

## Kevin Stevens



Championship basketball games certainly brought out the best in **KEVIN STEVENS**. That was certainly the case twice during his outstanding playing career as the talented 6-foot-5 forward helped lift two different teams to the promised land in the 1980s.

The first came in 1982 when the Norwalk High School senior captain put the Bears on his back and carried them to the Class LL state championship with a brilliant MVP performance in the finals.

Then in 1986 as a junior at Sacred Heart University, an injured Stevens turned in one gutsy, gritty effort after another in the NCAA Division II tournament as his inspirational play sparked the Pioneers to an improbable national championship.

Stevens' basketball journey, however, may have taken a whole different path had he and his family not moved from Boston to Norwalk in 1975. In fifth grade at the time, he

attended St. Thomas School and played on the school's basketball team in the Norwalk Parochial League as a seventh and eighth grader.

All roads led to Norwalk High where Stevens was part of the Bears' 1980 and '81 FCIAC championship teams. That 1981 team went 25-1, its only loss coming in the Class LL state semifinals to eventual champion Wilbur Cross. Four of the five starters from that team graduated (including Kevin's older brother John), but coach Ray Barry built his team around the younger Stevens and the Bears put together another stellar season.

NHS returned to the FCIAC final, but fell short in their bid to three-peat, losing to Trumbull. That stinging loss, however, served as motivation for Stevens as he led the third-seeded Bears to six straight victories in the 1982 Class LL state tournament, culminating with an 85-76 win over Holy Cross of Waterbury in the final before nearly 4,000 fans at Central Connecticut State University. Stevens culminated his outstanding scholastic career with one of his best games ever, finishing with 32 points on 14-for-17 shooting, 16 rebounds, and seven assists to earn Finals MVP honors.

Stevens' knack to shine in the biggest moments wasn't limited to just championship games, however. He scored a game-high 23 points and handed out six assists in the Bears' 82-57 quarterfinal win against Hamden, and four nights later netted a game-high 22 points in a 68-59 triumph over Lee on the Sacred Heart University court he would later call home. The win set the stage for Norwalk High School to win its second-ever state title in boys basketball and first since the Calvin Murphy-led 1966 team.

Stevens led the 23-3 Bears in scoring that season with 17.9 points a game while being named All-FCIAC First-Team as well as MVP of *The Hour's* 1982 All-City Team to cap off his scholastic career.

"He was a coach's dream," Ray Barry said.

After one season at the University of Hartford, Stevens transferred to Sacred Heart where his reputation as a big-time, big-game performer grew even more. That was never more evident than his junior season of 1985-86 when he helped the Pioneers reach the NCAA Division II mountaintop.

As he did at Norwalk High four years earlier, Stevens was at his best in the biggest games. He had 14 points, 11 rebounds, and keyed a second-half surge in a quarterfinal upset of

Norfolk State on NSU's court to advance to the D-II Final Four at the Springfield Civic Center. He scored 13 points as SHU rallied from an eight-point halftime deficit to knock off Florida Southern in the semifinals. The next night, Stevens scored a team-high 19 points on 9-for-11 shooting as Sacred Heart, a school with 1,700 fulltime students, defeated Southeast Missouri (13,000 enrollment) 93-87 to become the first men's basketball team from Connecticut—as well the first from New England—to win an NCAA championship.

Stevens was one of three SHU players to make the Final Four All-Tournament Team. But his play down the stretch was even more impressive because he was less than 100 percent after suffering an ankle injury in late January that forced him to miss four weeks. Even after he returned to the court, he would soak his swollen ankle in a bucket of ice water after every practice and game. That ankle was put to the test on back-to-back nights in the Final Four, but Stevens' toughness and intestinal fortitude overcame severe pain, something head coach Dave Bike said inspired the rest of the team.

Stevens averaged 14.5 points and eight rebounds a game for the Pioneers, who finished 30-4 that championship season. They would go 19-13 the following season and win the New England Collegiate Conference title while returning to the

NCAA tournament and reaching the New England Regional final. Stevens, a senior captain, put up 15.1 points and another eight rebounds a game, including 23 points in two games and 19 rebounds in another. He would finish his collegiate career with 1,244 points.

That career also included a memorable sophomore season in 1984-85 when rivals Sacred Heart and University of Bridgeport met four times and Stevens went up against 7-foot-6 Manute Bol. Despite giving away 11 inches, Stevens put his 205-pound body on the rail-thin Bol to keep him away from the basket and continually frustrate him. Stevens held his own in all four games and even held the upper hand in a pair of SHU wins, including in the NCAA regional semis.

"He gave him fits," Ray Barry recalled. "I mean he really manhandled him."

After college, Stevens had a tryout with his beloved Boston Celtics ("It was a quick one," he humorously noted), then played professionally in Ireland for one season before returning home and serving as an assistant coach at NHS under Barry for three seasons. The Bears won two FCIAC championships and one state title while reaching the Class LL state final all three seasons Stevens was part of the staff at his alma mater. He also coached PAL basketball for eight years in Fairfield.