, he became the second Southington scorer to eclipse the 1,000 points barrier in a game against Rockville. He pushed past Michanczyk as the program's top scorer and finished his career with 1,155 points. To this day, Blue remains the only Blue Knight to score more than 1,100 points.

"He was very outstanding. If you look at that time, he really stood out," said Nardi. "I don't know exactly how many 1,000 point scorers we've had in Southington, but we didn't have many. It was my first year and we didn't have a very good season, so a lot of things sort of fell on his shoulders. He handled it well, and he was very tough to contain."

Southington had fallen a long way from their heydays of the 1950s by the time that Blue arrived in town as a freshman at Kennedy Junior High School in January, 1969. A local housing boom was already transforming the quiet, blue collar town into a community with one of the largest high schools in the state when Blue arrived at the high school the following year.

It had been 20 years since Ray Michanczyk became Southington's first 1,000 point scorer during his four-year career in the 1950s, but Blue eclipsed his mark in just three seasons. Since his graduation, Southington has returned to a four-year high school program, but nobody has been able to beat his mark in 30 years.

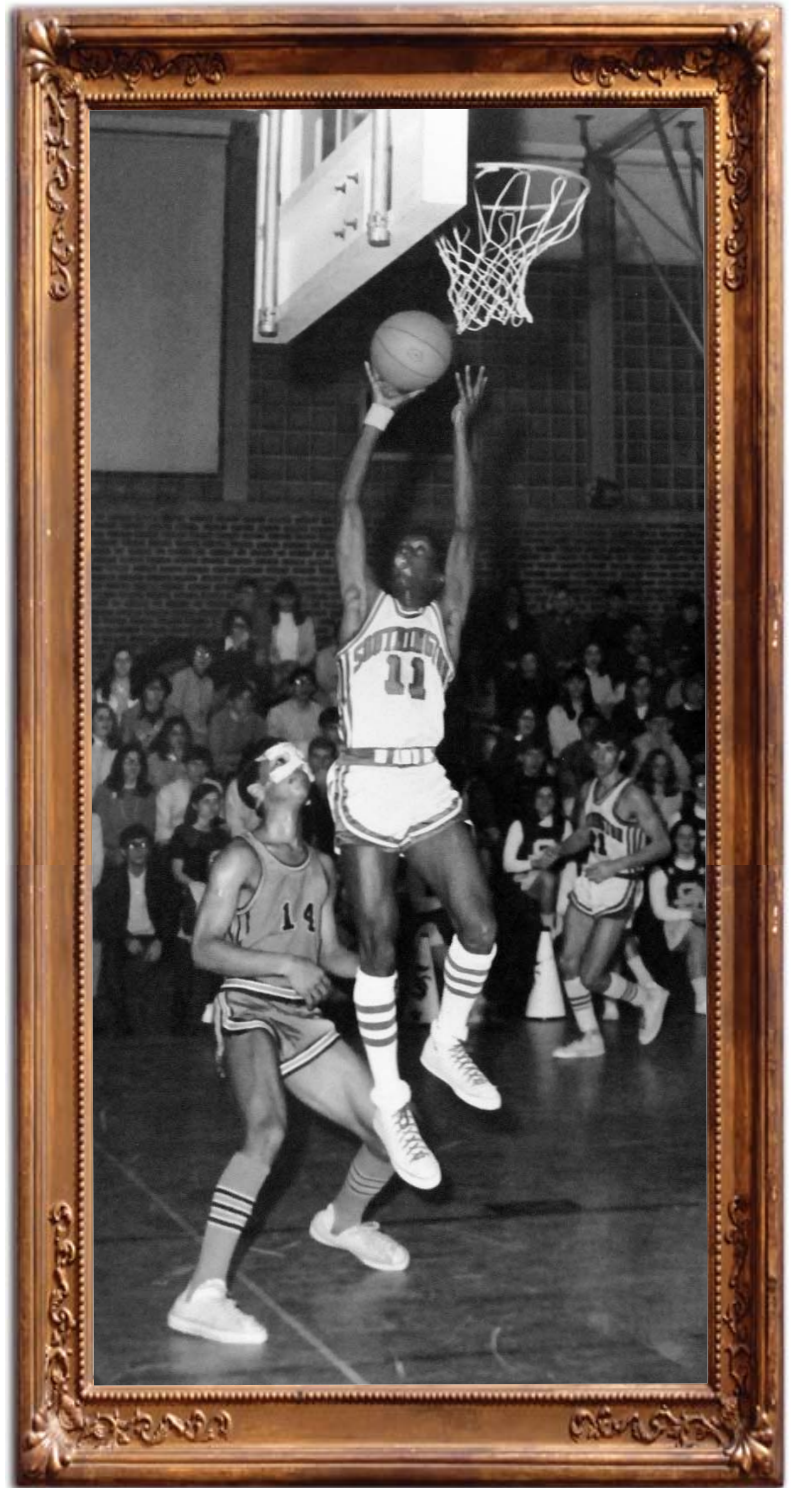
Blue seemed almost embarrassed at long-standing record. "I feel good about it, but I've held it long enough," he said. "I wish somebody would break it because I love the school and I love the sport. Okay. I held it this long. Now somebody else can take it, and I wish that I can be there to see it. I want to be there, and I want to shake his hand."

It seems almost impossible to believe that Blue had not scored a single point in an organized game by the time he landed at Kennedy Junior High School in the middle of his freshman season. It seems even more unlikely that a 5 foot, 8 inch player could wrestle big men as a sophomore power forward, but the high-jumping Blue scored 180 points in his first year with the Blue Knights.

In the off-season, he grew two inches, gained a few pounds, and worked on his game until dark on the courts at Plantsville Elementary School. All that work paid off in his junior year. Blue exploded with 424 points (22.3 points per game) to lead the conference in scoring, and that year still ranks sixth all-time for Southington scorers.

"In between my sophomore and junior years, I was focused on learning a jump shot," he said. "I wanted to have a 15-foot jumper that would work like a lay-up. As soon as I got that jump shot, I figured that I could take on anybody. If they were my size, they were in trouble."

It was no fluke. As a senior, he scored 451 points, and that still ranks fourth on the list of Southington's single season performances. His 45-point perform-



ance in the opener still holds the record for the top single game performance of any Blue Knight, and his 43-point effort against Plainville in mid-February ranks sixth on the all-time list.

Blue credits his coaches for the sudden rise to the top.

"I doubt that anyone else can claim that they had four hall of fame coaches in high school," he said. "There was Walt Lozoski and Dom D'Angelo in my sophomore and junior years. Then, I was blessed to have Ed Nardi and Dick Lorenzo as coaches in my senior year, and they are all hall of famers. Then, I was blessed to continue on at college with John Salerno and Bob Ruderman—both Southington guys—and they were both New England Basketball Hall of Fame coaches. I think I was pretty good, but I was blessed to have the opportunity to play under those guys in that atmosphere and those circumstances."

Whatever the reason, Blue was far from finished when he graduated Southington High School. He continued at Mattatuck Community College (now known as Naugatuck Valley Community College) where he managed to score over 400 points in both seasons under Salerno and Ruderman.

Blue scored 428 points in his freshman year and 449 points in his final season at the two-year program. He was the leading scorer both years despite his role off the bench as the team's sixth man. Salerno would shuffle him into the lineup when they needed offense and the team rallied for an undefeated season in Blue's first year.

"We used to get mad when he passed it. 'What are you passing the ball for?'" Salerno said with a laugh. "Everyone was always aware of who should shoot the ball.

When he was open to get the ball, they got it to him."

Blue still ranks in the top 10 in scoring (877 points), and he was inducted into the Mattatuck Community College Sports Hall of Fame in 1990.

"He had such quickness that he was able to get his jump shot off any time, no matter who was guarding him. He would get on a hot streak, and he was very quick," said Salerno. "He was very coachable and always had a good attitude. You'd kind of want to have 10 of him."

After graduation Blue went on to serve a 20-year career as a prison guard, but he never strayed too far from the sidelines. He became a coach in Waterbury's famed Pearl Street Basketball League that served as a jumping off point for future pro players like Rick Mahorn, John Bagley, Chris Smith, Michael Adams, and Charles Smith. His work there earned him a spot as the junior varsity girls basketball coach at Kennedy High School in Waterbury where he has served since 2008.

It's no surprise that the Southington Sports Hall of Fame selection committee chose Blue to be inducted into the local hall of fame. On Thursday, Nov. 14, he was honored in an induction ceremony at the Aqua Turf in Plantsville.

"I want to be remembered as the best 5'10" power forward that Southington has ever had," he said with a laugh. "I don't know what to say. I feel more about this honor now than if it happened 20 years ago. It's been such a long time, so to still be in that group? Wow. Any time that you're pointed out as being one of the better guys at something that you really have a passion for, how can you not be proud?"

Southington Sports Hall of Fame

Inside the Numbers

SHS Basketball

- SHS career scoring record (1155 points)
- SHS record for points in a game (45) and second most points in a game (43).
- Ranked No. 4 (451) and No. 6 (424) in single season scoring.
- Led the conference in scoring in 1970-71 and 1971-72.
- All-State honorable mention (1971, 1972)
- First Team All-Conference (1971, 1972)
- All-Conference honorable mention (1970).
- Captain (1971-72)

INDIVIDUAL STATISTICS

1969-70—19 games, 280 points, 14.7 points per game.

1970-71—19 games, 424 points, 22.3 points per game.

1971-72—20 games, 451 points, 141 rebounds, 22.6 points and 7.1 rebounds per game.

Mattatuck CC Basketball

- Mattatuck Community College Sports Hall of Fame (1990)
- Member of the 1972-1973 undefeated team.
- First team all-league (1972-73)
- Led the team in scoring two years.
- Ranks 9th in career scoring (877).

INDIVIDUAL STATISTICS

1972-73—24 games, 428 points, 17.8 points per game.

1973-74—26 games, 449 points, 17.3 points per game.

Coaching

- Coach in the Pearl Street Basketball League
- Kennedy High School Assistant Girls Basketball Coach (2008-Present).