

## Southington Sports Hall of Fame

# Paige Turner

## Paige Kopcza proved that softball is more than pitching

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SPORTS WRITER

The pitcher and the defense gave up just one earned run in 1983 to set a national record for ERA (0.04) that would stand for more than two decades. Their all-state pitcher was almost unhittable as Southington roared through the postseason. The offense was just as deadly with a .336 batting average in the regular season as they outscored opponents, 193-4.

Still, with two outs in the ninth inning of the championship game, shortstop Paige Kopcza was the only one that could protect the pitcher's perfect game when a blistering ground ball caught the dirt and ricocheted into the air.

### Hall of Fame

"It was one of those bouncers. It hit a rock and went sky high," Kopcza said, while sipping coffee at a local eatery and remembering the play three decades later. "It was going to be a short hopper for me to get to it, but I had to charge hard to get it on a really short hop. Otherwise, it could have gone anywhere, and Julie Bolduc was throw-

ing a perfect game."

Kopcza wasn't about to spoil her pitcher's perfect day. In one motion, she scooped the ball out of the air and fired a rocket to first base just ahead of the runner. It was just another day at the office for Southington's prized infielder.

"Defensively, she was solid as a rock," said former Lady Knight softball coach Joe Piazza. "She was probably my first shortstop that could go deep into the hole behind third base, backhand a ball, plant her back foot, and throw the ball across the diamond to first base. It's not something you see that often. You probably don't even see it a lot at the high school level now because it takes a lot of strength. Back then, it was almost unheard of."

Kopcza was always ahead of the curve when it came to female athletes. Even though Southington girls were already leading the charge for women's sports in Connecticut, Kopcza took it to the next level in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

As the youngest of three siblings—and the only girl in her family—Kopcza honed her skills in pick-up games with the neighborhood boys. A self-confessed tomboy, she never shied from a



challenge. Whether it was dirt track racing in the backyard, shooting pellet guns with her brothers, or competing in games of volleyball, kickball, or football with the neighborhood boys, Kopcza held her own.

"When they picked a team, they would sometimes pick me before half the guys," she said. "It didn't matter. I wasn't a girly-girl. That's for sure."

She first showed her competitiveness in fifth grade when her Southington Junior Pro basketball team advanced to Tennessee to play in a national tournament. She tried her hand at gymnastics and battled for goals on the soccer fields.

Then, in 1975, she raised the bar even further when she became one of two local girls to break the gender barrier in Southington's Little Leagues. She walked into try-outs at the Western Little League and quickly quieted critics when she earned a position on the opening day roster.

"I didn't think anything about it," she said. "We didn't have a softball league in town. That didn't come for years and years later. I think I was fearless, but I'll attribute that to my brothers and my dad. It was playing against all those kids in the neighborhood. I didn't think twice about what I was doing. It was just a game. It was fun, and I was always competitive. That flame was in my stomach and I just went with it."

Then, it almost came to a crashing halt. She was taking a throw from the outfield at midseason when she dropped the ball and fell to the ground with a broken leg. For the next six months she endured casts and a slow rehabilitation, but Kopcza returned to action the following year as a 10-year-old, made the team again, and even faced future Major League Baseball pitcher Rob Dibble on the Little League mound.

Even though she returned to the field, Kopcza never fully recovered from that early injury. She suffered a knee injury during a track meet sponsored by the Falcon Club, and that kept her out of sports for her entire seventh grade. Soon, doctors discovered bone chips that were causing her knee to lock in place that sent shooting pains up her leg. If Kopcza was going to continue as an athlete, she was forced to limit her competi-

"Softball was my love. I played basketball and volleyball at the middle school level and all these other sports in town, but I was already thinking about college as a ninth grader," she said. "I knew I had to focus on one because that would give me an opportunity. If I focused on two or three, that might not happen."

It turned out to be a great choice. Piazza admitted that it might not have been her only choice, but he was glad she chose softball.

"She was about as good of a softball player as we've ever had, and she went on to have a great career in college, too," said the coach. "I'm sure that if she played basketball in high school, she would have been a great basketball player. I'm sure if she played volleyball, she would have been great at that, too. She was just a great athlete."

She was so good, in fact, that Piazza was willing to bench a returning player from his state championship team just to make room in the lineup for Kopcza in her sophomore year.

"I knew that I had to find a place for this kid, but we had about 11 kids coming back with some sort of experience," he said. "I put her at third base a little bit. I put her at shortstop and the outfield. I put her at second. I put her at first. It took me the whole preseason and maybe a week or so into the regular season, but I finally decided that the best move for the team was to put her at short. I moved the shortstop that we had into the outfield, and the rest—I guess you would say—is history."

Kopcza never made her coach regret his decision. As a sophomore, she anchored the defense with her glove and helped pace the offense with a .357 batting average. The following year, she led the Knights with a .494 batting average and a .688 on-base percentage. Opposing coaches created special defensive shifts to account for Kopcza's knack for threading singles straight up the middle. Still, they couldn't keep Kopcza off the bases.

"I can remember playing one team that literally shifted their outfield to have a left-center fielder and a right-center fielder against me," she said. "They didn't really have a first baseman or a third baseman because they all shifted to the middle, but that's where I hit it. I had a knack of hitting it right

back at the pitcher."

It wasn't until her senior season that coaches were finally able to contain her...a little. Southington had finally graduated all of the players from her sophomore season, so teams were able to pitch around the Southington star. Still, Kopcza managed to finish her senior season with a .446 average.

"I think that year was tough for her because people were finally able to pitch around her a little more," said Piazza. "In that 82 and 83 team, they had no choice. They had to pitch to her. In 84, there wasn't as much around her. People could walk her, pitch around her, or not give her anything to hit."

Still, college scouts were infatuated with the Southington star. In a sport that's dominated by pitchers, Kopcza dominated headlines and focused the strategy of opposing coaches. Adelphi College offered her a full scholarship. The University of Rhode Island offered her the same opportunity, but Kopcza chose to attend the University of Massachusetts on a partial scholarship. It gave her a chance to fill the shoes of an all-American, and UMass offered her the educational challenges that she wanted.

Over the next four seasons, she batted .310 and led the team in five different categories as a senior. She still ranks fourth all-time in sacrifice flies (9) and wasn't caught stealing a single time in her final two years.

"If my numbers are good, it's just because I loved what I was doing," she said. "I don't like to toot my own horn. I did it just because I loved the game."

The Southington Sports Hall of Fame selection committee chose Kopcza as the first non-pitcher to represent softball in the local hall of fame, but Piazza isn't surprised by the choice. "Pitchers get the majority of the ink," he said. "People recognize them more, but it's those people behind them that make the plays."

On Thursday, Nov. 14, Kopcza was honored in an induction ceremony at the Aqua Turf in Plantsville.

"It's exciting," she said. "There are tons of athletes that have gone through Southington and were tremendous in their sport, whether it was softball, basketball, football, baseball, gymnastics, or whatever. They probably deserve the award more than I do, but I'm really humbled and honored."

### Southington Sports Hall of Fame

Inside the Numbers

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- Inducted into the CT Scholastic and Collegiate Softball Hall of Fame (1998)
- Member of the Junior Pro National Championship basketball team (1977)
- Helped start the Southington Lightning girls softball program

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**Softball**

- 3 Varsity Letters (1982, 1983, 1984)
- Member of the Class LL championship team (1982, 1983)
- All-Conference (1982, 1983, 1984)
- All-State (1983, 1984).
- Set a school record with 98 career hits.

**STATISTICS**

1982—.357 batting average.  
1983—77 at bats, 30 runs, 38 hits, 16 RBI, .494 batting avg, .688 on-base pct, 8 stolen bases.  
1984—.446 batting average, 57 assists.

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**UMass Softball**

- Led the team in sac flies (4 in 87, 88).
- Led team in batting average (.352 in 88)
  - Led in on base pct (.372 in 88)
- Led team in stolen bases (100% in 87, 88)
  - Led team in RBI (23 in 1986)
  - Led team in triples (3 in 1988)
- Led team in walks (8 in 85, 12 in 87)
  - Ranked 4th in sac flies career (9)

**STATISTICS**

| Year          | AVG         | GP-GS          | AB         | R         | H          | 2B        | 3B       | RBI       |
|---------------|-------------|----------------|------------|-----------|------------|-----------|----------|-----------|
| 1985          | .387        | 29-0           | 75         | 10        | 29         | 3         | 0        | 8         |
| 1986          | .315        | 45-45          | 143        | 22        | 45         | 4         | 3        | 23        |
| 1987          | .210        | 44-43          | 124        | 18        | 26         | 6         | 0        | 8         |
| 1988          | .352        | 45-44          | 145        | 24        | 51         | 7         | 3        | 17        |
| <b>Totals</b> | <b>.310</b> | <b>163-132</b> | <b>487</b> | <b>74</b> | <b>151</b> | <b>20</b> | <b>6</b> | <b>46</b> |