

# Jack Hopper

## Military commitment sidetracked all-around great

By JIM LANE

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When Jack Hopper was in high school, he weighed only 160 pounds, but that didn't stop him from doing big things in the world of athletics.

In football, he had few peers as a running back and was selected first-team all-state as a senior after leading the Altoona Mountain Lions to a perfect 10-0 season in 1941.

As a junior, during the spring track season of 1941, Hopper established the Altoona record in the long jump with a leap of 21-9 1/2. The mark stood for almost 50 years.

People who remember Hopper's exploits on the gridiron and track count him among Altoona High's all-time greats.

"He was a jack-of-all-trades," said longtime friend Bill Speacht. "There wasn't much he couldn't do. In football, he could run and pass, and he was one of the best punters around.

"In track, he wasn't only a good jumper, he was a key guy on relay teams," Speacht recalled. "He was one of the best people (Coach Dick) Bartholomew had."

For his exploits at Altoona High and later at Shippensburg State Teachers College, Hopper is being inducted into the Blair County Sports Hall of Fame tonight.

"I'm deeply honored," Hopper said. "I never expected this. There's probably 100 guys who should

be there before me."

That's Jack Hopper. Ever humble. Ever the gentleman.

Even though he was an outstanding athlete (he won the Joe Cohen Blanket Award as the Lions' MVP In 1941) and was courted by such schools as Notre Dame and Duke, Hopper, like thousands of other teenagers, wasn't thinking about college after high school.

They were thinking about World War II, and Hopper wanted to serve his country. He joined the U.S. Army and spent three years with the 613th Engineers attached to the Third Army XII Corps in support of the 4th Armored, 35th and 80th Infantry Divisions in their advance across France and Germany.

Hopper was discharged from the service at the end of the war and came home "safe,

happy, more mature and disciplined, but still a mixed-up young man," he recalled.

About a year later, through the urging of friends, teammates, former coaches and educators, Hopper enrolled at Shippensburg State Teachers College.

Hopper credits former Altoona School District superintendent Levi Gilbert, who was then president of Shippensburg, for guiding him "into a profession which I was best suited—that of teaching and coaching young people at the junior high and senior high level."



Jack was the proud receipt of the 1941 Cohen Blanket Award.



At the 1990 Hall of Fame dinner, Jack welcomed former Altoona High teammates, from left: James "Rabbit" Ward, Byron Crozier and Bill Madden. They were on hand to see their track coach, Dick Bartholomew, inducted.

At Shippensburg, he participated in football and track. He did well in both sports, but downplayed his accomplishments in college.

"Jack was a great football player who was underutilized," said former Shippensburg teammate Bill Minnick. "Back in the late 1940s, when Jack was at Shippensburg, they began to experiment with wideouts. They put him out there, but they never took advantage of his receiving and running abilities.

"I used to anguish that they didn't take advantage of how good he was," Minnick said, "but, he still scored touchdowns."

Following graduation from Shippensburg, Hopper returned to Altoona and was hired as a teacher-coach. He served the AASD from 1951 through 1981.

Hopper was an assistant under Earl Strohm for Altoona football teams from 1958-1969 when the Lions posted a 93-26-2 record.

## Jack Hopper



**Sport:** Football, Track

**High school:** Altoona Area, 1942.

**College:** Shippensburg,

**Hall of Fame achievement:** Led Mountain Lions to pair of unbeaten football seasons; inducted into Shippensburg Hall of Fame.

**Current occupation:** Retired.

**Current residence:** Altoona.

Others on the staff included Harry Dinges, Wally Fields, Ron Rickens and Ron Corrado.

The Lions took on all comers, including Massillon, Pennsbury, and Easton, to mention a few. That was long before the PIAA instituted statewide football playoffs, but the Lions always were considered among the state's top programs.

"It was a pleasure and an honor for me to work and associate with that fine group of dedicated, honorable men," Hopper said. "I'll never forget being part of what I thought were the golden years of AAHS football."

In addition to his teaching and football duties, Hopper also coached track five years and was faculty manager of athletics from 1970-81.

"I'll always be grateful to the Altoona Area School District and its dedicated staff – past and present – and the people of Altoona for giving me the opportunity to help teach and coach their most precious possessions – their kids," he said.