

Hall of Fame

Tenacious Defenders

The 1982 Lady Knights raised the bar for defense

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SPORTS WRITER

In mid-December 1981, Holy Cross players sauntered into the Southington gym without a care in the world. After all, why would they? Waterbury was an established city school, and Southington was just a burgeoning suburb. Holy Cross was an established team, and Southington was just an up-and-coming program on the heels of a 13-5 season.

Nothing could have prepared the Crusaders for what was about to hit them. They weren't the first ones surprised by the Lady Knights, and they certainly weren't going to be the last. Southington was getting ready to revolutionize girls basketball in the state of Connecticut.

It was like getting hit in the face by a 2x4.

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"The big thing about this team was their press," said former assistant coach Joe Piazza. "I don't think a lot of teams that played us were ready for it. They didn't play like a girls basketball team at that time. They played like a guys' team. They played with aggressiveness, tenacity, and quickness. They were all over the place, and I don't think many teams were ready for that."

Holy Cross certainly wasn't ready. From the opening tipoff, the Knights swarmed the Crusaders like an angry mob. Senior defenders Jeanne Cayer and Alison Nieckarz covered the wings with junior defender Pam Stagis. Senior guard Karen DeBishop and Shari Geddes were shuffled into the lineup with junior guard Liz Ringrose to lead the press. Kelly Hart waited at center court for the errant pass, and Meg Wright protected the hoop as the last line of defense.

There was no escape from the mix of man-to-man and zone coverages. Every open space was filled by a Lady Knight defender.

Coach Joe Daddio had prepared his team well, and that became the calling card for the Knights in the 80s. At a time when most teams just sagged into a halfcourt defense, Southington used every inch of the court. Turnovers became transition baskets, and it started with defense.

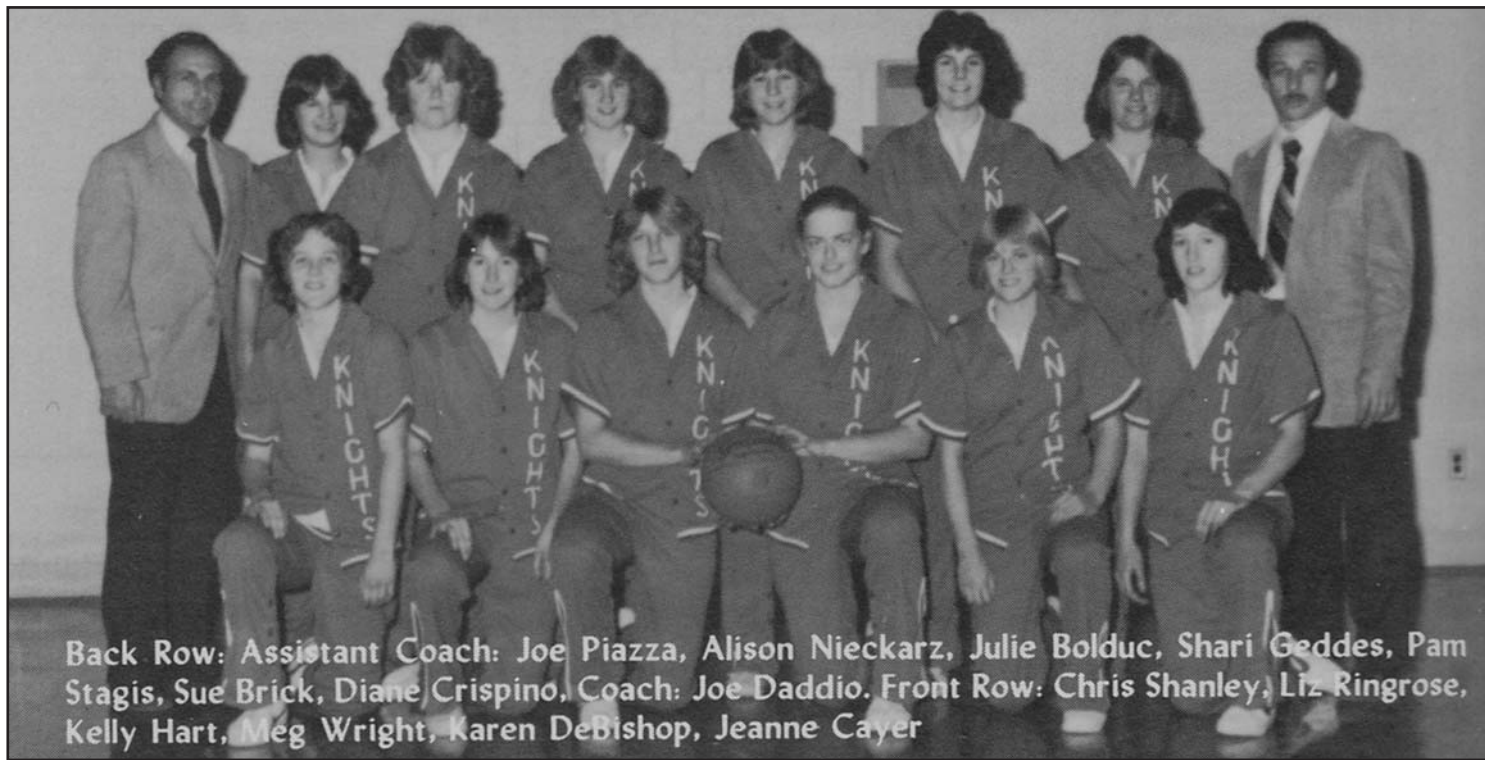
"I try to keep my team as disciplined as possible," Daddio told reporters at the start of the season. "They have to respect themselves, coaches, and their teammates."

As for opponents, they had to respect the scoring of Hart. The Southington shooter scored 29 points in the opener and led the team in every game but the one she sat out. Hart scored 16 points in the next game, 30 in the one that followed, and added 25 points as the Lady Knights opened the season with four consecutive wins.

"She has tremendous offensive skills," Daddio said at the start of her senior season. "She's a better passer, has natural instincts, and is a good ball handler. The one thing that has made her the kind of player she is is the fact that she hasn't sat back."

Hart scored more than 200 points as a sophomore. She led the team with 370 points as a junior, but she found an even higher gear for her senior season. Hart averaged 25.1 points during her senior campaign. Double and triple teams couldn't stop her, and she scored in double digits in every game she played. But to this day, Hart deflects the attention toward her teammates and Southington's steel curtain defense.

"We played a full-court man-to-man defense, and every position from point guard and off-guard to center was important," she said. "I played the No. 2 or No. 3 spot, but our rebounding and our defense was a total



Back Row: Assistant Coach: Joe Piazza, Alison Nieckarz, Julie Bolduc, Shari Geddes, Pam Stagis, Sue Brick, Diane Crispino, Coach: Joe Daddio. Front Row: Chris Shanley, Liz Ringrose, Kelly Hart, Meg Wright, Karen DeBishop, Jeanne Cayer

COURTESY OF THE 1982 SHS YEARBOOK

The 1981-82 Lady Knights went 18-1 in the regular season and 4-0 in the Class LL tournament to earn Southington's first state title in basketball.

1982 Lady Knight Basketball Team

(Overall record: 22-1)

Date	Opponent	W/L	Score
Friday, Dec. 11	Holy Cross	W	51-43
Monday, Dec. 21	Berlin	W	56-31
Wednesday, Dec. 23	Bristol Central	W	66-40
Monday, Dec. 28	Stratford	W	80-49
Wednesday, Dec. 30	Hamden	L	51-59
Saturday, Jan. 09	Maloney	W	59-46
Thursday, Jan. 07	Platt	W	54-42
Monday, Jan. 11	Bristol Eastern	W	57-45
Wednesday, Jan. 27	New Britain	W	65-53
Monday, Jan. 25	Bristol Central	W	72-25
Monday, Feb. 01	Hamden	W	65-53
Thursday, Feb. 04	Maloney	W	51-46
Monday, Feb. 08	Platt	W	71-39
Thursday, Feb. 11	New Britain	W	70-49
Monday, Feb. 15	Bristol Eastern	W	63-50
Tuesday, Feb. 16	Holy Cross	W	72-64
Tuesday, Feb. 23	South Windsor	W	59-38
Thursday, Feb. 25	Naugatuck	W	72-36
Monday, March 01	Plainville	W	64-24

POSTSEASON

Date	Opponent	W/L	Score
Wednesday, March 10	Conard	W	64-46
Saturday, March 13	Windsor	W	74-49
Wednesday, March 17	Hamden	W	68-59
Championship Game	Westhill	W	44-43

team effort."

On paper, this wasn't the strongest Southington team, but on the court they overachieved. Their only blemish came in the fifth game of the season when Hamden took advantage of 26 Southington turnovers and a poor shooting performance from the field and from the free throw line to score an eight-point victory in the finals of their holiday tournament.

That was the last time anybody would beat the Lady Knights.

"The turning point that year was the loss to Hamden in the Christmas Tournament at their place," said Hart. "I don't think we talked about it. We just played one game at a time. Everybody played their role, and everybody played defense. That made a huge difference."

Southington cruised through the rest of their schedule, winning 14 straight contests to claim the top seed in the Class LL tournament. They went undefeated in the Colonial

conference and won the rematch against Hamden with a 12-point victory in early February. The Knights beat all but two opponents by double-digit margins, including a 47-point win over Bristol Central, a 32-point victory over Platt, and a 36-point victory over Naugatuck in late February when Hart's 29-point effort lifted her over 1,000 points for her career.

The regular season rally culminated the following game with a 40-point victory in the season finale against Plainville with Hart sidelined by a nagging injury.

"It was a group of overachievers," Piazza said. "I don't think that, on paper, anybody could have predicted what Joe got out of that team. I think that, if they played somebody straight up and didn't press, they might have won about 60 percent of their games, but that press was the whole key to the whole thing. The press really turned that team from what would have been a pretty good team into a great one."



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Joe Daddio, Former Lady Knight basketball coach

Their regular season efforts earned them a bye in the opening round. Southington shook off the rust of a 10-day layoff to beat Conard by 18. They swept past Windsor, 74-49, and beat Hamden once against with a 68-59 victory in the semifinals.

Then, Southington fell behind early in the championship game, trailing by 15 points early. The Knights shot just 18 percent (3-for-33) in the first half but trailed by three at the break.

"I don't think any one of us thought about losing. It was just a matter of what we needed to do next in order to win," said Hart. "I don't think that there was fear of losing ever. It was really about performance and execution."

Southington battled back in the second half. Hart finished with 21 points. DeBishop scored a pair of layups in the final two minutes, and Southington edged Westhill, 44-43, to earn the program's first state title.

"I think we had it as a goal in our minds. We had some really talented teams in our sophomore year and our junior year as well, but [in 1982] we had a group of six seniors," said Hart. "It was our determination. I don't think we talked about it a lot. We just took it one game at a time, and really performed."

Hart finished the season with 552 points to claim the MVP trophy. Geddes finished second with 209 points (9.1 ppg). DeBishop led the offense with 3.7 assists and captured the Unsung Hero Award at the team's banquet. Crispino and Stagis were named as the team's Defensive Players of the Year. Hart was named to the all-state roster and joined Wright and Geddes on the all-conference team.

The Knights entered the 80s as an up-and-coming team but finished the decade as the team to beat. The 1982 team was the turning point in the program. That's why the Southington Sports Hall of Fame committee selected them for the Class of 2011.

On Wednesday, Nov. 9, the team will be honored in an induction ceremony for the Southington Sports Hall of Fame at the Aqua Turf Club in Plantsville.

"It's such elite company that it's humbling," said Hart, who will also be inducted for her individual efforts. "I'm just thrilled. I know that I'm going in as an individual, but I'm even more excited about being part of that team because it was an absolute team effort right to the finish."