Kelly Hart set the standard for girls sports

By JOHN GORALSKI

Kelly Hart was destined to break the mold for women athletes long before she entered Southington High School.

She grew up on stories about her mother's basketball career in the 1950s. She hung on every word as her mother spied tales about organized five-on-five games in upstate Maine with uniforms and officials.

She watched her neighbors' puzzeled grins when her father erected a plywood backboard in the backyard for her mother to shoot around, and she dreamed of following her mother's lead.

The landscape was changing fast in Southington in the 1970s, and Hart was looking for her place.

When she saw a flyer for a new junior pro basketball team, she leapt at the chance. She had no idea that it would launch a career that thrust Southington into the spotlight with their first basketball state championship. Hart told the Observer, "I just loved to play," she said. "I'm very honored. I've always wanted to be a part of something that was a big deal, and it really was a great adventure. It was new and exciting, and I'm just thrilled to be a part of it."

Joe Daddio, former SHS coach

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Hart scored more than 20 points in 14 different contests, including a 33-point against Hamden in early February that avenged Southington's only loss of the season. She finished the season with 552 points, becoming just the second player to score 1,000 career points, eclipsing the 500 point mark by the beginning of February and Hart into the national spotlight and the college ranks.

Still, it was her basketball talent that was drawing the most attention.

"She has tremendous offensive skills, she's a better passer, has natural instincts, and is a good ball handler," Daddio said in another 1982 interview with the Observer. "The thing that has made her the kind of player she is the fact that she hasn't sat back. She thrives in the sport. She borrowed money from her grandmother and began to attend local, state, and national camps. She credits Bob Ruderman for teaching her a ump-shoot at his Southington camp even though few girls would attempt them at the time. She flew to Chicago for another camp and went to Rutgers to work out in front of college coaches.

"It was sort of a lucky Olympic program," she said. "It was pretty neat. Pat Summitt was there. The Rutgers coaches were there. All the big coaches were there, and I made it to the last cuts in my senior year. That was so awesome. I was so excited about going back my senior year."

Hart was prepared to take the reigns in 1982, but few could have predicted her success as a senior. She sat out the volleyball season to focus on basketball, and she hit the ground running with 20 points in the opening game.

"I just loved, but when I got into the car to go home it just collapsed on me again," she said. "I'm very honored. I've always wanted to be a part of something that was a big deal, and it really was a great adventure. It was new and exciting, and I'm just thrilled to be a part of it." She said. "I'm very honored. I've always looked up to players like (2014 inductee) Val DePaolo and (2010 inductee) Irene Mach. Those were my role models, and they were some of the best players around."

"I was so excited about going back my senior year."

Kelly Hart drives past a Bristol Central defender during the 1982 Class LL state championship.

Hart continued to fight and claw her way back. She battled through two injury-riddled seasons in Boston but never did return to her previous dominance. She managed to play 75% of games for the Eagles, scoring 193 points with 121 rebounds, 77 assists, and 38 steals. She was named a starter for both her junior and senior seasons, and the Eagles went 85-30 over her four year career, including a 19-9 record in Hart's junior season.

"I just loved to play," she said. "I coached after college, and that's a wonderful thing, but there's just nothing like playing. I loved the exhilaration and getting that adrenaline going."

For members of the Southington Sports Hall of Fame selection committee, Kelly Hart was an easy selection as a member of the 2011 induction class. On Wednesday, Nov. 9, she will be inducted into the Southington Sports Hall of Fame at the Aqua Turf Club in Plainville.

"The people from the town supported us. Our teachers supported us, so it really was a great adventure. It was new and exciting, and I'm just thrilled to be a part of it," she said. "I'm very honored. I've always looked up to players like (2014 inductee) Val DePaolo and (2010 inductee) Irene Mach. Those guys came back to give us a hand when we were young. That really made an impression, so to go in with them is such a big honor."