

Hall of Fame

The Hart of a lion

Kelly Hart set the standard for girls sports

By JOHN GORALSKI
SPORTS WRITER

Kelly Hart was destined to break the mold for women athletes long before she entered Southington High School.

She grew up on stories about her mother's basketball career in the 1950s. She hung on every word as her mother spun tales about organized five-on-five games in upstate Maine with uniforms and officials. She watched her neighbors' puzzled grins when her father erected a plywood backboard in the backyard for her mother to shoot around, and she dreamed of following her mother's lead.

The landscape was changing fast in Southington in the 1970s, and Hart was looking for her place. When she saw a flyer for a new junior pro basketball team, she leapt at the chance. She had no idea that it would launch a career that thrust Southington into the spotlight with their first basketball state championship and Hart into the national spotlight and the college ranks.

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"That was my first taste of basketball in a game, and I just loved it," she said. "It was funny because the high school players were the coaches, and that's where I met everybody that I played with at the high school. I played with all the seniors from my high school team—Jeannie, Karen, Dianne, Meg, and Allison. We all played together when we were in junior pro, and Jeanne Cayer's sister was actually my coach."

It was the start of a sisterhood, and Hart was the center. She had a natural gift as a scorer, a mind for the game, and an athleticism that set her apart. Her parents sent her to St. Thomas Junior High School, and Hart threw herself into their burgeoning female programs.

"I played basketball all three years, but they didn't have everything to begin with," said Hart. "I think we had volleyball in ninth grade. In ninth grade, I played softball, but I think it was the first year for both of those teams. In eighth grade, I played co-ed soccer with Robbie Dibble and Teddie Wallace. They were men, and we were just running around."

It wasn't long before Hart began to turn heads as a female athlete. In ninth grade, she led the basketball team's offense, scoring 300 of the team's 900 points. High school coaches had already taken notice of Hart's potential.

"When I saw her play at St. Thomas in the ninth grade, you could see she had the ability and that she'd be starting," former Southington High School coach Joe Daddio told *the Observer* in 1982.

Hart didn't disappoint. She made the varsity lineup in volleyball as a sophomore and a junior. She scored over 200 points with the basketball team as a sophomore and eclipsed the 500 point mark by the end of her junior season. She cracked the varsity lineup in softball because of team injuries, and she finished the season with a .355 batting average. Hart moved to center field as a junior and hit .333.



Southington Sports Hall of Fame

Inside the Numbers

Basketball

- Member of the first Southington High School Class LL girls basketball championship (1982).
- No. 31 was retired by the Lady Knights (1982).

CAREER STATISTICS (SOUTHINGTON)

- Scored 1,132 career points.
- All-Conference (1982)
- Team captain (1981-82)
- Team MVP (1982)

1978-79—Scored 300 of the team's 900 points (St. Thomas Junior High School).

1978-79—210 points (11.1 per game).

1980-81—370 points (19.5 per game), 62% FT, 150 rebounds (7.9 per game), 80 steals (4.2 per game).

1981-82—552 points (25.1 per game), 79.5% FT, 126 rebounds (5.7 per game), 126 steals (4.1 per game).

CAREER STATISTICS (BOSTON COLLEGE)

- Played four seasons (1983-87)
 - Team captain (1985-86, 1986-87)
 - As a senior, averaged 4.2 points, 1.0 assists, and shot 46.3 percent from the floor (50-108).
- Career—76 games, 54-for-204 shooting (26.4%), 43-for-65 free throws (66.2%), 121 rebounds, 77 assists, 38 steals, 193 points (1.5 ppg).

Softball

- Member of the Class LL softball state championship team (1981, 1982).
 - Earned 3 varsity letters (1980, 1981, 1982)
 - All-Conference (1981).
- 1980—Shortstop and third base, .355 Batting Average.
1981—Center fielder and leadoff hitter, .333 Batting Average, 20 runs, 9 steals.
1982—Center fielder.

Volleyball

- Earned 2 varsity letters (1980, 1981).

Still, it was her basketball talent that was drawing the most attention.

"She has tremendous offensive skills, she's a better passer, has natural instincts, and is a good ball handler," Daddio said in another 1982 interview with *the Observer*. "The one thing that has made her the kind of player she is is the fact that she hasn't sat back."

Hart threw herself into the sport. She borrowed money from her grandmother and began to attend local, state, and national camps. She credits Bob Ruderman for teaching her a jump shot at his Southington camp even though few girls would attempt them at the time. She flew to Chicago for another camp and went to Rutgers to work out in front of college coaches.

"It was sort of like a junior Olympic program," she said. "It was pretty neat. Pat Summit was there. The Rutgers coach was there. All the big coaches were there, and I made it to the last cuts in my junior year. That was so awesome. I was so excited I was going to go back my senior year."

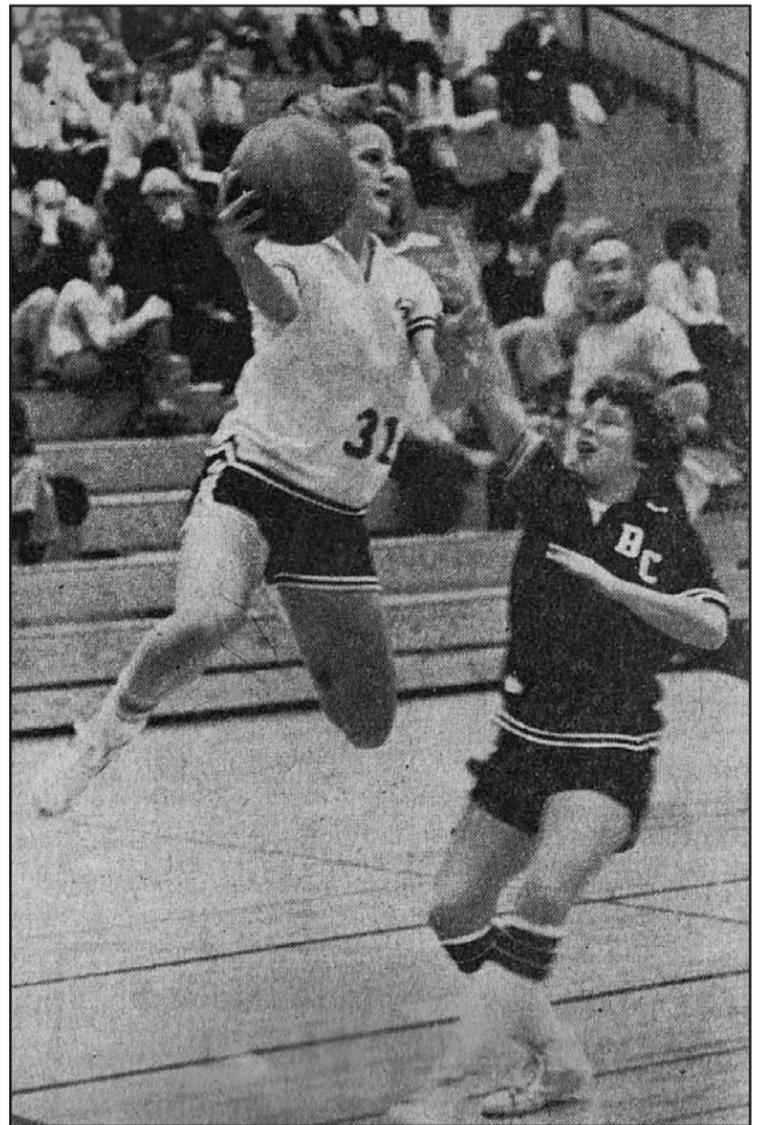
Hart was prepared to take the reigns in 1982, but few could have predicted her success as a senior. She sat out the volleyball season to focus on basketball, and she hit the ground running with 29 points in the opening game.

Hart scored more than 20 points in 14 different contests, including a 33-point effort against Hamden in early February that avenged Southington's only loss of the season. She finished the season with 552 points, became just the second player to score 1,000 career points, and the first to lead her team to a Class LL state championship. Hart was at the center of nearly every point.

"We had great teams in my sophomore and junior years—my sophomore year especially—but we had a lot of injuries and didn't end up going very far," she said. "In our senior year, we didn't talk about it. It wasn't like we said that we were going to win the state championship. We just talked about working hard. Everybody was just so selfless—the juniors, the sophomores, and the seniors. There was no pecking order with who was important and who was not. It was a great year, and everything fell into place."

Southington became known for two things: a steel curtain defense and the scoring of Kelly Hart.

"She's definitely a team player and at times I have to beg her to shoot. She could score as much as she wants, but she likes to keep the team involved," Daddio told reporters at the time. "Whenever we needed a good pass, she comes



FILE PHOTO

Kelly Hart drives past a Bristol Central defender during the 1982 Class LL state championship season.

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Whenever we needed a good pass, she comes through, or if we need a big bucket, she gets it. She seems to be at her best when it's a close game.

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Joe Daddio,
Former SHS coach

through, or if we need a big bucket, she gets it. She seems to be at her best when it's a close game"

Her efforts earned the Knights their first state title, and Hart signed with Boston College for a promising collegiate career. Then, everything suddenly screeched to a halt. She was playing a coed pickup game to work on her skills when she felt a twinge in her knee. She had played through knee injuries before, but this was worse.

"It hurt like heck, but when I got into the car to go home it just collapsed on me again," she said. "I knew it was serious. I got a couple of tests done here, but they couldn't figure it out. It was just at the beginning of arthroscopic surgery. I was very nervous that I was going to lose the scholarship. I called the coach, and she was phenomenal. She told me that she was committed to me, so I went up to Boston to get surgery on my 18th birthday."

Hart continued to fight and claw her way back. She battled through two injury-riddled seasons in Boston but never did return to her previous dominance. She managed to play 76 college games for the Eagles, scoring 193 points with

121 rebounds, 77 assists, and 38 steals. She was named captain for both her junior and senior seasons, and the Eagles went 63-50 over her four year career, including a 19-9 record in Hart's junior season.

"I just loved to play," she said. "I coached after college, and that's a wonderful thing, but there's just nothing like playing. I loved the exhilaration and getting that adrenaline going."

For members of the Southington Sports Hall of Fame selection committee, Kelly Hart was an easy selection as a member of the 2011 induction class. On Wednesday, Nov. 9, she will be inducted into the Southington Sports Hall of Fame at the Aqua Turf Club in Plantsville.

"The people from the town supported us. Our teachers supported us, so it really was a great adventure. It was new and exciting, and I'm just thrilled to be a part of it," she said. "I'm very honored. I've always looked up to players like [2010 inductee] Val DePaolo and [2011 inductee] Irene Mach. Those guys came back to give back to us when we were young. That really made an impression, so to go in with them is such a big honor."