

By PENNY WEICHEL
Webmaster

Melinda Hale Rhoads and her oldest daughter Jence were inducted into the Butler County Sports Hall of Fame the other day. It is at least the third Hall of Fame for Melinda, the 1973 Oil City High School graduate who starred in every sport she ever tried at OCHS and Slippery Rock College.

She's also in the Slippery Rock (2023) and Pittsburgh Women's (1992) Halls. Although initially known for basketball, she's one of the pioneers of team handball in the United States and had the honor of being a torch bearer when the U.S. hosted the 1996 summer Olympics in Atlanta. Yep, Melinda's life story has been anything but run-of-the-mill. She's certainly not "Every Woman." And it gets better.

She and her husband, the late Bob "Posey" Rhoads, have three daughters – Jence and twins Karly and Kourtney.

Now get this: as a family they totaled 7,370 points in high school basketball. Most families have *zero*.

Rocky Grove and Cranberry fans would especially be familiar with Posey during his high school days at Mercer. The Mustangs won back-to-back Class B state titles in 1966-67, routinely putting 100 points up on opponents. Rhoads once laid 50 on the Grove, and in his senior year netted 816, averaging 30.2. He finished his career with 1,516 points before heading to Wake Forest and then getting on with his life's work of mostly coaching.

Jence is the all-time leading scorer not only in her family but Slippery Rock High School and in Butler County girls basketball with 2,170 points. After graduation in 2007, Jence starred at Vanderbilt before following in mom's footsteps and taking up team handball.

The twins played college ball at Kentucky Wesleyan, and they, too, left their mark at SRHS before graduating in 2010. Karly scored 1,547 points and Kourtney 1,174.

That brings us to Melinda, who "chipped in" with 963 points in not that many games. It would have been way more had she not played when girls basketball was just making a comeback in the late 1960s/early 1970s.

A little history lesson

Basketball was invented in 1891 in Massachusetts. Its popularity spread like wild fire. I have an account of a Franklin-Oil City game from 1899. Girls were playing by World War I. Franklin boasted two juggernauts, first in 1918 and then in 1927.

Girls continued to play into the early 1940s, and locally produced several stars: Norma Vogelaar and Emily Burgi of Cranberry and Louise Smiley, Ruth McAlevy and Gladys Nadig of Franklin to name some. But sometime in the 1940s – poof! – girls hoops were gone. I've always assumed it was because of World War II, but I don't know why.

The game's triumphant return

The girls game made its comeback, at least around here, 25 or 30 years later. Thankfully, six players to a side became obsolete. So did three dribbles and a cloud of dust. (Eyeball roll.) But girls schedules were limited (Oil City had 50 games from 1970-73), players were on jayvees as freshmen, and playoffs were practically non-existent. This was Melinda Hale's basketball world in high school and why, by my count, she "only" scored 963 points.

And then came college at Slippery Rock. Even with Title IX just implemented, the Rock played only 54 games during Hale's time there – 12 her freshman year, the program's second season since 1930. And its first game wasn't until February. February!

'900ish' career points

Melinda would turn out to be Slippery Rock's first four-year starter, but I don't know how many points she scored in college, which is why I started to write this, hoping for The Big Discovery. I looked through old newspapers. Came up empty. I found some box scores, but mostly papers reported the score only.

What I did know: she averaged 12-13 points as a freshman and scored 300 as a senior.

Melinda has since filled me in with an estimate: "I think 900 some."

(In case you're wondering, I do have a point total for three-time Fall of Famer Jodi Gault, who followed Melinda to the Rock from stardom at OCHS two years later: 978 points. But a definite number for Melinda will never be etched in stone.)

What is etched is Melinda's school record 37-point game against Edinboro. The Rock, however, doesn't include it in its media guide – 37 would now rank No. 7 in school history – but it does list her 16 field goals against the 'Boro. That is No. 1 all-time.

It has been said that Slippery Rock beat Penn State in the playoffs. Actually, the Rock beat Penn State more than once during Melinda's time there. She scored 25 in one game, and 18 in another, but Penn State played a Pennsylvania Conference schedule back then.

A bigger deal was suiting up against Immaculata, the tiny Catholic school outside Philadelphia that ruled college women's hoops during the early 1970s. The UConn of its day, but more lovable. The Mighty Macs were the darlings of the country. The Rock faced them in the playoffs after one of their national titles (but lost).

Melinda lands at Mars

In the meantime, Melinda was getting involved in team handball – a sport widely known everywhere but the United States. She made the national and U.S. Olympics teams and for years served as an ambassador for the sport.

But first, Melinda landed her first coaching job. It was at Mars High School, off Route 8 south of Butler, in time for the 1977-78 season.

Mars was coming off a trip to the state finals. Its coach, Carol DeVenzio, was from one of the blue blood basketball families of western Pennsylvania. Chuck DeVenzio coached 1967 state champion Ambridge, recognized as one of the best teams ever, and his son, Dick, was the star point guard who later played at Duke.

Not only was she replacing a semi-legend, but here she was only 22 years old (eyebrows raised), coaching a team with Very High Expectations.

Neither the Mars superintendent nor the athletic director seemed to mind, but they had little choice. DeVenzio's original replacement, the track coach, also resigned and nobody else from the school district applied.

Audrey Davidson, a sports information person for the Rock who competed against Melinda in college, told the Pittsburgh Press, "She was excellent at driving to the basket. She can drive through the key with five people in there and still score. She's very agile...With the team they have there at Mars, she will do well."

Davidson was correct. Not shy about implementing her own coaching ideas, Melinda had Mars in the playoffs in each of her two years and left with a 27-16 record.

Then it was off to her life's work – globe trotting for team handball.
Yep, Melinda Hale Rhoads: Not "Every Woman" indeed.