

Hall of Fame

Home sweet home

Tom Poitras returns to Connecticut for the next chapter in his storied career

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SPORTS WRITER

University of Hartford officials were committed to the finding the perfect candidate when they began the hunt for their ninth head coach in soccer program's 54-year history. They looked nationwide and searched overseas. They rifled through resumes and poured through statistics. The interview process went world-wide but continued to lead them back to the local fields and Southington's first son of soccer—Tom Poitras.

Hawks Athletic Director Patricia H. Meiser is excited about the fit. "Very clearly, his resume speaks to excellence and enormous success wherever he's been," she said. "He's a name that is very well-known throughout the Big 10. He's been a finalist at major institutions, and he is very much a part of the Connecticut fabric. We feel very lucky to have him in our school."

Hall of Fame

Southington residents weren't surprised by the selection. After all, few local athletes can match Poitras' success at any level. He was a star varsity player at Southington High School in the mid 1980s. As a four-year starter at Southern Connecticut State University, Poitras helped capture a national title, and he hasn't strayed from a soccer field ever since.

He's played professionally. He's coached at the youth and high school levels. He's enjoyed a 17-year collegiate coaching career that has come within one win of a national title and has rebuilt a pair of struggling programs. Now, Poitras is coming home to try to finish his quest to win as a player and a coach.

Can he build the Hawks into a national contender? Can he swing the soccer spotlight to the state capitol?

"We're definitely going to compete for it," he said. "To win, a lot of things have to go right. You have to have a little bit of luck and things have to go your way, but we're definitely going to work hard to build a program that can be the best in the America East [conference]. We want to be the best team in Connecticut eventually. I know that's a tall task, but we want to get back to the NCAA tournament and compete and try to win games in the NCAA tournament."

History is behind him. Over his entire career from the high school level to the present day, the 42-year-old Poitras has only suffered four losing seasons—five if you count a youth soccer season right before former Blue Knight coach Dan Murawski met his future star at a youth camp at YMCA Camp Sloper.

"He had a mopey face on, but he always tried so hard," said Murawski. "I asked him what was the matter, and he told me that he had lost all of his games during the previous year of Little League soccer. I said, 'Guess what, Tom? You're going to have an excellent year, and you're going to score a ton of



COURTESY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF HARTFORD

Former SHS grad Tom Poitras has been named as the new head coach for the University of Hartford for 2011.

goals.' And he did."

Even at an early age, Poitras was beginning to show his talent for building programs. It carried him into two varsity seasons at St. Paul High School in Bristol, and it was a big reason why he transferred back to Southington High School for his junior year. The Knights had graduated a number of top players. They were stuck in a rebuilding year, but Poitras appeared at the first day of practice.

"I had all these relationships in Southington with all the kids I grew up with and all my friends in school," he said. "I wanted to be back in Southington to play with them. Dan Murawski welcomed me back in my junior year so that I was able to have a couple good years in Southington at the high school level."

Poitras was popped into the mid-field slot on a rebuilding team, and Southington rallied to a winning record. The following year, Poitras strapped the team on his back and carried the Knights into the second round of the Class LL tournament, scoring all four goals during a 4-0 win in the opening round.

Poitras didn't shatter any scoring records during his high school career, but his 27 goals in two years as a midfielder can rival most effective offensive scorers. More importantly, Poitras had a knack for bringing the best out of his teammates.

"He wasn't my fastest player. I don't even know if you can say that he was my most skilled player, but man could he read the game," said Murawski. "He knew where to be at the right time, defensively and offensively. He knew when to pass. He was just absolutely awesome."

According to Poitras, versatility was pounded into him since his first season in the Southington youth leagues. His first coach, Bob Swanson, stressed every aspect of the game, and Poitras threw himself into the game. He studied

offense, defense, and possession and emerged as a solid all-around player.

"I wasn't a forward, although I could play forward if we needed me to. I was actually a midfielder, but I also played defense. I remember in my senior year, the first game or two our sweeper got hurt, so I played as a back. When I went to college, I played as a back for the first year or two before going back to midfield," said Poitras. "That was one of the things growing up that was stressed. Bob Swanson switched us around a lot as young players, and I think I just got comfortable doing a little bit of everything."

His abilities earned him a spot on the CT Olympic Development program, and his versatile style caught the attention of Southern Connecticut State College coaches. He started all four seasons at the collegiate level. As a defensive player, he helped lift Southern to a 17-1-3 record and an NCAA national championship in 1987. As a midfielder, he helped bring them back to the semifinals the next season. The national championship would be the pinnacle of most players' careers, but Poitras was just getting started.

"We always talk about the fact that there's only one team in the state—or one team in the country in college soccer—that wins the last game of the season," he said. "That was what we talked about a lot at Southern. We wanted to be that team that competed and won in the last day of the season, and we were fortunate enough in 1987 to pull that off."

After graduation, he played two years with the Connecticut Wolves professional soccer club before turning his full attention toward coaching. As good as Poitras was on the field, he was even better roaming the sidelines. He coached three years at North Haven High School, made the move to college in 1994, and has been there ever since.



Southington Sports Hall of Fame

Inside the Numbers

Soccer PlayingHIGH SCHOOL

- Played two varsity seasons at St Paul High School (1983, 1984).
- Played two varsity seasons at Southington High School (1985, 1986).
- All-State (1986).
- All-Conference (1985, 1986).
- 1985—Scored 10 goals as a midfielder.
- 1986—Scored 17 goals with 2 hat tricks as a midfielder.

COLLEGE

- Played four varsity seasons at Southern CT State University (1986-1989).
- Member of the 1987 NCAA tournament National Champion team.
- Member of the 1988 NCAA Semifinal team.

PROFESSIONAL

- Connecticut Wolves Professional Soccer Club (1993-1994).

CoachingNCAA COACHING

- Hired by the University of Hartford in April 2011.
- Overall collegiate record, 191-103-39 (.632).
- Member NCAA Soccer Regional Advisory Committee (2005-07, 2011-present).
- Horizon League Ethics Committee (2007).
- Graduated 4 professional players in last 5 years with one national player of the year.
- Developed Green Bay's first Horizon League Player of the Year.
- Developed Green Bay's only two Horizon League Offensive Players of the Year.
- Coached 13 All-American athletes.
- Coached 31 All-Region selections.
- Coached 70 All-Conference selections.
- Post season appearances at all three college programs.
- Rebuilt 2 struggling college soccer programs (Univ. of New Haven, Univ. Wisconsin-Green Bay).

COACHING RESUMEUniversity of Wisconsin-Green Bay, 2004-2010.

- Overall record, 72-46-18 (.595).
- Horizon League Champions (2009).
- Southern New Hampshire University, 1998-2004.
- Overall record, 81-25-16 (.730).
- NCAA Tournament runner up (2002).
- NCAA Tournament quarterfinalist (1998, 2000).

HIGH SCHOOL COACHINGNorth Haven High School, 1991-1994.

- Overall record, 33-16-3.

Poitras has compiled a 191-103-39 record with three different college programs. He rebuilt a struggling University of New Haven team into a 15-6-1 record in just four seasons. He took a Southern New Hampshire team into the NCAA championship game in 2002, coming just one win short of a national title. Then, he moved his family to Wisconsin-Green Bay to rebuild a struggling division one program into an NCAA tournament qualifier.

That was the deciding factor for the University of Hartford. The Southington native was the perfect man for the job.

"His resume speaks to enormous success in winning games," said Meiser. "He recruits the right kind of kids with a focus on great conditioning and academics. He just does things the right way, and he's been wonderful with our staff."

As for Poitras, soccer has become a way of life, and now it's come full-circle with a return to his hometown and a collegiate coaching job at a local institution.

"I'm not sure what I'd do if I wasn't in college coaching or involved in soccer," he said. "I'm one of the fortunate ones that gets to go to work every day, and I enjoy every single day on the job. Not

everyone can say that, so I treasure it."

His dedication, success, and longevity made him an easy choice for the Southington Sports Hall of Fame selection committee, and Murawski said that Poitras is as good as it gets.

"We've got professional athletes, especially in baseball, and how can you argue with that?" said the coach. "But when you play for two years in high school and do as good a job as he did, then you go onto Southern and you're part of a national champion, then you become a coach at the national level, I think that's certainly enough. What else can you do beyond that?"

For Poitras, it's been a labor of love.

"I just want to be remembered for working hard and giving an honest effort every day," he said. "I try to do things the right way and try to do those things that my father and mother taught me to do when I was young. I took the right path. I didn't cut any corners, and I worked really hard for every place that I wanted to go."

On Wednesday, Nov. 9, Poitras will be inducted into the local hall in a ceremony at the Aqua Turf Club in Plantsville.