

Hall of Fame

Gunning for the goal

John Crowley set the standard for Blue Knight scoring

By JOHN GORALSKI
SPORTS WRITER

What was the most memorable goal of your career? The question was tossed casually across the table at a local restaurant. John Crowley never hesitated.

"It was against EO Smith, and we won 1-0," he said. "That was a big rivalry for us, and we knew that it was a benchmark for us. That was a game that we really wanted to win."

Athlete

Crowley remembers being marked by three defenders (Even though the newspaper clipping credits five opposing players). The goal sparked the team's hopes, and seemed like a big turning point in Southington soccer. Oh yeah, the goal was scored by Fran Russo.

The favorite goal of Crowley's career was a game-winner scored by a teammate in a rare contest where Crowley was held scoreless. For those that know him, it isn't so surprising.

"He was a great leader, a great team player, and obviously the greatest scorer that Southington High School ever had," said former Blue Knight coach Dan Murawski. "Even beyond that, he was the type of athlete that I loved to have. He was the epitome of my perfect soccer player in his attitude and everything else."

Crowley never welcomed the spotlight in 1983 when cameras swung away from the football field to focus on the prolific scorer. Even now, he shifts in his seat and stares at the recorder as he's forced to talk about his own accomplishments during his varsity days.

His favorite photo? An old, tattered newspaper clipping that shows Russo celebrating the score. Crowley's back is to the camera as he hugs his teammate by the goal.

He evades questions about his scoring and credits his classmates Todd McMillan, Nello Picone, and midfielder Kevin Scanlon—a player that Crowley ranks at the top of any he's seen.

Then, he falls silent as he runs through the roster in his head. "I don't want to miss anybody," he said. "I was just one of the guys. I didn't like to get all that recognition when it was because some other guy

Southington Sports Hall of Fame



Inside the Numbers

- Holds school record for single season scoring in soccer (26 goals in 1983)

- Scored 46 career goals (1981-83)
- Collected 50 points as a senior (1983)
- Selected All-Conference (1982, 1983)
 - Selected All-State (1983)
- Selected All-New England (1983)
 - Earned scholarship to CCRI

- Named All-American by the National Soccer Coaches Association of America (1983)

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Dan Murawski,
Former SHS soccer coach

passed me the ball.”

In fact, Crowley would have been content to pass through local athletics without ever being noticed, and that would have happened had he stuck to hockey. Southington didn't have a varsity team at the time, but he was introduced to soccer as a way to stay conditioned during the warmer weather.

His neighbor, Frank Passarelli, introduced him to the sport, and the hockey player's jaw dropped when he saw the size of the goal.

They worked on passing, trapping, touching, and shooting in the back yard. Crowley would practice kicking with his instep and the outside of his foot. He practiced shooting with his left foot and his right. He learned about fundamentals, and threw himself into both games.

"I worked hard at it," he

said. "I always had a ball. I played a lot of hockey, and I played a lot of soccer. I practiced a lot on my own, and I always played with a lot of the same guys. We got to know each other well, and we turned into a pretty nice unit."

The hard work paid off. Crowley burst onto the soccer scene in 1981, scoring six goals in his sophomore season. He was named to the all-conference roster the following year with 14 goals as a junior, but fans will always remember 1983. Crowley scored 26 goals that season, a single-season record that still stands in Southington's record books.

"His willpower, desire, and concentration were just outstanding. He wasn't the fanciest player in the world or the most skilled, but his desire to score was unbelievable," said Murawski. "He had that desire for that ball to go into the net. He wouldn't be stymied, and he knew he was going to win."

Soon, scouts began to pepper the Southington sidelines, but Crowley kept his focus on the game, the ball, and the net.

"Once the game started, I didn't care who was on the sidelines. My focus was on the game," he said. "I just wanted to get the ball. A 50-50 ball? In the box, there's no such thing as a 50-50 ball. Not in my mind. There was no defense at any level where I thought they'd shut me down for a whole game. It's not a bragging thing. That was just my attitude. It has to be if you're going to be good."

Crowley collected 50 points in his senior season, and finished with 46 goals in his three-year career with the Knights—a mark that wasn't broken until well after the high school became a four-year program. Crowley became the



SUBMITTED

John Crowley, right, poses alongside his son, Jamie, at the start of a pre-season alumni scrimmage in 1983.

first Blue Knight to receive national attention. If it hadn't been for a late-season ankle injury that slowed him significantly, his total might have been even higher.

He was all-conference all-state, and all-New England as a senior. In addition, Crowley became the first Southington soccer player to be named to the American roster.

He earned a scholarship to play soccer and ice hockey at the Community College of Rhode Island (CCRI) with an expectation to continue at the University of Rhode Island (URI). Unfortunately, Crowley delayed his enrollment to URI, and a back injury ended his career too soon.

Crowley fought his way back to the soccer field where he faced his son Jamie in 2008 during an alumni game at the start of his senior season. He said that he's counting the days

to this fall's season, so he can watch his daughter, Jordan, compete for the Lady Knights. He lists his children's accomplishments among his greatest moments in sports.

"To see your kids play with that Southington 'S' is the best. It really is," he said. "To play at the high school level is something special. I always let them do their thing, but I always encouraged them. I tell them, 'If you aren't training, somebody else is.' You've got to make yourself better."

Crowley still roots for the Knights as they pursue an elusive state title. In fact, he said that he'd trade all of his personal accomplishments for one state championship.

"I want to throw that out to the guys coming up," he said. "Guys have to play year round. I see other teams do it. I see football players out there every

day—not with the coach, obviously, in the off-season—but they're out there training. They're working out with the weights and working hard. I like football, but I love soccer. We need a state championship."

His love for the sport was one reason why Crowley was chosen to represent the program in the first class of the Southington Sports Hall of Fame. On Wednesday, Nov. 10, he will be inducted in a ceremony at the Aqua Turf in Plantsville.

"I was a little surprised, because I didn't play in the big three—baseball, basketball, and football," he said. "There have been a lot of nice soccer players in our town, and it's an honor to represent them."

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