



SPORTS GUYS



BY RICH WESTCOTT

It's Been a Great Year for Sports Figures from the Philadelphia Area

THE PHILADELPHIA AREA has always been a leader in producing successful sports figures. Over the years, numerous local athletes and coaches have come from the area and gone on to national prominence.

It's doubtful, though, that any period in local sports has had such an extraordinary run as the one in roughly the last 12 months. Starting last spring, successful achievements by native sons and daughters regularly captured national headlines. In the process, they once again put the Philadelphia area in the limelight, focusing attention on the region as the birthplace of some of the country's leading sports people.

Sports, of course, go back a long way in the Philadelphia area. Sporting events were known to be held as early as the mid-1700s when cricket became a popular sport. Baseball was first known to have been played in the area in 1830. Later, the first championship of the first professional baseball league was won by a local team in 1871. Along with that, the first National League game was played in Philadelphia in 1876.

Penn fielded its first football team in 1876. Records show that the nation's first college bas-

ketball game was played in Philadelphia in 1895 with Haverford College beating Temple, 6-4. That same year, the Penn Relays and the Devon Horse Show began. The first Army-Navy football game was played in Philadelphia in 1899. And the first professional major league basketball championship was won by the Philadelphia Warriors in 1947. And these are just a few of the landmark events that have occurred in the greater Philadelphia area and South Jersey.

Along with these team stories, many great individual athletes came from the area. Names

such as Wilt Chamberlain, Paul Arizin, Roy Campanella, Bill Tilden, Carl Lewis, Tom LaSorda, Emlen Tunnell, Bernard Hopkins, Goose Goslin, Theresa Shank Greutz, John B. Kelly, Sr., Herb Adderley, Tara-Lipinski, Helen Sigel Wilson, Walt Bahr, Reggie Jackson, Jack Ramsay, and Joe Walcott are just a fraction of the fabled athletes and coaches who are native sons and daughters.

Truly, the Philadelphia area has been the Cradle of Stardom with success stories by the thousands emitting from every corner. But few, when it comes to players born in the area (this list cites the specific town where people were born and does not include players who were born elsewhere but grew up in the Philadelphia area) if any, can match the period that began last spring and ran up to the present.

During that period, the area produced the Most Valuable Players in both the National Football League and the American League in baseball, two coaches who led their teams to NCAA basketball championships, nine Olympic Gold medal winners, three new inductees into Halls of Fame, a super featherweight boxing champion, a coach who led his football team

to the Rose Bowl, members of both the Chicago Cubs and New England Patriots championship teams, and 12 players on NBA teams.

And that's just part of the list. It is a list that in terms of being the birthplace of some of their sports' top people is arguably unmatched by any other area in the country.

At the top of that native son and daughter list is **Matt Ryan**. The quarterback from Exton won the NFL's 2016 Most Valuable Player Award and was named the league's Offensive Player of the Year with a spectacular season that led his Atlanta Falcons to the Super Bowl. Ryan threw 38 touchdown passes while completing 2016 passes for 4,944 yards.

Right there with Matty Ice is Millville's **Mike Trout**. Widely regarded as the best position player in baseball, the Los Angeles Angels outfielder won his second American League MVP Award in the last three years while hitting .315 with 29 home runs, 100 RBI, and 123 runs scored, and winning his fifth straight Silver Slugger Award.

Last spring, another super feat occurred when Coach **Jay Wright** of Churchville led Villanova to a 32-4 record and the NCAA championship with a last-second, 77-74 victory over North Carolina. The Wildcats' roster included seven players from the Philadelphia area and South Jersey, those being **Ryan Arcidiacono**,

Daniel Ochefo, **Mikai Bridges**, **Kevin Rafferty**, **Darryl Reynolds**, **Donte DiVincenzo**, and **Tim Delaney**.

Recently, Philadelphia's **Dawn Staley**, a Hall of Famer and three-time Olympian, joined the list of the area's great coaches by guiding her South Carolina team to a 33-4 record and then beating Mississippi State, 67-55, to win the women's NCAA basketball championship.

Meanwhile, **Carli Lloyd** of Delran continued her ranking as the world's best women's soccer star by being named Player of the Year while performing for Manchester, England in the Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) The honor came just one year after she scored three goals to give the women's United States soccer team the World Cup championship.

In the Olympics last summer, gold medal winners from the area included Philadelphia's **Kyle Lowry** in men's basketball, and in women's basketball assistant coaches **Staley** and **Cheryl Reeve** of Salem, and player **Elena Delle Donne** from Wilmington. (Head coach **Geno Auriemma** was raised in Norristown but was born in Italy.)

Other gold medal winners included **Lauren Schmetterling** of Moorestown in the women's eight-person rowing team,

Kelsi Worrell of Voorhees in the 100-meter butterfly, **Cierra Runge** of Cochranville in the 4 x 200-meter freestyle relay, **English Gardner** of Philadelphia in the 4 x 100-meter relay, and **Taylor Ellis-Watson** of Philadelphia in the 4 x 400-meter relay.

Three local sportsmen entered their sport's Halls of Fame. Former catcher **Mike Piazza** of Norristown, owner of the most home runs (396) by any catcher in big league history (427 homers overall) and a star backstop mostly with the Los Angeles Dodgers and New York Mets entered the baseball hall. Ex-wide receiver **Marvin Harrison** of Philadelphia and the Indianapolis Colts went into the football shrine after a career in which he caught 128 touchdown passes and latched onto 1,102 receptions for 14,580 yards. And veteran Villanova coach **Marty Stern** of Upper Darby, a six-time NCAA Track and Field Coach of the Year and coach of 15 men's and women's NCAA championship teams, was inducted into the National Track and Field Coaches Hall of Fame.

Elsewhere on the local sports scene, defensive lineman **Sean Daniels** of Camden starred for the Philadelphia Soul as they won the Arena Football League championship. Another Camden native, **Jason Sosa**, won the super featherweight boxing title. **James Franklin** of Langhorne coached Penn State's football team into



the Rose Bowl in a year in which the Nittany Lions posted an 11-3 record. **Matt Szczur** of Cape May was an outfielder on the Chicago Cubs World Champion baseball team, and fullback **James Develin** from West Chester, cornerback **Logan Ryan** from Berlin, and assistant coaches **Joe Judge** of Philadelphia and **Keith Carter** of Downingtown were members of the NFL champion New England Patriots.

Of course, no list of the Philly area's finest could go without mention of the contribution the region made to the NBA's 2016-17 season. During all or parts of that season, no less than 12 players who were born in the Philadelphia area performed in the league (The list does not include players who went to college here.) No other sport in the area, whether it's baseball, football, or anything else, ever represented the area with that many players.

Lowry of the Toronto Raptors was one of them. In addition, there were Philadelphians **Dion Waiters** of the Miami Heat, twin brothers **Marcus Morris** of the Detroit Pistons and **Markieff Morris** of the Washington Wizards, **Rasual Butler** of the Minnesota Timberwolves, and **Michael Kidd-Gilchrist** of the Charlotte Hornets.

Chester natives **Jameer Nelson** of the Denver Nuggets, **Tyreke Evans** of the Sacramento Kings, **Rondae Hollis-Jefferson** of the Brooklyn Nets, and **Derrick Jones** of the Phoenix Suns also played during the season. The group was filled out by Morrisville's **Lavoy Allen** of the Indiana Pacers and Wynnewood's **Wayne Ellington** of the Heat. Of course, it was only one year ago that Philadelphia-born, all-time NBA great **Kobe Bryant** retired from the Los Angeles Lakers.

Numerous others from the area also brought the spotlight to the Philadelphia area in the last year or so. For instance, **Mike Scioscia** of Springfield (Delco), now in his 18th season as manager of the Los Angeles Angels, has served longer than any current skipper in the major leagues. Toms River native **Todd Frazier** of the Chicago White Sox and formerly the Cincinnati Reds, had established himself as one of the top third baseman in the big leagues, a ranking demonstrated by his 40 home runs and 98 RBIs in 2016. And local pro teams have one head coach from the area, the Philadelphia Union's **Jim Curtin** from Oreland.

Overall, as ably demonstrated by this very special group, the area that covers Philadelphia, its four suburban counties, and South Jersey has in only a little more than the last year, produced many of the most successful sports figures in the country. The number is well above what any other area has done in such a short time. ■