

## Guest Column: It's been an extraordinary year for Philly-area sports

*By Rich Westcott, Times Guest Columnist*

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In the long and sporadic history of Philadelphia area sports, there has never been a year like 2016. It has been a year filled with sparkling individual achievements and serves as a reminder that few if any other areas in the country have as many outstanding sports participants as we do.

Sure, there have been other years when teams won championships. And there have often been years when unusual events captured the spotlight. But when it comes to the combined success of a large number of athletes and coaches, this year ranks at the top.

Start with the recent induction of Allen Iverson into the Basketball Hall of Fame. When the former 76ers four-time NBA scoring champion and an 11-time NBA all-star entered the basketball shrine, each one of the four major professional sports had inductees into their halls of fame with Philadelphia connections.

Mike Piazza, born in Norristown and raised in Phoenixville where he attended the local high school, was taken into the Baseball Hall of Fame after a career spent mostly with the Los Angeles Dodgers and New York Mets, during which he hit more home runs than any catcher in big league history.

Eric Lindros, who spent eight seasons with the Flyers and was a seven-time all-star and the fourth fastest player in NHL history to score 300 points, entered the Ice Hockey Hall of Fame. And Philadelphia native and Roman Catholic High School graduate Marvin Harrison joined the Football Hall of Fame after 13 years, six on the all-pro team, with the Indianapolis Colts.

Never in local history has the hall of fame of each of the four major professional sports had inductees with Philadelphia connections in the same year. That is a record that may never be matched.

But the hall of fame inductions are only part of the story. In the recently completed Olympics, no less than nine people from the Philadelphia area won gold or silver medals.

The list included Philadelphian and a member of the men's winning basketball team Kyle Lowry from Cardinal Dougherty High and Villanova. In addition, four other local athletes won special honors, including gold medal winners Kelsi Worrell in the 100-meter butterfly and English Gardner in the 4x100-meter relay, both from South Jersey, Chester County's Cierra Runge, a gold medal winner in the 4x200-meter freestyle relay, and silver medalist Nia Ali from Philadelphia in the 100-meter hurdles.

Four members of the women's basketball team won gold medals. The group included Elena Delle Donne from Wilmington, head coach Geno Auriemma from Norristown, and assistant coaches Dawn Staley from Philadelphia and Cheryl Reeve from Salem, N.J.

And even that doesn't complete the story. The retirement of Kobe Bryant, who spent 20 years with the Los Angeles Lakers after graduating from Lower Merion High School, brought attention to the fact that in 2016, no less than 13 players from the Philadelphia area performed in the NBA.

The list included three Chester natives, the Denver Nuggets Jameer Nelson and the Brooklyn Nets, Rondae Hollis-Jefferson, both of whom are graduates of Chester High, and the New Orleans Pelicans Tyreke Evans, who went to the American Christian Academy in Aston. Also on the list were graduates of Episcopal Academy in Newtown Square, the 76ers Gerald Henderson and Wayne Ellington of the Miami Heat.

Along with Lowry, other NBA players from the area included Philadelphia natives Dion Waiters, who attended Life Center Academy in Burlington, N.J., of the Heat, Roman Catholic High's Rasual Butler of the San Antonio Spurs, twin brothers Markieff Morris of the Washington Wizards and Marcus Morris of the Detroit Pistons, both graduates of APEX Academy in Pennsauken, N.J., the Charlotte Hornets' Michael Kidd-Gilchrist from Somerdale, N.J., and Fairless Hills native and Pennsbury High grad Lavoy Allen of the Indiana Pacers.

The list of this year's accomplishments by local sports people will be further embellished by the forthcoming induction of Upper Darby High alumnus and legendary Villanova coach Marty Stern into the National College Track and Field Hall of Fame. And speaking of Villanova, not only is the head coach of the 2016 NCAA champions, Jay Wright, a graduate of Council Rock High School, but players Ryan Arcidiacono (Neshaminy), Daniel Ochefo (Downingtown East), Mikai Bridges (Great Valley), Kevin Rafferty (Malvern Prep), Darryl Reynolds (Lower Merion), Donte DiVincenzo (Salesianum), and Tim Delaney (Pitman) all went to high school in the Philadelphia area.

In baseball, Springfield (Delco) High graduate Mike Scioscia, now in his 17th season as manager of the Los Angeles Angels, has served longer than any other current skipper in the major leagues. And to go a step farther, former Villanova baseball and football star Matt Szczur from Cape May is a valuable outfielder on the best team in baseball, the Chicago Cubs. In addition, one of baseball's best players, Millville native Mike Trout of the Angeles, is third in the American League in batting average, and Toms Rivers' Todd Frazier of the Chicago White Sox ranks fifth in the league in home runs.

It all goes to show that the Philadelphia area and its surrounding regions is as good as it gets when it comes to producing top-level sports people. And to date, there has never been a year like 2016 when such a large contingent was as successful as this one.

*Rich Westcott is a sports writer and historian and the author of 25 books. The most recent is "The Champions of Philadelphia," which covers the city's top professional sports teams. He once covered sports for the Daily Times.*

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