

Special Award
Norwalk Babe Ruth All-Stars
NHS Girls Basketball Team

A pair of championship teams from Norwalk, which captured the collective hearts of the city seven months apart, have been chosen to receive the Norwalk Old Timers "Special Award" tonight.

The **1999 Norwalk Junior Babe Ruth 13-15 Year-Old All-Star Team**, which won state and regional championships and then finished seventh at the Babe Ruth World Series in New Orleans, and the **1999-2000 Norwalk High School Girls Basketball Team**, which went 26-0 and captured the Class LL state championship, are both being recognized for their outstanding achievements.

Fifteen 'Boys of Summer' made the summer of '99 a memorable one for the city of Norwalk as the local Junior Babe Ruth All-Stars won 11 of 14 games, including nine in a row at one point, and posted a combined 10-1 record in the state and New England tournaments to reach the World Series.

What made that summer even more exciting was the fact the Norwalkers hosted the Connecticut State Tournament at Malmquist Field. They didn't disappoint the hometown fans either, as Norwalk opened up with an impressive 10-0 win over New Fairfield.

In the second round, however, Shelton surprised the locals 5-4, knocking the host team into the losers' bracket and one loss away from elimination.

But needing to win five straight games, the Norwalk all-stars responded in grand fashion, starting with another 10-0 win over Hamden and then another win over New Fairfield, this time by a 16-1 score.

That put them in the finals of the losers' bracket where they beat a tough Stamford team 9-5 to reach the championship round and a rematch with Shelton.

But Norwalk had to defeat the unbeaten all-stars from the Valley twice and, like a champion, came through with a pair of exciting victories. After holding on to post a 7-6 win and force an "if" game, Norwalk came back 24 hours later to beat Shelton again 5-3 for the state crown.

Given a reprieve, the Norwalk All-Stars then rolled through the New England Regional Tournament with four straight victories. In the opening round, they knocked off Vermont 11-0, then crushed Main 25-1, and routed Massachusetts 11-1.

Then needing to win one of two games, the Norwalkers made sure they avoided the "if" game by holding on to edge New Hampshire 6-5 for the New England championship and earn a berth in the Junior Babe Ruth World Series.

Norwalk outscored its four opponents in the region by a 53-7 margin and, counting the state tournament, the locals held a whopping 114-27 edge, including three shutouts and three more games in which they only gave up a run.

Then it was off to New Orleans where Norwalk lost to California 6-4, but bounced back to beat Wisconsin 12-7 before being eliminated by an 8-3 loss to Maryland.

Gerald Anastasia was the head coach while Ed Luczkowski and Dick Zakhar were assistant coaches. Members of the team were Danny Doyle, John Bellantoni, Jason Zakhar, Frank Machinello, Chris Brown, Dewey Raymond, George "Bly" Blystone, Kyle O'Brien, Tom Zisek, Garth Langrin, Joe Zullo, Joe Cossuto, Craig Bartush, Brian Friedman, and Craig Ventrice.

Likewise, the Norwalk High School Girls Basketball Team provided the city with a memorable season. In fact, it was a perfect season as the Lady Bears won all 26 games they played, captured the Western Division and FCIAC titles for the second year in a row, and capped it all off with the Class LL state championship, the second in the history of the NHS program and the first since 1981.

In addition, Norwalk was ranked first in all of the state polls, second in the Madison Square Garden Network Tri-State Poll, fifth in the East region in the *USA Today* poll, and 25th in the nation in the Fox Sports Fab 50.

The Bears deserved all the accolades they earned as they won most of their games in most impressive and dominating fashion. How dominating? They won 22 of their 26 games by 20 or more points, 16 games by 30 points or more, 11 by 40 or more, and six games by 50 or more points. They even won one game by 70 points.

But the closest game Norwalk had was also its biggest game as the Bears nipped defending state champion Norwich Free Academy 47-45 in the state finals.

Prior to that, however, the Norwalkers had hardly been challenged. They rolled through a perfect 19-0 regular season with their closest game being a 59-49 non-league win over New Britain in the third game of the season. Their next closest game was a 21-point win over Fairfield, the second-best team in the FCIAC with a 19-1 record.

The Bears added three more one-sided wins in the conference playoffs, beating Ridgefield 72-32, Trumbull 55-35 in the semi-finals, and then Fairfield again 68-52 in the FCIAC championship game.

Then came the state tournament where Norwalk reeled off the final four wins in its magical season, including a 57-22 win over Stamford, a 56-43 victory over New Britain, and a 61-41 triumph over Fairfield in the Class LL semi-finals. The Mustangs, a perennial power itself, finished the season 23-3 with all three losses coming to Norwalk.

That set up a much anticipated showdown between the 25-0 Bears and 26-0 Norwich Free Academy in a rematch of the 1999 state final. This time, however, Norwalk came out on top as senior captain Ayanna Brown hit the game-winning shot with 1.5 seconds to go. It was a fitting way to end a fairy tale season.

The 6-foot-3 Brown, the heart and soul of this NHS team, finished with 22 points, 10 rebounds, and nine blocked shots in the final game of her brilliant high school career to earn tournament MVP honors.

The win also avenged Norwalk's 64-59 loss to NFA in the '99 state final, the Bears' only loss in their last 53 games. Meanwhile, NFA, which had won three of the previous four Class LL state titles, had its 53-game winning streak snapped.

Fred English, in his seventh season, was the NHS head coach while Rick Fuller, Jr., and Phil Mendence were his assistants. Besides Ayanna Brown, other members of the team were Cathy Cash, Kati Cavanagh, Tanya Rhodes, Killi Miklovich, Sophia Koletsos, Shantelle Pugh, Pam Karagiorgos, Megan Daher, Marva Dash, Kara Williams, Jenna Bartolo, Tonia Kalmanides, Dineen Naper, Jenn Ross, and Marsha Tsombanidis.