

Hall of Fame

The Little Engine that Could

Dick Lorenzo played bigger than his size

By JOHN GORALSKI
SPORTS WRITER

Dick Lorenzo didn't turn many heads when he walked onto Southington's varsity basketball court in 1954. The five-foot-eight player wasn't scared by his shadow when he strolled across the infield in the spring. Lorenzo's stature never inspired fear in the minds of the opposition, but that peace was quickly shattered when the ball reached his hands.

Lorenzo is living proof that good things come in small packages, and nobody ever used the word "small" to describe Lorenzo's spirit.

Athlete

"Dick was a tremendous player who was a great competitor," Jay Fontana told the Observer in 1984 when Lorenzo was inducted into the town's baseball hall of fame. "He just wouldn't quit...a great athlete."

In the mid 1950s, Southington's sports were exploding. A new high school had just opened in the center of town. Major colleges were taking notice of the tiny blue-collar town and its strange ability to push out athletic talent.

But an undersized sophomore out-rebounding big men? A diminutive infielder with power at the plate? When it came to Lorenzo, there was no explanation.

"I was fortunate that I had some quickness in both baseball and basketball, which gave me a slight edge because I was small," he said. "I was a pretty good rebounder because of my positioning. It wasn't that I could jump like crazy, but I could get myself into pretty good positioning. Walt Lozosky had me playing forward."

There had to be something in the water.

On the basketball court, Lorenzo set the pace. He averaged double-digit scoring in three straight seasons. He finished just under 1,000 points for his career (927 points). He earned second team all-state honors in 1957 as a junior and made the first team the following year.

Lorenzo credits his off-season approach, playing year-round in pick-up games in his Liberty Street neighborhood and challenging the bigger, older kids in full-day battles at the YMCA gym.

"It was a 12 month thing for me," he said. "We used to shovel off basketball courts around town or in our own driveways. We'd make sure that we could play, and we'd shoot for hours upon hours. I don't want to sound corny, but sport has always been an awfully big part of my life."

That hard work paid off. In his junior year, Lorenzo helped break a three-way tie in the race for the conference title, averaging 25 points per game through the final four contests and adding 25 points in the final game to clinch the title. He went on to score 49 points in two tournament games.

Southington Sports
Hall of Fame

Inside the Numbers

Basketball

- Scored 927 career points.
- 1954-55—Scored 217 points in 21 games (10.3)
- 1955-56—Scored 377 points in 21 games (18.0)
- 1956-57—Scored 333 points in 22 games (15.1)
- Selected All-State (1957, 1958)

Baseball

- Three-year starter, hit .460 in 1957.
- Earned scholarship to Fairfield University
- Hit .300 (1958), .320 (1959), .380 (1960) for the Stags.
- Inaugurated into SHS baseball hall of fame (1984).

Slow pitch softball

- Won 7 Connecticut state championships.
- Won 7 New England state championships.
- Placed fourth in the national tournament (1967).
- Named to all-national first team (1967).
- Inducted into CT slow pitch softball hall of fame (1989).

Coaching

- Overall record 216-138 (1975-91)
- Coached in the CIAC all-star game between the CT all-stars and RI all-stars (1980)
- (86-34)—St. Thomas Seminary (1974-80)
- (26-2)—Asst. at Mattatuck Community College (1980-81)
- (35-11)—Simsbury High School (1981-83)
- (10-4)—Freshman coach at Wesleyan (1983-84)
- (59-87)—Southington High School (1984-91)

"I was a competitor, and I'm a competitor even now," he said. "I always want to get better at whatever I do. I want to find out where I went wrong with whatever I did, and I am that way right now. It's just my competitive nature."

Lorenzo carried that spirit into every competition. When it came to baseball, Lorenzo took the same approach. He'd face older kids in games of stocking ball. When there weren't games, he'd pitch tennis balls at Fran Tully as if he was trying to knock him down. When the town started Little League, he started on every team and earned spots on every all-star roster.

He started in center field on the high school team as a sophomore and worked himself into the lineup as the leadoff hitter. He moved to the infield the next two years, and went .460 at the plate in his senior season. Once again, Lorenzo credits the older competition for raising his level of play.

"Fontana used to bring around the older players, the alumni, and they used to pitch to us," he said. "We'd get a good pitcher like Michael Mauro, and he'd pitch against us. We got to play against a lot of older players. It was one of Jay Fontana's strategies, and I think it really helped us as a team. It certainly helped me as an individual, because I was one of the younger ones but I used to playing against older guys all the time."

His efforts earned him a scholarship to Fairfield University where he hit .300, .320, and .380 over three seasons with Stags.

After college, he organized a

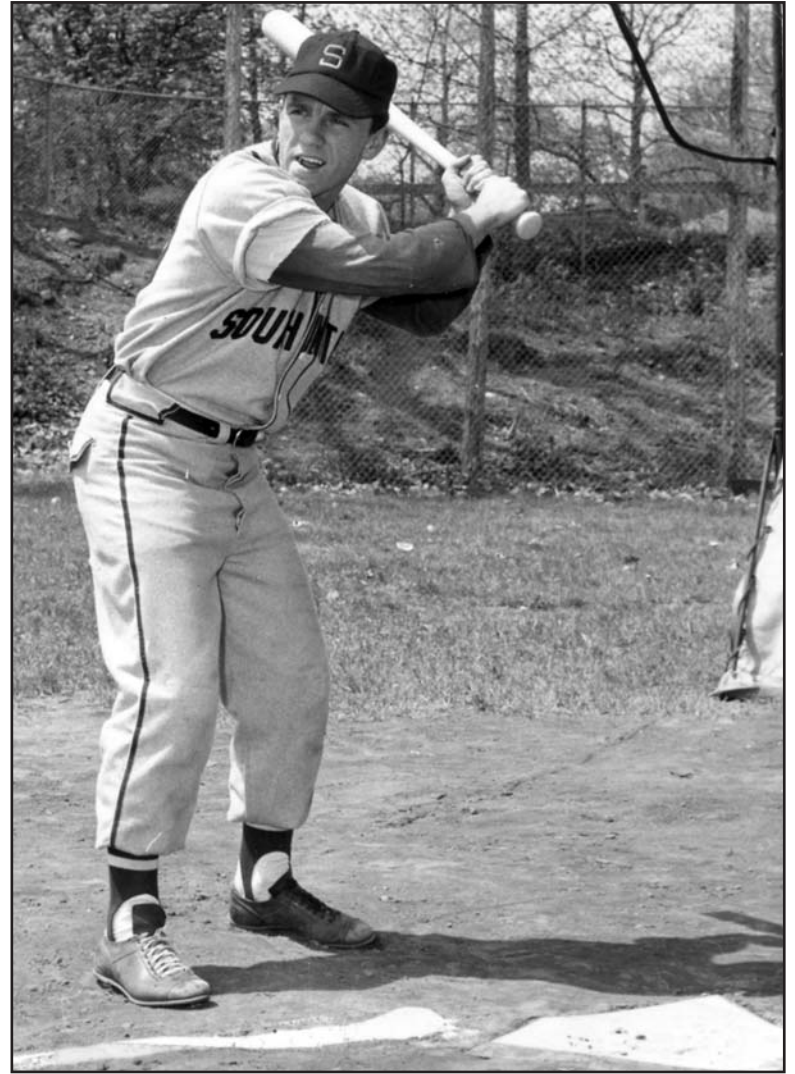
slow pitch softball team in 1964 that won seven state tournaments, seven New England regional titles, and finished fourth at the national tournament in 1967.

"We were big-time," Lorenzo said. "We even scheduled teams from Pittsburgh and Detroit in Meriden at Ceppa Field. We had to fly them in and all that, but we had a great sponsor with a construction company in Meriden-Chadwick Construction that was later called Twin Cities Construction. We had the finances, and we raised a lot of money ourselves. It was quite a big part of my life."

Lorenzo was the player-coach for that softball team, and that launched his next career in coaching. Soon, he was approached as a teacher in South End School to coach the fourth, fifth, and sixth graders in a town league.

He transferred to Kennedy Junior High School to work with the older kids, and went on to coach at the high school level and college level with St. Thomas Seminary, Mattatuck Community College, Simsbury, and Wesleyan before ending his career at Southington High School from 1984-1991.

After patching together a haphazard team in Simsbury and rallying for 24 consecutive wins. Jim Senich, the Observer's sports writer at the time, said, "Dick Lorenzo could take five children from a kindergarten class and in a short space of time take them to the finals of the state tournament—maybe even make them an NBA franchise."



SUBMITTED

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Jim Senich,
Former *Observer* sports writer

Lorenzo became known for getting the most out of his talent—the same praise he received as a player. He remembers two teams at St. Thomas Seminary, a four-year school with a total enrollment of fewer than 75 students destined for the priesthood. Lorenzo marshaled them to an 18-2 record in back-to-back seasons in 1977 and 1978.

"The first one averaged about 70 or 75 points per game. They were a fast breaking team in a small gym. We still won 18 games with the second one, but we only averaged about 43 points per game. We were a slow-it-down team," he said. "We had to be methodical with every pass because we didn't have the talent we had the previous year. Those kids accepted what we had to do to be successful and win."

When Lorenzo finally retired from coaching, his teams had amassed a 216-138 record. "I don't know that you'd call it 'tremendous,'" he said, "but it was a very

good coaching career."

With his coaching and playing, Lorenzo was an obvious choice to represent the town in the first class of the Southington Sports Hall of Fame. On Nov. 10, he will be inducted in a ceremony at the Aqua Turf in Plantsville.

"I was very honored to be in this group of athletes and those coaches," he said. "Southington was a big part of my life, and sports were a big part, too. To be inaugurated into this first class is something that is very special. These athletes that have been chosen? I watched them. I watched these greats when they played, and that helped me. I would watch those older guys, and I would pick up things that would suit me. Those coaches were phenomenal. They made Southington what it is as a sports town."

To comment on this story or to contact sports writer John GoralSKI, email him at jgoralski@southingtonobserver.com.