

Tony Ward



In what many local sports fans agree was the biggest high school basketball game in Norwalk history, **TONY WARD** cemented his place as one of the city's all-time greats when he led Brien McMahon over rival Norwalk High to claim the 1983 Class LL state championship.

This year marked the 40th anniversary of that historic all-city state final on March 26, 1983 when the Senators beat the Bears 73-65 before an overflow bi-partisan crowd of proud Norwalkers who made the 60-mile drive to Central Connecticut State University in New Britain.

And it was Tony Ward, McMahon's talented junior guard, who led the newly crowned state champs with a team-high 17 points and was a unanimous choice as the game's Most Valuable Player.

That clutch championship game performance was the culmination of a sparkling state tournament run by the 6-foot-1 Ward, who led the No. 3 seeded Senators in scoring in all five of their Class LL tourney victories en route to McMahon's second state title in boys basketball. Ward scored 22 points in an opening-round victory against Rippowam, followed that with 23 versus Danbury a few nights later, and then fired in 27 points, including 10 in overtime in the Senators' dramatic quarterfinal win over perennial power Wilbur Cross.

The red-hot Ward would throw in another 24 points in the state semifinals to lead BMHS to a 63-49 victory over No. 2 Simsbury (22-1 coming in) as the Senators punched their ticket to the 1983 Class LL state championship game against their neighbors from the other side of town.

Then in the final game of his high school career, Ward scored 11 of his 17 points in the second half as McMahon pulled away to win by eight points. The Class LL finals MVP also finished with a game-high six assists, meaning he had a hand in 29 of the Senators' 73 points in addition to his usual excellent defensive play. In true MVP fashion, Ward saved his best for last with 113 points in those five state victories, an average of 23 points per win.

For the season, Ward averaged a team-leading 17 points a game for the 22-4 state champs. He also led the Senators in steals with three a game and was second in assists with just under five per contest. He capped off his outstanding junior season by being named the Most Valuable Player of *The Hour's* 1983 All-City Boys Basketball Team, becoming the first underclassman to garner the award. He was also named to the All-FCIAC West Division team.

Ward followed that season up with an even better senior campaign for the 18-6 Senators. He captured both the FCIAC and city scoring championships with a 22.5 average while being named first-team All-FCIAC, first-team All-State, and becoming the first two-time All-City MVP. He was also the *Connecticut Co-Player of the Year* as well as being nominated for the 1984 High School All-American Team.

But one of Brien McMahon's all-time great basketball players didn't play his entire four-year high school career on Highland Avenue. Ward transferred after his freshman year to Central Catholic and led the Cavaliers in scoring as a sophomore with 17.5 points a game. He was

the only CCHS player named to the All-City team, the first of his three all-city selections. He transferred back to McMahon for his All-City MVP seasons as a junior and senior.

Being named an “MVP” was practically a habit for Ward throughout his basketball journey, starting when he was 12 years-old and was named MVP of the Norwalk Calvin Murphy Bidly Basketball League after leading his team to a second straight league championship. At McMahon, he won back-to-back MVP awards at the Williard Williams Christmas Tournament, was the Class LL finals MVP, and was a two-time All-City MVP.

In his final season, Ward led the 1984 Senators to an 18-6 record and a berth in the FCIAC semifinals and Class LL state quarterfinals. He finished with 1,386 career points, the third most on the city’s all-time scoring list behind only former Norwalk High great Calvin Murphy and McMahon’s Marvin Spencer.

Hall of Fame coach Ralph King, who coached Spencer, Ward, and a host of other outstanding players, rates Tony Ward among one the best to ever wear the Senators’ uniform.

“Tony was a complete player,” the legendary coach said after the 1984 season. “He was a great team captain and an excellent offensive and defensive player. To have such a good player and such a good person is something special. A player like Tony comes along very seldom.”

King wasn’t the only coach to praise Ward’s

talent on the hardwood. Norwalk High School’s Ray Barry, another legendary Hall of Fame coach, was also a fan.

“We geared our defense to try to stop him,” he said. “If you wanted to beat McMahon, you had to stop Tony. He had the best jump shot in the league.”

Ward excelled in the classroom as well as on the court and the honor student accepted a full scholarship to Penn State University where he was a four-year starting guard and a rare three-year team captain. He led the Nittany Lions in assists all four seasons and averaged double figures in scoring his final three years, including tying for the team lead as a junior with 13 points a game. He graduated in 1988 with 1,007 career points.

A few years after graduation, Ward’s passion for basketball led to a position with the National Basketball Players Association, the labor union that represents NBA players. Ward spent six years as Manager of Marketing for Special Events, including All-Star Weekend. He later joined an advertising firm in New York City where he was Director of Advertising and Marketing for the U.S. Army All-American Bowl and HBCU Football Classic.

And in one of his greatest accomplishments after basketball, Ward produced a documentary titled “Rainbow on the Green” about African-Americans in the sport of golf, which aired nationally on the ABC Network.