

Hall of Fame

The First Lady of Sports

A pioneer for the girls, DePaolo's record stands the test of time

By JOHN GORALSKI
SPORTS WRITER

Val DePaolo still remembers being called into her parents' kitchen and listening to her mother's accusing tone as sweat rolling down her daughter's muddied face. Tennis against the boys was one thing. Street hockey and baseball were fine, but tackle football? Is that any way for a young girl to behave?

"I don't remember how old I was, but I can still remember my mother sitting me down and telling me that I might be at that age where I shouldn't be playing tackle football with those boys," she said with a laugh. "Of course, I never thought about any of that. I was a tomboy."

Athlete

When DePaolo was growing up in the 1970s, there were very few opportunities for girls in sports. If a young girl wanted to compete in sports, she had to challenge the boys.

"It was tough. You had to learn how to make yourself a better player, and you had to play against the boys," she said. "When I got a little older, I used to drive my bike down to [Recreation Park]. I don't know how I used to carry the basketball down there, but I did. You put on your sneakers, and you'd stay for the day. Everybody had to figure out how to get along, pick teams, play games, and that's what you did. It wasn't until I got a little older and into high school, that there were a few more girls starting to do that. I always felt very much like I did a lot with the boys."

There were no youth camps, few sports leagues, and even fewer girls in the neighborhood to play against. It wasn't until junior high school that DePaolo was able to get involved with organized sports when Kathy Conway, a teacher at St. Thomas school, introduced her and her classmates to organized sports.

"Kathy Conway had a basketball team. We did softball, and I was introduced to volleyball and badminton," DePaolo said. "She had a lot of things going, and she was phenomenal with the gymnastics and everything. That's where I learned to play basketball, and she was so good at teaching fundamentals. I had such a good foundation from her, and from there I started to get introduced to



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Val DePaolo set the standard for the Lady Knights as a three-sport athlete in the mid-70s. Her career scoring record still stands after more than three decades.

people who recognized that I had some talent."

By the time she reached the high school, DePaolo had found her first love—sports.

"I was just thrilled that there were sports," she said. "I remember when I went to the high school that someone told me there were even sports in the fall. I didn't know what field hockey was, so I picked volleyball."

That started her three-sport career. DePaolo joined a small core of high school girls that traveled from season to season playing whatever game was available for them to play.

"There were a lot of the players that played basketball and softball. I ended up playing tennis because I had a history with tennis," DePaolo said. "I felt like we were the pioneers. We made the state tournament a couple of those years, and I think that was a big deal at the time. I don't remember us doing much in the tournament, but that was a big step. We made it."

"By that time, we were starting to get girls that were more athletic, and Val was one of the first girls to do that," said Ed Malczyk,

Southington Sports Hall of Fame



Inside the Numbers

1,333 points (SHS record)
1,074 rebounds

- Three sport athlete from 1976-79 (volleyball, basketball, tennis)
- Three sport captain
- First-team All-Colonial Conference (77,78,79)
- First Team All-State two years (77,78)
- Prep All-American & Converse All-American (79)
 - Full basketball scholarship to the University of Massachusetts
- Inducted into the Connecticut Women's Basketball Hall of Fame (1993)
- Inducted into the New England Basketball Hall of Fame (2009)

the girls volleyball coach at the time. "She was a really good spiker. She also had a very good serve. She was a tennis player, so she used that tennis motion in her serve. She was a little wild at times, but it was very strong. At that time, that was the big thing for scoring points."

DePaolo balanced all

three sports, making all-conference in every season, but it was basketball that caught the attention of local fans. DePaolo stepped out as a scorer in her sophomore season, and committed to the game. She joined a Wallingford league in the off-season and practiced on her own.

"I had school and vol-

leyball, so it was hard to fit in basketball to do some work," she said. "I would get up every day at 5:30 in the fall and go out to my driveway with my dog. I'd turn on the spotlight in the pitch black and do a workout for an hour or an hour and fifteen minutes."

By the start of her junior year, DePaolo had earned the respect of her coach and teammates. "Val's ability to score is awesome. She is such a great shooter. She is an all-state candidate right now," Lady Knight coach Lois Busa told the Observer at the start of the 1977 season. "However, in order for her to get statewide exposure, we must get in the tournament. That's what we're shooting for."

Busa was right. DePaolo exploded for 469 points (26 points per game) as a junior with six 30-point games and a 41-point game. She had 540 points as a senior (28 points per game). The Knights made the postseason both years. DePaolo had a 36-point performance against Torrington in the state tournament, and she was named to the all-state roster both seasons.

DePaolo was the first Southington student to score 1,000 points in a career, finishing with 1,330 points and setting a scoring record that still stands even though the high school is now a four-year program. DePaolo also dominated inside with 1,074 career rebounds.

"I remember that it was a big deal to score the 1,000th point, and I remember that night really well," DePaolo said. "It was against Plainville. I only needed a couple points, and I was a nervous wreck. The

first couple of points were bricks...I remember them stopping the game, the team congratulating me, and receiving the game ball. I was really proud, but I was really just happy to do something that I had a passion about. Basketball's my passion. I loved playing it. I love coaching it. I love watching it"

DePaolo earned statewide recognition and was named as a Prep and All-American and Converse All-American in 1979. She received a full scholarship to the University of Massachusetts and transferred to Boston University to finish her collegiate career. DePaolo helped put Southington on the map for women's sports.

"It was great to be a part of a team with volleyball, basketball, and tennis. I was in my glory. I just loved it," she said. "I just loved being at the high school and playing with all those athletes. It was nice to be a part of a common goal and playing sports all the time."

DePaolo is widely recognized for her impact on high school sports. She was elected into the Connecticut Women's Basketball Hall of Fame in 1993. She was inducted into the the New England Basketball Hall of Fame in 2009, and was selected unanimously into the first class of the Southington Sports Hall of Fame.

On Wednesday, Nov. 10, DePaolo will be honored in an induction ceremony at the Aqua Turf in Plantsville.

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

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Val DePaolo,
Former SHS athlete