

MEDIA PRESS RELEASE

Hardin County Sports Hall of Fame “Class of 2026” Selections Released

The Hardin County Sports Hall of Fame is honored to announce the 2026 Hall of Fame class of inductees.

Jeff Fries: *Ada HS graduate (1976); Defiance College (1976-77); Mt. Vernon Nazarene College (1977-1980).* Jeff was a true example of a scholar-athlete at Ada High School as a 4-year letterman and 4-year starter in 3 sports with a 3.9 GPA, ranking 3rd in a class of 100 students. Jeff was the point guard on the 21-2 1976 basketball team that won the Northwest Conference Championship, Sectional Tournament Championship, District Tournament Championship, and lost in the Regional Tournament in overtime. He held the following records at Ada High School: 1139 Career Points, 602 Career Assists (still stands), 200 Assists in 1 season (still stands), 21 Assists in 1 game (still stands and is 3rd All-Time in Ohio). Jeff played a very big role in laying the groundwork to turn the Ada Basketball program into a program that won championships. During his 4 years as a Bulldog, the basketball team had 4 winning seasons, culminating with a 21-2 senior year. As a point guard he was able to get the ball to teammates in scoring position and could score when he was needed to score. If the 3-point line would have been in at the time, he would have been a 3-point shot specialist. He was a coach on the floor and he put a certain flare in the game when he played. He was the inspiration and leader in turning the Ada basketball program around. Jeff was a scoring member of the cross country team that won the Northwest Conference Meet 3 of his 4 years in high school and made it to the State Meet 2 times, and was a 4-year starter as 2nd baseman on the baseball team. He attended Defiance College and started on the Freshman Basketball Team. After his freshman year he transferred to Mt Vernon Nazarene College where he played on the basketball team for 3 years. He earned his degree in Business Administration and graduated Magna Cum Laude. He received the Wall Street Journal Business Award for the top business student in the graduating class at Mt. Vernon Nazarene. Jeff has worked for 40 years as the C.F.O. and Business Manager for the Igel Construction Company in Columbus, Ohio.

Tom Lease: *Kenton HS graduate (1987); The Ohio State University.* A standout athlete for Kenton, Lease amassed 9 letters - 3 each in football, basketball, and track. He started 3 years at linebacker for the Wildcats and became a two-way player his senior year, also starting at tight end on offense. He had 472 tackles in his high school career. As a senior, he had 162 tackles and was named Kenton Football Most Valuable Defensive Player, WBL Defensive Back of the Year, AP Class AA Northwest District 1st Team Linebacker, AP Class AA Northwest District Lineman of the Year, and AP All-Ohio Class AA First Team Linebacker and Lineman of the Year. He was selected to play in the Ohio North-South All-Star Football Game. In 1985 he was a WBL 1st Team Linebacker and earned Honorable Mention All District. In basketball, as a senior, his honors included Kenton Top Rebounder, Special Mention WBL, NW District Honorable Mention, and District 8 All-Star. He was also a District Track Champion as anchor for the 1987 4x400m relay team. Tom played linebacker for the Buckeyes from 1988 through 1992 (redshirted in '88). In 1989, he started in 11 games and had 33 tackles, including 6 tackles for loss. In 1990, he started every game, played 199 minutes, and had 53 tackles (7th on the team), including a personal season high of 7 tackles versus Iowa. Over the course of his Buckeye career, he played in 47 games and had 126 tackles. The Ohio State Football media guide described him as "especially strong versus the run, but also solid on pass defense. OSU coaches like his intensity and intelligence."

Mike Merchant: *Kenton HS graduate (1968).* During his Kenton Wildcat Basketball career, Mike earned 2-time All-Western Buckeye League honors. In 1968, he was named WBL Player of the Year, All-Ohio, Honorable Mention Prep All-American. His 1966-67 team went 18-3 and were the WBL champs, finishing with the best record in school history. His 1967-68 team finished 16-4, and were WBL Runners-up. Mike graduated as Kenton's all-time leading scorer and currently sits third on the career scoring list at KHS. He also holds 7 individual school records (all from the 1967-68 season): Most Points in a Season - 600; Highest Scoring Average in a Season - 30 ppg; Most FG Attempts in a Season - 507; Most FGs Made in a Season - 237; Tied for most FG Made in a Game - 18; Most Consecutive FTs Made in a Season-25; and Highest FT% in a Season - 90.6%.

Sharon Pitts (Posthumously): *Roundhead High School graduate (1958); The Ohio State University and Ohio Northern University.* Sharon was a beloved teacher and basketball coach for most of her career, touching the lives of thousands of students, but her legacy will be that of a great basketball player and coach. After starting the basketball program at Ada High school in 1972, her teams dominated the region for the next 10 years. Her 1978 team won the Ohio State Girls Basketball Championship and was inducted into the Hardin County Sports Hall of Fame. At Ada she compiled a 117-51 record, a 69% Winning Percentage, 3 Conference Championships, 6 Straight Sectional Championships, 2 District Championships, 1 Regional Championship, and 1 State Championship. After leaving Ada in 1983, she moved to Marion, Ohio to teach and coach at Ridgedale High School. In 1986, she moved to Columbus, Ohio and taught her remaining years at Starling Middle School where she retired in 1992. Following retirement, Sharon built a log cabin home in Roundhead, where she enjoyed her relationships with her lifelong Hardin County friends, and family. Sharon experienced and persevered through the highs and lows of life as a result of being “in the Arena.” What a great example she was for her family, friends, students, and players. Sharon was multi-faceted: fiercely competitive, aggressive, protective, and fun. Sharon could practice, play, and compete, whether it was basketball, softball, cards, or Tiddlywinks. She flat out got after it. And she could coach. After Title IX, she approached the AHS administration and offered to start AHS Girls Basketball, to motivate, care, lead, and build, both the team and the individual. She was an educator in Reading, Writing, Math, Ohio History, and US History. She parented in a ‘live by your values example’ sense, and her greatest gift—she was your friend, genuinely loving and caring for you, not because you were family, had a fancy title, or money (in fact, she loved you more if you didn’t have any of these things), and it didn’t matter whether you were 5 or 95. She had an extra depth of empathy and keen eye towards those she sensed needed a friend or a hand. The more you needed her, the more she invested in you, just to help you like those who had helped her. Her personal athletic achievements included scoring 50 of her team’s 57 points against the ONU basketball team while competing for the Grange. In high school she averaged 31 points per game, won League and Regional championships, was a cheerleader, a trumpeter in the RHS Band and Roundhead UMC orchestra, and worked at Roundhead Store for her Uncle Ed. Her college athletic achievements included scoring 60 points in a game as a walk-on freshman at OSU.

Garrick Sherman: *Kenton HS graduate (2009); Michigan State University (2009-2011); University of Notre Dame (2011-2014).* As a Wildcat Senior, Garrick averaged 23.6 points, 15.8 rebounds, and 4 blocks, and led Kenton to the Division II District Finals, finishing the season with a 17-6 mark. He was named The Associated Press OHSAA Division II Co-Player of the Year, finished his career as the school’s all-time leading scorer and rebounder, and is the 7th leading rebounder in OHSAA state history. He was 2009 First-Team All-State Division II, and WBL Player of the Year, and District 8 Player of the Year. As a Junior, his team was 17-5 and he averaged 23.3 points, 15.5 rebounds, and 5 blocks, shooting 68% from the field, and was named 2nd-Team All-State OHSAA Division II, WBL Player of the Year, and District 8 Player of the Year. As a Sophomore, he averaged 17.1 points, 17.4 rebounds, and 5.8 blocks, while shooting 61.5% from the field. As a Freshman, he averaged 16.8 points, 14.2 rebounds, and 5.4 blocks while shooting 64.5% from the field. He was a 4-time 1st-Team All-WBL honoree, a 4-time 1st-Team All-Lima-land honoree, and a 2-time Wildcat Team Captain. As a Michigan State Freshman, he appeared in 36 games, starting in 12 (including 11 of the first 14 games of the season), shot 59.6% from the field, including 62.5% in Big Ten play, and averaged 6.8 minutes and 2 points in the NCAA Tournament, scoring 4 points each vs. Northern Iowa in the Sweet 16 and Butler in the Final Four. As an MSU sophomore, he appeared in 34 games, starting in 17 contests, and shot a team-best 69.6% from the field, including a remarkable 78.9% in Big Ten play. At Notre Dame, he played in 61 games and earned 33 starts, averaging 10.3 points (630) and 5.4 rebounds (328) with the Irish while shooting 50.6% from the field. He served as one of four captains during the 2013-14 season, and started all 31 games he played during his final season, averaging career bests of 13.5 points and a team-best 7.3 rebounds, scoring 419 points and grabbing 225 boards while also leading the team with 21 blocked shots. He netted double figures in 21 games (third most on the team), and topped the Irish scoring column on 8 occasions and in rebounding 14 times. He registered six career double-doubles in his final season, and shot 50.6% from the field and 68.9% from the free-throw line, while averaging 12.9 points and 7.1 rebounds in ACC play. He finished second in the ACC in field-goal percentage in both overall (50.6%) and conference games (49.2%). Overall, he played in 131 career college outings and made 62 starts in those contests, finishing his career with averages of 6.2 points (806) and 3.6 rebounds (474). He scored in double figures 31 times during his career, and registered six career 20-plus point outings and posted six double-doubles. He played in the NABC Reese’s Division I All-Star Game at the 2014 Men’s NCAA Final Four in Arlington, Texas.

Drew Snow: Hardin Northern graduate (2003). Drew was a standout 3-sport athlete at Hardin Northern and was an integral part of the Polar Bear success in 2001 (Regional Runner-up to McComb) and the 2002 (State Runner-up) football teams. Drew was the featured offensive back (fullback) in an offense where teams consistently were coached and geared to stop the run game. Drew excelled despite defensive coordinators building their game plans to stop him. His senior year at Arlington, he had 10 carries in a row (mostly the same play) in a 66-yard drive that demoralized the defense. This was on the first drive of the second half. HN pulled away from there in an otherwise close game. His 2002 Football Season Stats included 1,920 Rushing Yards, 43 TDs, and OHSAA State Runner-up. He amassed 3,932 Rushing Yards, 91 Total TDs, 262 Unassisted Tackles, 115 Assisted Tackles, 462 Total Tackles, and 55 Tackles for Loss in his high school career. He was a 3-year letterwinner, National Football Foundation Hall of Fame - Scholar Athlete (2002), 1st Team All-State RB (2002), NW Ohio Offensive RB of the Year (2002), 1st Team NW Ohio RB (2001 and 2002), BVC Offensive and Defensive Player of the Year (2002), BVC First Team Offense RB and LB (2001 and 2002), Channel 13 ABC Athlete of the Week (2002), WKKI-FM Athlete of the Week (2002), Lima News Dream Team (2002), and NWO All-Star Team (2002). Drew was a solid, 2-year letterwinner and NWO District 8 All-Star in basketball, and a very good baseball player, playing outfield, pitching, and playing first base for HN, earning 3 varsity letters and 1st Team BVC honors(2003). Drew currently works at Upper Scioto Valley as their Informational Technology Director. He has been with the district for a number of years.

2025 Class Team Inductee

2002 Hardin Northern Football Team

State Runner-Up

Regular Season: 10-0

BVC: 9-0

Playoffs: 4-1

The 2002 Hardin Northern Polar Bears went 10-0 in the regular season and won the Blanchard Valley Conference title outright, outscoring opponents 427–82. On average, they scored over 42 points per game while allowing just 8.2. This was coming from a team who had graduated 17 seniors the year prior, 2001. That season saw the Polar Bears go 9-2, earning runner-up to McComb in the Blanchard Valley Conference and falling to McComb once again in the Regional Play-offs.

Going into the 2002 campaign the expectations from Polar Bear fans was probably not as high as the previous year. That expectation changed by the midpoint of the season with wins over rival Arlington in convincing fashion 42-13, and a nice win early in October over Leipsic 28-13. The Bears clinched the BVC title a couple of weeks later with a big win over Cory-Rawson that saw the team go over 70 yards in the last 2 minutes of the game for a winning drive and final score of 24-17.

In the play-offs, the Bears faced Anna at home, winning 24-13 and got a win over Troy Christian 35-0. The Regional Final was played at Piqua stadium against the defending State Champions, Marion Local. Few people gave HN a chance. After getting down early, the Bears fought back, and Craig McMillan's diving catch of a deflected ball near the HN goal line seemed to give the Bears confidence. They not only scored that touchdown, but went on to dominate the rest of the game. The Flyers scored late in the 4th quarter to cut the spread to 10 but when HN recovered the ensuing onside kick, the game was over.

The State Semifinals were played in Findlay at Donnell Stadium. The Friday game was moved to Sunday afternoon due to a snow storm on Friday afternoon and evening. After a scoreless first half, the Bears scored to take the lead and added 2 more touchdowns late to take a 20-0 win. Unfortunately, this team lost to Mogadore in the State Finals, a game that was much closer than the final score (27-7) indicated.

The 2002 season was a great season: 14 wins is tied with the 2004 State Championship team for the most wins in a single season in Hardin Northern football history. The Polar Bears were led by OHSAA Hall of Fame Coach, Pete Brunow.

