

Gary Libertore



Back in the early 1960s, Gary Libertore was considered armed and dangerous with a basketball in his hands. And with good reason. As many opposing players throughout Fairfield County and the state, and later throughout New England, found out, this sharp-shooting scoring machine was nearly unstoppable.

While the 62-year-old Libertore has lived more than half his life in Norwalk, it was in New Canaan where he first began to make his mark in athletics. The second youngest of six children and youngest of five sons, Libertore was involved in every youth sport the town had to offer, but it soon became apparent basketball was his favorite.

He had to wait until his junior year at New Canaan High School until he played varsity, but despite playing only two seasons he still scored 980 career points. As an All-FCIAC and all-state senior guard in 1961-62, he led the state with a 24.0 scoring average.

A deadly outside shooter, Libertore scored 31 points as the Rams lost to Danbury in the first-ever FCIAC championship game. New Canaan bounced back in the state tournament, however, as Libertore averaged 30 points a game and led the Rams to the Class M state finals.

But his two biggest points, maybe in his entire career, came when he sank two clutch free throws with one second left in the state championship game to give New Canaan a thrilling 49-48 win over Plainville, which had come into the game 30-0.

That was just one of two state championship teams Libertore was a part of his senior year. He was also an all-state runner on the Rams' cross-country team that captured the state crown in the fall of '61. In fact, Libertore lettered in four sports at New Canaan High School, playing defensive back on the football team and center field in baseball. Not surprisingly, he was voted the school's "Best Male Athlete" in 1962.

Libertore received a full scholarship to the University of New Haven, where he continued his torrid scoring from 1963-66. UNH was a NAIA school back then and, unlike NCAA rules at that time, freshmen were allowed to play varsity. All Libertore did his first year was lead New England in scoring with a 26.0 average. His numbers increased to 32 points a game as a sophomore and 34 a game as a junior.

Then as a senior in 1965-66, he led the nation (among NAIA schools) with a 31.0 average, finishing with 1,009 total points, and was named the New England Collegiate Player of the Year.

Libertore, who shot a sizzling 50.4 percent from the floor his senior year, scored a career-high 55 points against New York Tech and 42 versus Sacred Heart, the same night he became the first college player in New England history to score over 3,000 points. He led UNH to the NAIA Nationals that season and scored 33 points in his final collegiate game, a seven-point loss to St. Joseph's College of New Mexico.

For his career, Libertore averaged 31.7 points per game, still one of the highest averages in NAIA history, and his 3,176 points and 1,271 field goals were both New England records in the major and small college divisions. And that was before the 3-point shot came along.

What's more, Libertore continues to rank among the top 20 scorers all-time in any division, and he still holds 14 records at the University of New Haven, which has retired his No. 45.

New Haven compiled a sparkling record of 92-12 during Libertore's four years there, and he capped off his outstanding career by receiving the Bob Cousy Award as the best basketball player in New England under six-feet tall. He was also selected to the NAIA All-American team, joining future Basketball Hall of Famer Earl "The Pearl" Monroe.

In addition, Libertore was a four-year starting center fielder on New Haven's successful baseball team and had a lifetime batting average of .340. He later returned to UNH as a full-time Physical Education instructor and also served as head coach of the men's tennis and cross-country teams as well as assistant basketball coach.

In 1969, Libertore was drafted in the United States Army and saw active duty in Vietnam. He did find time, however, to play basketball and made the All-Army Team.

Following his tour of duty, Libertore returned home in 1971 and married Carolee Rozic of Norwalk. Then in 1974, Libertore was hired to teach Physical Education at K.T. Murphy Elementary School in Stamford, where he is now in his 33rd year.

Also in 1974, Libertore was named head coach of the boys basketball team at Stamford Catholic High School. He continued that until 1979, but in 1980 he left coaching to become a highly successful basketball official for the next 20 years. In fact, in 1999 the Connecticut High School Coaches Association named him the recipient of its inaugural "Official of the Year" award.

Libertore and his wife Carolee still reside in Norwalk and have three children and four granddaughters.