

Southington Sports Hall of Fame

The Gold Medal Gang

The 2005 Lady Knight gymnasts were the best in school history

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SPORTS WRITER

When the Lady Knights entered the Milford gym for the 2005 Class L championship meet, a hush descended upon the crowd.

Gymnasts stopped their practice routines to get a better look at the team that had a stranglehold on the state's sports headlines. Coaches stared. Officials laid down their pens to get their first look at the Southington team.

And the Knights were just getting started.

"We definitely felt it," said former Lady Knight gymnastics coach Byron Knox. "There was a lot of pressure. They were watching us like hawks in warm-ups, and it wasn't just gymnasts. It was the coaches and officials. I think people were mesmerized from what they saw from us. From our first kid to our last kid, we were incredible."

Hall of Fame

There's been a long standing debate among gridiron fans. Which team is better? The 1949 Lewis High School team or the 1954 Southington High School squad? Fans have argued about which softball championship was the greatest or which girls basketball team was the most powerful.

But when it comes to Southington teams and their impact on a sport, no other team can match the 2005 Southington gymnasts. In a sport that's decided by less than a point, they won by dozens. In a sport where records are broken after the decimal point, Southington bested previous marks



by five or six points.

When it comes to team sports, the 2005 Lady Knights were in a league of their own.

"If you equate what we did to other sports, it would be like winning a football game by 50 points...at the state championship," said Knox. "I don't think that there can be an argument. I don't think you can debate it at all.

What that team did was unprecedented, and I don't think we'll ever see something like that again."

It's almost hard to believe that Southington entered that 2005 gymnastics season without a single state title. They came close as runners up for three consecutive seasons. In 2004, they were edged by Hall in the final event by 0.2 points, but the Knights were already turning the corner when Knox took over the team at the start of the 2005 season. When a small tide of club gymnasts followed him into the team's first practices, the first-year coach knew that something big was about to happen.

The team returned gymnasts that had already set program records in every event. The team had already set a program record with 142.2 points at the 2004 Class L meet. Jess Gianatti returned to the lineup as a sophomore with team records in two events, but even she wasn't guaranteed a spot on the opening day roster.

"The competition within the team itself was tougher than anything that any other team could throw at us," he said. "We were jockeying for first and second, second and third, and it was every day at practice. It was so great to coach a group of girls that were friendly to each other but at the same time they were completely competitive. One would show a routine at practice, and then another one would try to top her. They would just keep showing me routines back to back to back."

"We have enough girls to field two teams and be pretty competitive throughout the state," Knox told *The Observer* during a pre-season interview. It sounded like a boastful statement at the time, but his team made him look prophetic.

On Jan. 4, the Knights opened the season with 146.9 points in a 46-point victory that shattered the school record. They rallied for 19 wins as Knox shuffled gymnasts in and out of the lineup like a Vegas black jack dealer, and each roster kept raising the bar higher and higher.

"We had to have five scores

from six different meets in order to qualify, so we had to get enough meets so that every kid had a chance to qualify for the state meet," Knox said. "We had a lot of kids on the team, and I really felt that most of them were good enough to compete at the conference level. I wasn't wrong."

The team averaged over 148 points during the regular season and broke the 150-point barrier twice. When they scored 150.85 points against five teams at the Farmington Invitational in late January, the Knights began to see an influx of photographers and journalists at their regular season meets. By the time they broke the 'unbreakable score' again in late February, the Lady Knight gymnasts were snatching sports headlines away from the more popular sports.

The girls enjoyed the spotlight, and they used it to bring even more excitement to their routines. They began rhythmic chanting on the sidelines and exploding into cheers when a teammate stuck a routine. That didn't happen prior to the 2005 team, but it started a tradition that has carried into the present day.

"We brought an excitement to the meet and to the media," said Knox. "It's funny for me to see all the other teams at club meets and high school meets these days. They get together for a cheer before the meet. They cheer on the sidelines during the meet. They clap. They pound the mat and cheer. We started all of that."

That's why heads turned when the Knights entered the state meet. Could this group of public schoolgirls live up to the hype? Critics chalked the scores up to easier scoring at the regular season contests. Sure, the Knights could beat a smaller team by 50 points, but could they do it in the pressure of a state meet?

They were about to find out. Southington set new state records in every event but floor, and Kristy Dougan set a state record in the all-around with 38.225 points. Jessica Gianatti

won vault (9.8). Dougan won bars (9.6) and beam (9.75). Yvette Mirando didn't set a state record on floor, but she won the event easily with a 9.5.

As impressive as the top scores were, it was Southington's depth that was truly unparalleled. Lady Knights scored five of the top eight vault scores.

Southington scored the top five scores on bars and the top six on beam. Their worst event was floor where Lady Knight gymnasts scored five of the top eight scores.

"The unique thing was that we had our seniors—those kids with the most experience—going up first or second in our lineup because we had so many qualifiers," said Knox. "Typically, they're toward the end because they're the strongest athletes, but it helped to have them go in the beginning. They led off with good scores. They were consistent, and that pushed our scores even higher."

When the dust settled, Southington's 151.525 team score shattered the previous state record by more than five points. Only 16 scores count toward the team score, but the Knights beat Hall by more than 13 points. If the next four Southington scores in each event were grouped to form a second team, the Knights would have still beaten Hall by more than five points.

Knox's preseason prediction came true.

"We had enough kids in our lineup to make two teams, and we would have finished first and second. We had kids that didn't even compete for us, but they would have been an all-star on another team. It was pretty exciting," said the coach. "Yes, I really talked a good game about what we were going to do, but we had no idea we were going to be that good."

The Knights went on to dominate the postseason. Dougan still ranks as the only Lady Knight to sweep the postseason with all-around victories at the Class L meet, the state open, and the New England championship. Dougan (all-around) and Gianatti (vault) won titles at the state open. Southington went on to win the New England title with meet records in scoring (151.125), the all-around (Dougan, 38.275), and vault (Gianatti, 9.75).

The team launched a dynasty as the Knights went on to capture six of the next eight Class L titles and three consecutive New England titles. The girls went on to break most of their records in 2007, but the 2005 team launched the dynasty.

It was no surprise when the Southington Sports Hall of Fame selection committee chose the 2005 Lady Knights as one of two teams to be inducted into the Class of 2013. On Thursday, Nov. 14, they were honored in an induction ceremony at the Aqua Turf in Plantsville.

"I really believe that they deserve it," said Knox. "We took a sport that wasn't in the limelight, and we created attention that had never been done before. People that had never even watched gymnastics before came out to see our meets. All through town, we were treated like local celebrities. It was great for the school and great for the sport. I'm proud of those girls."

Southington Sports Hall of Fame

Season at a Glance

- Regular season record, 19-0.
- Class L Champions.
- New England Champions.
- Earned 5 Class L individual titles.
- Earned 3 State Open Individual titles.
- Earned 2 New England Individual titles.

REGULAR SEASON SCHEDULE

Date	Opponent	Site	W/L	Score
Jan. 4	Nonnewaug	Home	W	146.90
Jan. 14	Rockville	Away	W	147.50
Jan. 16	S. Windsor	Home	W	146.95
Jan. 27	Hand	Home	W	146.20
Jan. 29	6 Teams	Away	W	150.85
<i>(Pomperaug, Glastonbury, Rockville, S. Windsor, Farmington, Nonnewaug)</i>				
Feb. 1	Glastonbury	Away	W	147.25
Feb. 3	Hall	Away	W	149.55
Feb. 5	NFA	Home	W	149.20
Feb. 7	2 Teams	Away	W	149.25
<i>(Glastonbury, Farmington)</i>				
Feb. 15	Wethersfield	Away	W	145.25
Feb. 19	3 Teams	Away	W	151.25
<i>(Wethersfield, Law, New Milford)</i>				

POSTSEASON SCHEDULE

Feb. 26	Class L Meet			151.525
March 5	State Open			
March 12	New England Meet			151.125

ROSTER

Kelsie Straub, Nikki Salvatore, Kristen Rossi, Sara Stylinski, Kelsey Opozda, Alysha Hill, Jackie Nadeau, Krissy Scarfo, Kristy Dougan, Kelly Dougan, Jennifer Roberts, Jessica Roberts, Kelsey Boyce, Shannon Strachel, Jessica Gianatti, Brittany Johnson, Yvette Mirando, Becca Wiltse, and Bonnie Tormay.