



NJSIAA TRAILBLAZER

The list of super-talented women's basketball players who've emerged out of New Jersey during the Title IX era is impressive. And it all began with one extraordinary player, Carol Blazejowski, whose career began at Cranford High School and culminated with her induction into the Naismith Memorial Hall of Fame in Springfield, Mass.

Known throughout her career as "The Blaze," you won't find her on a list of the state's all-time leading high school scorers. That's solely because of timing and not talent. At age ten, she was introduced to the game in school but had no team to play on, no gym to practice in, or hoop to shoot at in her driveway. But she did find ways to learn the game shooting and playing pickup games at a park in town.

Title IX, which created unprecedented athletic and educational opportunities for women, was passed in 1972. Cranford's first girls' basketball team began with the 1973-74 season, her senior year. During her one season playing for the Cougars - two years before the launch of the official NJSIAA state tournament as we know it - she scored an amazing 638 points in a 20 game season, an average of 31.9 per game.

The 5-10 Blazejowski then continued her career at Montclair State. She helped become a national power when there was no separation between huge national names like UCLA and small ones such as Montclair. While there, she put up some of the greatest numbers among any collegian from past to present. For her career, she scored 3,199 points, including 52 in one game against another early power - Queens (N.Y.) before a sold-out crowd at Madison Square Garden. It still stands as the all-time record by any college player in a game played at MSG.

She scored an astounding 1,235 points during her senior year (averaging 38.6 per game), shot 58 percent from the floor, and averaged 9.9 rebounds. She averaged 31.7 points for her career. She was a three-time All-American and recipient of the first Wade Trophy, given to the National Player of the Year, in 1978.

She played amateur basketball on the AAU circuit for the next year, was also the leading scorer for the USA team that won the 1979 World University Games in Mexico City. Later that year, the title-winning USA team at the World Championships in South Korea. She competed for the USA in the 1980 Olympics in Moscow but lost out on her opportunity because of the United States boycott that summer.

Later in 1980, the Women's Professional Basketball League formed, and Blazejowski signed a three-year, \$150,000 deal to play for the New Jersey Gems. The league folded after one season, but it was a building step for the women's game.

Her playing career soon ended, but an administrative job was just getting underway. Blazejowski worked many years at the NBA office and then became the first Vice President and General Manager of New York Liberty in 1997. She was promoted to President a year later and remained with the team until 2010.

Blazejowski was inducted into the Naismith Hall of Fame in 1994 and was also a charter inductee into the Women's Basketball Hall of Fame in Knoxville, Tenn., in 1999.

Closer to home, the basketball courts at that pivotal park in Cranford were named in her honor in 2017.

