

From the Schenectady Daily Gazette

Big rewards for Section II girls as basketball avenues increase

By Jim Schiltz | January 1, 2021



PHOTOGRAPHER:

Gazette file photos

Categories: -The Daily Gazette, High School Sports, Sports

It's always been big news when a player from Section II makes a commitment to join a Division I women's basketball program.

That happened seven times in recent months, a mass splurge that created a big story all of its own.

"I remember when two or three was a good year," said former girls' basketball coach Fran Pugliese, who began a 20-year stint at Draper and Columbia high schools back in 1977. "Seven is amazing. Girls are playing so much now."

They are, and so many more will be joining in to compete, grow and be evaluated in places in and around the Capital Region that weren't available not too long ago.

"There were two AAU teams in this area when I was playing," said 1996 Burnt Hills-Ballston Lake graduate and current Niskayuna coach Sarah Neely. "If you were lucky enough to make it."

Saratoga Springs coach and former Union College basketball standout Robin Chudy didn't even have that.

"I played on a boys' team that my dad coached," the 1988 Columbia graduate said. "Back then, it wasn't huge."

The expansion of AAU programs and club teams in the area, and more recently organizations such as the Empire State Takeover, have helped change that.

"There are more good players because there is more basketball available," former Shenendehowa girls' coach Ken Strube said.

Section II has never seen a senior class of Division I commits quite like this one in respect to its large number and record of achievement. The all-star cast features Meghan Huerter of Shenendehowa (Providence), Niskayuna's Olivia Olsen (Providence), state champion Cambridge twins Lilly Phillips (UAlbany) and Sophie Phillips (Rhode Island), Antonia May of Amsterdam (UMBC), Valencia Fontenelle-Posson of Guilderland (Siena) and Maddisyn Mahoney of Shaker (Fairleigh Dickinson).

Whether those players get a chance to play this winter season remains in question with COVID-19 cases on the rise and the "high" risk sport of basketball on hold in New York. Their level of dedication and talent, however, is without question.

"The Capital Region has consistently produced some of the strongest players in upstate New York, but this is a special class," Empire State Takeover founder and director Jeff Mlinar said. "They've all put in a ridiculous amount of work to get where they are."

All of them have been through the travel ball route and participated in Empire State Takeover activities that include league play and college showcase events. Family genetics and a large dose of family support, Mlinar noted, played a part in those Division I scholarships, too.

"It shows that there are a lot of hard workers in the area," Lilly Phillips said of Section II's Division I-bound class. "It shows that our age group really loves basketball."

"I think we started young and had a passion for basketball to get where we are now," Fontenelle-Posson said.

Mlinar said more Division I talent from Section II is on the way.

"More girls are going to the scholarship level," said Mlinar, who will be entering his seventh year working with upstate girls. "We will have another solid class next year and another one in 2023. We are trending in the right direction and I think we'll continue to do that. Some classes will be bigger than others."

Rhaymi Porter of Scotia, who will play at Division I Canisius after her 2021 graduation from Wilbraham & Monson Academy in Massachusetts, is another product of the Empire State Takeover program and the travel ball circuit.

"There are more opportunities for girls to be in the gym, and develop and be seen," Mlinar said. "A big point is they are getting the opportunity to do it at a younger age."

"This class has been blessed to have the opportunities we've had," said Fontenelle-Posson, who joined the City Rocks AAU program when she was in third grade. "Forty or 50 years ago, they didn't have that."

Shenendehowa was one of Section II's first schools to reap the rewards of a strong youth program in terms of wins and championships on the court, and Division I college scholarships to the player that made it happen, some of the earliest being 1988 graduate Wendy Czelusniak (New Mexico State), and 1990 twin graduates Laura and Debbie Barnes (Richmond).

Several more Division I players followed during the Strube era including Jen Scanlon (1992, Duke), who, like Debbie Barnes, earned the New York Miss Basketball award during her senior year. State career scoring leader Caryn Schoff of St. Johnsville (1995, Syracuse) and Carolyn Gottstein of Albany (2000, Boston College) would later garner that award, as well.

"We had a ridiculous youth feeder program," said Strube, who won four state titles and 10 Section II championships in his coaching run at Shenendehowa from 1979-2012. "The cool thing was the dads didn't just focus on their daughters. They developed the whole program, and I got the credit."

"When I started out, they didn't start until high school," Pugliese said of his early groups at Draper. "They're playing in third and fourth grade now."

"I just think if you look at the '80s and '90s, girls' sports started to evolve," Neely said. "There are so many opportunities for female athletes in so many sports."

In more recent years, single-sport specialization has become more common among female athletes, weight rooms have become more available and personal trainers and coaches have become more prevalent.

"Everything plays a role," Mlinar said.

Increased exposure of different kinds has also aided both players and college coaches in the recruiting process.

"I remember when [former Daily Gazette sports editor] Butch Walker asked me if I wanted to cover a Bishop Gibbons girls basketball game. We had never done that before," said Bill Buell, a Gazette sportswriter from 1978 through 2002. "The rest is history. A few years later, we put out our first Gazette All-Area girls' basketball team."

Buell covered that initial girls' game during the 1983-84 season, three years after the first NCAA Division I women's basketball tournament was staged, and a decade after Ann Meyers became the first female basketball player in the United States to get a four-year athletic scholarship from UCLA.

"We always had a few good players," Buell said of his early years with the newspaper. "The mindset was different then. Most girls didn't think about getting Division I scholarships."

Buell said star players such as Shawn Shafer, who went from Bishop Gibbons to Siena in 1986, Tanya Hansen, who went from Albany to Rutgers in 1988, and Anita Kaplan, who went from Bethlehem to Stanford in 1991, helped change that thought process.

Kaplan was in the national spotlight her freshman season when she played a role in Stanford's NCAA Division I championship. (That team, of

course, was coached by Schenectady County native and all-time women's college basketball wins leader Tara VanDerveer, who struggled to find girls' teams to play for in her youth.)

"Once those girls started getting some publicity, others thought, 'We can do that, too,'" Buell said. "'This avenue is open to me.'"

Chudy saw youngsters flock to 2020 graduate Dolly Cairns, Saratoga Springs' career points leader who is playing at Rhode Island, and 2019 grad Kerry Flaherty, who is competing at Holy Cross.

"The neat part is watching the younger kids who want to emulate them," said Robin Chudy, whose team includes her daughter, sophomore Natasha Chudy — one of Section II's rising stars.

Fontenelle-Posson knows younger eyes are on her, as her own were on 2018 Niskayuna graduate Olivia Owens, who is currently playing at Kentucky after spending time with the Maryland program.

"I watched her for a long time and still keep tabs on how she is doing," Fontenelle-Posson said. "It's a cycle. Now it's my turn to try to set an example so the younger girls can see what can happen with hard work."