

Southington Sports Hall of Fame

The full court press

Jim Senich championed the Knights with his pen and his golden voice

By JOHN GORALSKI
SPORTS WRITER

Jim Senich still remembers the nun's comments when he delivered his oral report to his sixth grade class. "Someday you're going to be a radio announcer," she said, and the velvety-voiced youngster slid back into his seat with a satisfied grin.

Some boys practice last second shots in their driveways with dreams of screaming fans. Others swing sticks in their backyards with visions of ninth inning World Series homers. Some shoot slap shots against brick walls fantasizing about Stanley Cup trophies.

Senich dreamed of being the narrator that announced those scores to the cheering world.

Hall of Fame

"I wanted to be a sportscaster from sixth grade on," he said. "Most kids don't know what they want to do even in their first few years in college, but I always knew what I wanted to do. I wanted to be a play-by-play guy for the Cardinals."

So when his high school coaches cut him during the pre-season, Senich's dreams weren't totally shattered. When his parents shifted him from the Waterbury public schools into the Catholic prep schools, Senich didn't complain too

loudly that his teams wouldn't win state titles. Instead, he focused on his studies, listened to games on the radio, and continued chasing his dreams.

When graduation day came, Senich packed his bags for Boston on the advice of his cousin Bob Crane (from Hogan's Heroes fame) and entered the Leland Powers School of Radio, Television, and Theatre. He was determined to make his dreams come true...

"I wasn't too thrilled about acting, but you had to take it because of the name on the marquis," he said. "I wasn't going to be a Hollywood star, but we did Shakespeare. We did Molière and all the classics with the long soliloquies. After a while, I didn't embarrass myself, and it really helped my elocution and pronunciation. In those days, we didn't have microphones on stage. Your voice had to reach the back row. That helped me work my way into radio because I learned to strengthen my voice."

After graduation, some classmates chased the bright lights of Hollywood and Broadway. Others headed straight for big-city TV shows. Senich made a beeline for the sidelines. He bounced around the radio dial from Bridgeport to Greenwich and Bristol. He wrote freelance sports articles, and began to show up at Fairfield College for basketball games and New York Giants preseason camps in the mid-1960s.

He covered the Raybestos Brakettes in Stratford when they were the best softball team in the world. He championed Fairfield University basketball teams and interviewed players and coaches from Tom Seaver, Mel Allen, and Red Smith to Frank Gifford and Rosie Greer. If there were sports to be covered, Senich was eager to please.

"They had me do reports on the yacht club, and I knew nothing about yachts," he said. "But you meet somebody who's nice. You tell them that you don't know anything about it, and they guide you through. It's the same at any job."

His path began to unfold before him. He abandoned the newspapers for the radio. He worked his way up to news director at WBIS in Bristol, but those childhood voices still rang in his head. Sports, not news, was beckoning. So when yet another format change chased him from the radio, and the rising cost of gas threatened the long commute to Greenwich, someone told the Waterbury native about a new radio station in Southington.

"I was from Waterbury," he said. "All I knew was that Southington was a town at the bottom of the hill. We thought they were all farmers down there. I knew a little bit about Joe Fontana. Outside of that, I knew nothing."

From his first sentence on the air, Senich was absorbed into the Southington community. The local radio station had him chasing high school football teams and scoring varsity baseball games on the air. His enthusiasm was contagious. His research was impeccable, and his timing was perfect.

"I worked with him at my very first job at WNTY in Southington in the early 1970s. In fact, he hired me," said radio personality Tom Shute. "Years later I hired him at WATR in Waterbury. He got to continue his love of sports during our sports broadcasts. Also, he got to do our sports on the morning show. Eventually, we made him our news and sports director, and at one point he did a talk show for us, but sports was always his favorite. He just loved to do the play-by-play."

Senich became a fixture on the sidelines. Southington was already established for the rich football tra-



dition that reached back to the 1940s. Baseball was emerging as another dynasty, and Southington was leading the charge in girls sports. When he was let go by the local radio station, a new weekly newspaper was just starting up. Just before Christmas in 1975, Senich was hired as the first sports editor for *The Observer*. He served at the local paper for the next 13 years in ever changing roles from sports editor to executive editor. His column, 'Senich's Sportscope,' chronicled the town's emergence as a leader in sports.

"Although he wasn't from Southington, he adopted this town and showed a lot of passion for it," said former *Observer* sports writer Art Secondo. "It showed in his coverage of Southington sports. He got into it, and he really became a big part of covering our stars and our history. He loved it so much that I think he would have done it for nothing."

Senich still recalls that times as a high point in his career. He covered Southington's only wrestling state title in 1978. He witnessed the town's first and only cross country title in 1984 and the high school's only golf title in 1987, but it was the coverage of the Lady Knights that really set him apart. His columns tracked nine state titles in softball and four state championships in basketball with a seriousness that was uncommon for girls sports in the 1970s.

His coverage never wavered whether it was a Thanksgiving football game or a preseason gymnastics meet.

"Jim Senich was probably one of the first writers in the state that felt like the female athlete deserved as much ink as the male athletes got," said former Lady Knight softball coach Joe Piazza. "When he was the sports writer and the editor of *The Observer*, he went out of his way to feature female athletes in his columns as much as the males, and that was new. He was always really friendly and open with the kids. He was open with the coaches. When he interviewed you, you

always knew that what you said was what was going to be printed."

His coverage opened the door for women, and the accolades began pouring in. He was recognized by the CT High School Coaches Association (CHSCA) in 1997 and flew to San Diego to accept a national high school coaches award two years later. He was inducted into the Southington High School Baseball Hall of Fame (1982), the Connecticut Scholastic and Collegiate Softball Hall of Fame (1994), and the CHSCA Hall of Fame (2007) because of his coverage of Southington sports.

Senich used his newfound power to change the community and help the athlete. He was sometimes critical, sometimes thoughtful. He wrote one series of columns aimed at the Board of Education after witnessing injuries to a soccer player and a gymnast, and that series led to the hiring of a full-time medical trainer at the high school.

"I told them that they had to find the money for a full-time sports trainer. They fired back at me, saying that they couldn't afford it, and that really ticked me off," he said. "Couldn't afford it? You can't afford to protect the health of the athletes? They finally gave in, and I felt proud about that."

It's no surprise that the Southington Sports Hall of Fame selection committee chose Senich as just the second member of the press to be inducted into the local hall of fame. His coverage of Southington sports set the bar for all who followed and his influence changed the athletic landscape. His focus on girls sports helped launch dozens into the collegiate ranks.

"We didn't have as many sports as we do now, so a lot of people were just writing about football, basketball, and baseball. We didn't have girls track, field hockey, or gymnastics," Secondo said. "If it wasn't for people with that sort of passion, sports in Southington would not be what it is today. He helped carry on the tradition and legacy of Southington sports by constantly printing it."

On Thursday, Nov. 14, Senich was honored in an induction ceremony at the Aqua Turf.



Southington Sports Hall of Fame

Inside the Numbers

Radio

- News director at WBIS (Bristol)
- Sports director at WNTY (Southington)
- News-Sports director at WATR
- Broadcasting at WLAD, WNAB, WGCH

Newspaper

- Connecticut Sunday-Herald, writer
- Observer sports editor (1975-1985)
- Southington Observer editor (1980-1988)

Awards/Recognitions

- Big Apple Award for Education Coverage (1982)
- New England Press Association Award for Best Sports Column (1983)
- Southington Chamber of Commerce Award (1983)
- District 5 Officials Award (1992)
- Waterbury Crime Stoppers Service Award (1992)
- Kiwanis Club Merit Award (1994)
- CT High School Coaches Association Joseph Fontana Service Award (1997)
- National High School Coaches Association Service Award (1999)
- Waterbury Olympian Club Merit Award (2000)
- Sacred Heart High School Distinguished Alumni Award (2001)
- CIAC Basketball Merit Award (2004)

Halls of Fame

- SHS Baseball Hall of Fame (1982)
- CT Scholastic and Collegiate Softball Hall of Fame (1994)
- Teikyo Post University Hall of Fame (2001)
- CTHSCA Hall of Fame (2007)