

NJSIAA 2024 HALL OF FAME INDUCTEES

The 26th Annual High School Hall of Fame ceremony gives us the opportunity to honor the following individuals – most deserving of our recognition.



BEN CANDELINO **St. Mary o/t Assumption HS & Elizabeth HS** **Basketball Coach**

Many people have a special connection to the town that they grew up in. Ben Candelino takes his to another level.

Born in early 1952 in Vallata, Italy, he came to the United States nine months later with his parents, Rosario and Vincenza. He grew up in the Peterstown section of Elizabeth, and has been part of the fabric of the community ever since.

He attended St. Mary's High School in Elizabeth, where he was an All-Union County performer in basketball and baseball. During his senior year in 1970, he was an All-State baseball selection after leading the county in hitting.

He received an Associate of Arts degree from Union County College. He then moved on to Kean University, where he earned a BA degree in Social Studies and a MA in Administration and Supervision.

He began to teach and coach, first at St. Mary's, where his accomplishments included a 109-56 basketball coaching record, and piloting the baseball team to the 1983 NJSIAA Parochial B state championship.

He moved over to Elizabeth High School, and became its basketball coach. In a tenure that spanned from 1984 through '97, his Minutemen teams went 348-46, winning 12 Watchung Conference titles, nine Union County Tournament championships and five NJSIAA Group 4 championships. His 1989 team was runner-up to St. Anthony in the first Tournament of Champions, and then became the first of only three public schools to win the TOC when it defeated St. Anthony in the 1990 final.

He was also part of the coaching staff on championship-winning Elizabeth football teams earlier in his career, meaning he coached state championship winning teams in three different sports.

He switched from the classroom to administration in 1993 and became a principal. He is currently the Director of Athletics at the high school, and is approaching his 50th year as an administrator.

Along the way, he has also been inducted into the following Halls of Fame: Union County College, Elizabeth High School, Union County Baseball, and the New Jersey Scholastic Coaches Association.

He has been married for 43 years to his wife Cristina, who also grew up in Elizabeth. Together they have a son, Stephen, and deceased son, David, who passed away in 2019.



KIM DEGRAW-COLE **NJSIAA** **Administrator**

Kim DeGraw-Cole spent decades involved in high school sports, in a career that launched during her days as an athlete at Dover High and culminating with her service at the NJSIAA, where she joined the staff in 2010 and retired in 2022 as its Chief Compliance Officer.

She played field hockey, basketball and softball at Dover High School, graduating in 1972, which was the same year that Title IX, the federal legislation that granted unprecedented opportunities for female athletes, was signed into law.

She then attended Rutgers University, where she was a part of ground-floor collegiate competition as a member of the softball team.

Upon her graduation in 1976, she landed a teaching and coaching position at Southern Regional High School in Ocean County. She also earned a MA in Sports Administration from The College of New Jersey.

After coaching field hockey, basketball and softball at Southern, she became its athletic director in 1984. In doing so, she became the first woman AD in the history of the Shore Conference, and one of the few to hold the position in the state. During that time, she was also involved with the NJSIAA, serving on the Executive Committee, Controversies Committee, Finance Committee, Program Review Committee, Wrestling Committee and Eligibility Appeals Committee.

Upon joining the NJSIAA, she became the third woman to work in a director capacity, following Florence Peragallo and Carol Parsons, who are also members of the NJSIAA Hall of Fame.

During her time with the NJSIAA, she was a very important employee. She handled sports like field hockey, basketball, softball and lacrosse, and played a very integral role in the introduction of wrestling as a girls varsity sport. She also handled transfer data and student-athlete eligibility. She was also involved with the association's increased use of technology to improve its overall efficiency. In addition to being in charge of transfer and eligibility issues, she set up a waiver system during the COVID period to help student-athletes return to sports if grades were an issue.

She was also the first person appointed to the position of Chief Compliance Officer at the NJSIAA prior to her retirement.

"Kim has been a mentor to me," said current NJSIAA Executive Director Colleen Maguire at the time of DeGraw-Cole's retirement. "She has been a remarkable asset for the NJSIAA."



MARK DEROSA **Bergen Catholic HS** **Athlete - Baseball & Football**

Plenty of outstanding athletes have passed through the halls of Bergen Catholic High School, but few have been as versatile as Mark DeRosa, who graduated from the Oradell school in 1993.

He was not only an All-County and All-State honoree in football and baseball, the Carlstadt native was an outstanding student who attended the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania, where he continued to play both sports while managing the academic load.

He was then drafted by the Atlanta Braves in the seventh round of the 1996 MLB draft. He reached the big leagues with the Braves in 1998, the start of a 16-year career in the majors.

He first gained state-wide notoriety at Bergen Catholic as quarterback of teams which closed out his career with a 22-game win streak.

The last game of his senior year was also one of the most famous in NJSIAA playoff history, a 44-34 win over Paramus Catholic in the North Jersey, Parochial A championship. Bergen Catholic won that day by outscoring its rival, 15-0, in the fourth quarter. DeRosa was 10-of-13 for 287 yards and three touchdowns to help fuel the win.

He was also a standout baseball player at Bergen Catholic, as a slick fielding and clutch-hitting shortstop.

In college at Penn, he continued to blossom in both sports. As a quarterback, he started as a sophomore in 1994, and helped the team to an undefeated season and Ivy League championship. He led the Quakers to another Ivy title as a junior. During those two seasons, he passed for 3,895 yards and 25 TDs.

All the while, he kept progressing as a baseball shortstop, so much so that the Braves selected him with the 212th pick of the 1996 draft.

He joined the Braves as a September call-up in 1998, the beginning of a major league career in which he totaled 975 hits, 100 home runs and 494 RBI, and also hit .268. From his early days as a shortstop, he emerged into a valued utility man by also playing third base, second base, first base, right field and left field for six different teams.

Just as impressively, even though he left Penn early to sign with the Braves, he continued to attend classes and earned his Wharton degree.

Since retiring from baseball, he has remained very active in the game, working as a prominent analyst and host on MLB Network. In 2023, he managed Team USA at the World Baseball Classic, where it finished runner-up to Japan.



SYDNEY MCLAUGHLIN-LEVRONE

Union Catholic Regional HS

Athlete - Track & Field

When the topic of outstanding New Jersey high school athletes of the 21st Century is discussed, the conversation may very well begin with Sydney McLaughlin-Levrone.

After all, not many athletes possess world records, compete in the Olympics and wind up on the cover of national magazines by the time they graduate.

McLaughlin-Levrone, who graduated from Union Catholic in 2017, accomplished all of those things and more during her days at the Scotch Plains school. While in high school, she won 13 national titles (seven individual, six on relays), a NJSIAA record-tying 11 individual Meet of Champions titles (seven outdoors and four indoors), set seven state records, four national records and one junior world record.

Her MOC titles included five in the 400 meters (three indoors, two outdoors), four in the 400 hurdles, the 100 hurdles as a freshman and the 55 hurdles as a sophomore. She still owns the national high school records in the 400 indoors (51.61) and the 400 hurdles (53.82).

She achieved even more while at Union Catholic: Sydney ran multiple sub 50 splits on the 4x400 relay, and ran the 400 leg on a world indoor-record-breaking distance medley relay. She also became the first athlete, male or female, to win the Gatorade National Athlete of the Year award in consecutive years (2016 and 2017).

There was also the Olympics. In 2016, she became the youngest United States track athlete in 44 years to compete in the Olympics (New Jersey's Carol Lewis qualified as a high schooler in 1980, but did not compete due to the United States boycott that year). Sydney advanced to the semifinals of the 400 hurdles during those games in Rio.

She ran collegiately for one year at University of Kentucky before turning professional. During that freshman season, she won the NCAA 400 hurdles championship in 53.96. Earlier that campaign, she won the 400 hurdles at the SEC Championships in 52.75, setting a NCAA and World Junior record.

She's continued to climb in stature since. Most notably, she won two gold medals at the 2021 Olympics in Tokyo, capturing the 400 hurdles in a world record time of 51.46, and also as part of the 4x400 relay. She's also won three world championships as a pro, as part of the 4x400 relay in 2019 and 2022 and also by setting a world record in winning the 400 hurdles in 50.68 in 2022. That clocking broke her own world record of 51.41 which she set a month earlier. She's currently training to compete this summer at the Olympics in Paris, France. In addition to her specialty events, she also began racing last year in the 400 meters, and established herself as a threat to win that, as well.

She married Andre Levrone Jr., a former NFL receiver, in 2022.



MICHAEL O'KOREN

Hudson Catholic Regional HS

Athlete - Basketball

Hudson County and hard-nosed basketball have been synonymous for generations.

One of the all-time greatest examples of that connection is Mike O'Koren, who grew up in a tough environment in Jersey City, raised by his mother, Rose, after his father passed away when he was young. He attended Hudson Catholic High School in Jersey City, where he graduated in 1976 as the school's all-time leading scorer. He moved on to the University of North Carolina, where he became an immediate star in the Atlantic Coast Conference. After that, he was a first round draft choice (sixth overall) by the New Jersey Nets. He played eight years in the NBA, including seven with the Nets.

At Hudson Catholic, he was a four-year starter under coach Joe "Rocky" Pope, where he formed a great combination with teammate Jim Spanarkel, who also went on to the play in the ACC (Duke) and become a first-round NBA pick (Philadelphia). Spanarkel, who was also a baseball star, was inducted into the NJSIAA Hall of Fame in 2018.

The 6-7 O'Koren helped Hudson Catholic win the Hudson County championship as a junior, a season in which he averaged 19.4 points and 12 rebounds. It was the only county title for the Hawks in a span of 37 years. A year later, with Spanarkel now in college, those numbers increased as his senior campaign concluded with a win over Holy Spirit in the NJSIAA Parochial A championship game. O'Koren was also named an All-American.

He finished his high school career with more than 1,800 points and 900 rebounds. He ranked at the time as the No. 2 scorer in Hudson County history behind another NJSIAA Hall of Fame member, Bill Raftery from St. Cecilia (Kearny). Not only was O'Koren leaving as the leading scorer in Jersey City history, he was Hudson Catholic's all-time leading rebounder.

At North Carolina, O'Koren became the second freshman to start for coach Dean Smith (Phil Ford had done so previously) and he averaged 13.9 points that year for a team which lost to Marquette in the NCAA Tournament final. He scored 31 on 14-for-19 shooting in a 84-83 Final Four win over top-ranked Nevada-Las Vegas, which had seven future NBA players. It stands as one of the greatest performances by a freshman in Final Four history. As a sophomore, averaged 17.8 points and was second nationally in field goal percentage. He averaged 14.7 points as a junior and 14.7 again as a senior. He totaled 1,765 points as a Tarheel. O'Koren is the only player in North Carolina history to total more than 1,500 points, 800 rebounds and 300 assists. He also finished with a .572 field goal percentage. He was an All-American as a junior and senior as well as a two-time All-ACC pick. He also graduated from North Carolina in four years with a degree in therapeutic recreation.

He was a steady player throughout his NBA career, averaging 8.2 points, 3.4 rebounds and shooting 49 percent in his eight seasons. He then spent many additional years in the league as an assistant coach.



GREG OLSEN **Wayne Hills HS** **Athlete - Football & Track & Field**

Greg Olsen's career in the sport of football has been remarkable, and he's still only 39 years old.

High school All-American at Wayne Hills? Check.
College superstar at Miami? Yup.
First round draft choice by the Chicago Bears? Oh yeah.
Three time Pro Bowl selection and two-time All-Pro tight end? Another yes.
A post-NFL television career, including working as color analyst during a FOX Sports Super Bowl broadcast? Did that, too.

It all began from his earliest days soaking up the game as a youngster hanging around Wayne Hills football teams coached by his father, Chris. Wayne Hills is where he later achieved his first football stardom as a high school player.

During his football career at Wayne Hills (2000-2002), he was a three-year starter on teams that went a combined 33-3, capped by a 12-0 season as a senior in which the team captured the North Jersey, Section 1, Group 3 championship. He was a 6-6, 245-pounder, and dominant on both sides of the ball. As a senior, he had 38 catches for 703 yards and 14 touchdowns, but was chosen state Defensive Player of the Year by The Star-Ledger after also recording 87 tackles, 25 of them behind the line, and 15 sacks. He was selected to several All-American teams, and one of three finalists for Gatorade National Player of the Year.

He also participated basketball (three years) and track (four years). In the spring of 2003, he was runner-up in the shot put at the NJSIAA Meet of Champions. He set a Wayne Hills shot put record (59'4-5) and also set a school record as part of the 4x400 team.

In college, he became a starter at Miami as sophomore, and during his career as a tight end totaled 87 receptions for 1,215 yards and six touchdowns, earning All-Atlantic Coast Conference recognition.

He then embarked on a NFL career which was so good that he is considered possibly the best pro tight end coming from a Miami program known as "Tight End U" for the amount of stars that it has produced. He played 14 years in the NFL, with Chicago, Carolina and Seattle. He totaled 742 receptions for 8,683 yards and 60 touchdowns. He was the first tight end in NFL history to record three consecutive seasons of at least 1,000 receiving yards, and retired fifth all-time among tight ends in both receptions and yardage, and eighth in touchdowns.

His television career actually began when he called several games while still an active, injured player. After delving into the job full time upon his retirement, he soon became the lead game analyst for FOX Sports, teamed with play-by-play man Kevin Burkhardt, a Bloomfield native who earlier called Greg's Wayne Hills games on WGHT Radio. In 2023, they announced Super Bowl LVII to an audience of more than 113 million viewers, which was the second-most watched game ever.



KETURAH ORJI **Mount Olive HS** **Athlete - Track & Field**

Many New Jersey athletes have gained legendary status in the sport of track and field.

In the case of Keturah Orji, the Mount Olive product has earned a place as the state's best horizontal female jumper.

Her earliest athletic experiences were in gymnastics, which evolved into excellence in other sports.

A 2014 graduate of the Morris County school, where she also starred in volleyball, Orji won the triple jump and long jump three times apiece at the NJSIAA Meet of Champions. She still holds the New Jersey high school record in the triple jump (44-11), which is also No. 2 in United States high school history.

While in high school, she also won six national championships, as well as the 2014 USATF Junior National title in the triple jump.

On the volleyball court, she was a prime reason that Mount Olive won a school record 22 games during her junior year.

She competed collegiately at University of Georgia, where her list of major accomplishments was extensive.

She was the Southeastern Conference indoor triple jump champion four times and the outdoor champ another four times. She was also a three-time NCAA indoor triple jump champ (finishing second as a freshman) and four-time NCAA outdoor triple jump champ. She also had two NCAA runner-up finishes in the long jump. She became the first woman to win eight NCAA championships in field events.

Many of those championships resulted in record-setting SEC, NCAA and American leaps. She also won numerous awards, including SEC Scholar Athlete of the Year. The biggest came in 2018, when she won the Bowerman Award, which is collegiate track and field's highest individual honor. She was previously a two-time finalist, making her the first three-time female finalist in the award's history.

While in college, she earned a spot on the United States Olympic Team, and finished fourth in the triple jump at the 2016 games in Rio. She returned to the Olympics in 2021 in Tokyo, and finished seventh in the triple jump.

Just last month, she won her 10th overall United States triple jump championship at the USA Indoor Championships in New Mexico, traveling 47-7. It was her third straight national indoor title in the event, and is part of her run-up to qualify for the Olympics this summer in Paris.