

Southington Sports Hall of Fame

Without question

Meghan McNicholas-Leggett set the standard for team players

By JOHN GORALSKI
SPORTS WRITER

Maybe it was because of a late season slump that former Lady Knight softball coach Joe Piazza sent his prized sophomore to the plate to bat left-handed in the 1990 Class LL championship game. Maybe it was because his team was trailing by one run, and the coach saw something in the defense.

It's been almost a quarter century since Meghan McNicholas-Leggett stood in the batter's box as a switch hitter, but Piazza still remembers it clearly. She gave him a quizzical look because it had been almost three weeks since the right hander had practiced her lefty stance, but Meghan stepped to the plate without a question ...and executed.

Hall of Fame

"Just as the girl was getting ready to pitch I heard their coach start screaming. He realized that she wasn't left handed, but it was too late," Piazza said with a laugh. "Meghan dropped the bunt perfectly, and it just rolled down the third base line. By the time their girl got it, Meghan had beat it out. That's the way she was. She did it just because I asked her to do it. That started a rally, and we ended up winning the game, 4-3."

When it comes to team players, few compare to McNicholas. If you needed something done, she'd do it. If you needed a position filled, she'd volunteer. She wasn't always the fastest, but she was usually the best.

That might be the reason that—even though she openly admits that softball is not her best sport—Meghan started for the Knights in all three years at the high school, and she worked her way up through the organization to become a senior co-captain. Piazza said that McNicholas was a player that he could always rely upon.

"She was my second baseman, but she was willing to do anything. She was my back-up catcher when somebody got hurt. She would do whatever you needed her to do," he said. "She was a great captain and a super leader. She was a great defensive player in softball because she was really quick. She could cover a lot of ground, and she always did what she had to do. She was a pleasure to coach without a doubt."

"Whatever I wanted her to do, she'd do it," echoed former Lady Knight soccer coach Winston Thompson. McNicholas caught his attention as a 13-year-old on his travel team. Thompson challenged his young player to compete at a Maryland tournament, and McNicholas passed the test with flying colors.

"We had a really weak team,

but she was just unbelievable," said Thompson. "She told me that, whatever I wanted her to do, she would do. She was that kind of athlete. I loved her attitude, her desire, and her dedication. She was able to handle just about everything that would come at her."

The work ethic carried into her high school career. Primarily a midfielder and half back, she quickly developed into a style that would serve her well throughout her career. She wasn't always the one grabbing headlines for her scoring. She was the rarest of players—one that would make everyone else around her better.

As a junior, she helped anchor a senior-laden soccer team that broke a two-year drought as conference champs. As a senior, she scored 13 goals to help a young team repeat as conference champs with an undefeated, 13-0-2 regular season. In all three years, McNicholas earned all-conference honors, and she was named to a pair of all-state rosters. Twice, she was named as the team's MVP.

"She was one of the most wonderful people that I've ever coached," said Thompson. "She was a very special person. I wouldn't say that she was the greatest goal scorer that we ever had, but she was definitely one of the best players that we ever had."

Still, McNicholas was never happy with just being good. "We didn't go very far in the tournament, but I have to say that we had some great seasons," she said. "We lost very few games in the regular season, but once we got to the tournament we were never able to push forward. We always got matched up with teams like Avon or Staples, and we were never able to get too far."

That stuck with the fiery playmaker because few people understood Southington's storied history better than McNicholas. She rarely missed a high school game as a young girl. She would accompany her father to soccer and basketball games after school in the 1980s.

By the second and third grades, she had already joined a nucleus of girls that were to be the core of Southington's teams in the 1990s. By the time she reached



senior that she was finally happy. She

scored the first four baskets in the championship game, and Southington rallied to a 65-51 over Glastonbury to break a three-year title drought.

"To me, if you don't make the state championship it's only an okay season," she said. "We lost two years in a row in the finals to Bristol Eastern, and that was huge. I remember walking out to the center of the court at Central with Debbie Suess, and I said that there was no way in the world that we were leaving with a loss. I think we all knew it before we even stepped onto the court."

McNicholas' efforts earned her a spot in Southington lore on a short list of athletes that have won state titles in multiple sports, but it also brought her individual attention. When news of the guard reached college scouts, they began to pour into the high school gym. They followed her in summer leagues and watched her compete on Junior Olympic teams.

By the end of her sophomore year, a handful of colleges had already shown interest. By the start of her senior season, Assumption College had won the bidding war. The Greyhounds offered McNicholas a full scholarship, and she embraced the challenge.

"There were a couple of schools that I had offers from, but I knew that I was going to play at Assumption," she said. "I knew that it was close enough that my parents could come and see me play. I liked the school when I went up to visit it, and I wanted everybody to be able to come up and watch."

It was worth the trip for Southington fans. McNicholas still ranks among the top 20 in games played (105) for the Greyhounds. As a senior, she collected 104 assists including a 10-assist performance against Quinnipiac. Her 320 career assists still ranks No. 8 all time at the school.

It was no surprise that the Southington Sports Hall of Fame selection committee chose McNicholas to be inducted into the local hall of fame. On Thursday, Nov. 14, she was honored in an induction ceremony at the Aqua Turf in Plantsville.

DePaolo Junior High School, her teams were knocking off opponents like a well-oiled machine. Undefeated seasons were commonplace, and McNicholas was a central figure.

At home, she threw herself into pickup games against the kids in her neighborhood, holding her own against boys that would go on to become high school stars.

"It really helped my mental toughness," she said. "There was no separation between the sexes or the ages. When you get a little bit older, it comes into play. When I played at DePaolo, I could tell that boys didn't like to play against a girl. It wasn't that I was more of a threat than anybody else, but you could tell."

McNicholas never shied away from a challenge, whether it was batting as a switch hitter in a crucial game or helping her soccer team overcome an injury to an all-state teammate. That might be why every program improved when she entered the lineup. The soccer team returned to the top of their conference. The softball team captured another state title, but it was on the hard court that McNicholas really made her presence known. She stepped into the basketball lineup as a sophomore point guard and by the midpoint of her senior year had established herself as the school's all-time assist leader.

"She took charge of the team, and she distributed the ball well, but she was a better shooter than she gave herself credit for," said Piazza. "Joe Daddio would always try to get her to take more shots, but Meghan was the type of kid that would rather make that great pass than take the shot."

She could dribble with both hands. She could pass, and she could see the floor. She was the leading defender and worked her way up to co-captain as a senior. As a sophomore and junior, McNicholas' teams lost in the Class LL championship game. It wasn't until they captured the title as a

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Inside the Numbers

- Junior Olympic Basketball Team (1988-1991).
- Earned full scholarship to Assumption College for basketball.

SHS Soccer

- First team All-State (1990, 1991)
- All-Conference (1989, 1990, 1991)
- Captain (1991)
- Team MVP (1990, 1991)

SHS Basketball

- First team All-State (1991, 1992)
- Second team All-State (1990)
- All-Conference (1990, 1991, 1992)
- Scholar Athlete Award (1992).
- McDonald Athlete of the Week (1991, 1992)
- Captain (1991-1992)
- Class LL championship team (1992).
- Class LL championship game (1990, 1991, 1992).
- Lady Knight Co-MVP (1992)
- Holds program record for career assists.

SHS Softball

- First team All-State (1991, 1992)
- Second team All-State (1990)
- All-Conference (1990, 1991, 1992)
- Class LL championship team (1990)

Assumption College Basketball

- 4 Varsity Letters (1992-1996)
- Scored 633 career points (6.02 average)
- 320 career assists (ranked 8th)
- 105 games played
- All League in the Northeast 10 Conference (1994-95, 1995-96)
- Captain (1995-96)