

# Dick Johnston

## Altoona little man made it big in basketball

By **JIM LANE**  
*Altoona Mirror*

Dick Johnston was ahead of his time. Basketball today is played by men — and women — who dribble behind their back and between their legs almost as soon as they hit the hardwood.

But there was a time when players were reluctant to try those things in practice, and they certainly didn't try them in games.

Although there's no proof, Dick Johnston probably was the first player in the Altoona area to use a behind-the-back dribble in high school games. Actually, he was doing it before he entered Altoona High School and became one of the Mountain Lions' all-time great guards.

"I think 7th grade was the first time I ever did it," Johnston recalled recently.

Johnston attended Roosevelt Junior High School and used to shoot in the gym before school. Frank Mastrocola, the Altoona High coach then, taught at Roosevelt and used to watch Johnston shoot before school. He encouraged Dick to develop the fancy dribble.

"Frank said I needed to do it, so I did," Johnston said.

Johnston became known throughout the city when he was just a youngster. Even though he usually was the smallest player, Johnston could compete with anyone. Whether it was Little League baseball or Recreation Commission basketball, he was a standout.

"Even at 5-foot-4, he was the best I ever had — by far," said former Roosevelt basketball coach Jim Rice, who compiled an incredible record of 179-18 and nine Inter-County League titles in 11 years. "We were undefeated his 9th grade year, and nobody came within 10 points of us."

After the season was over, the Roosevelt team entered the Altoona YMCA Midget Tournament (for junior high teams) and won the championship with Johnston garnering MVP honors.

"That was only the half of it," Rice said. "Penn Sill put us in the Junior Tournament (high school) and we beat the Altoona High jayvees in the first game. Then we played Rothrock, which had won the Class C state championship, and they couldn't handle us. We played Huntingdon High next. They had a very good team, and we gave them a great game. Dicky made the second all-star team.

"I think that was the first time people became aware of how good he was," Rice said. "He really put on a show."

If they didn't know it then, they found out soon enough when he donned an Altoona High uniform.

He had grown to about 5-6 by then and, in his first game as a sophomore, the same day President John F. Kennedy was assassinated, scored 16 points at Ellwood City.

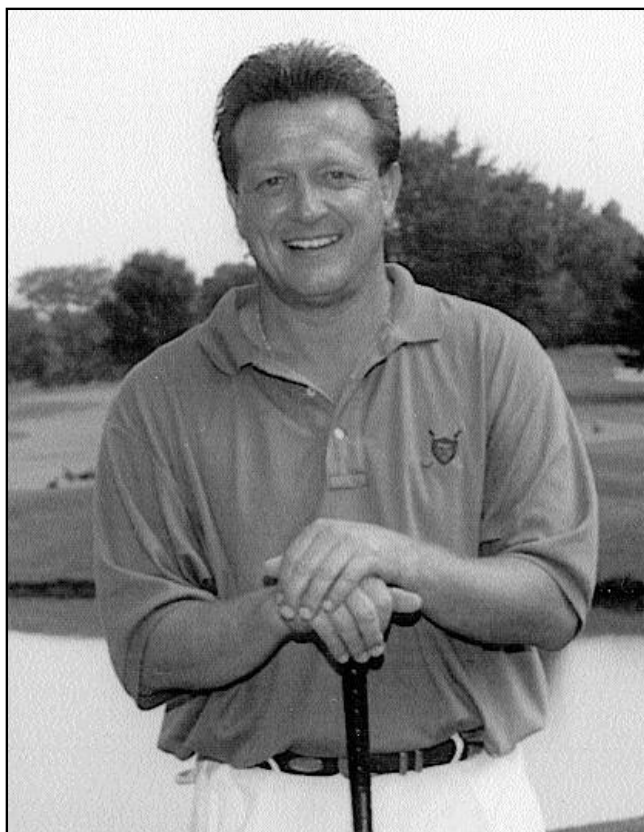
"We had scrimmaged a couple of good Class B teams in the preseason and I think I scored one point," Johnston said. "I was beginning to wonder if I would ever score. To get 16 in the first game was kind of the

launching pad for me."

By the time he was finished, he was considered one of the Mountain Lions' all-time greats, and their best "little man" ever.

During his three varsity seasons, Johnston established then-school records for most points in a career (1,427) and points in one game (42). The 1,427 is still third best at AHS, and he did it without the benefit of the 3-point shot.

"We beat Farrell all three years," he said, "and that's when they were in their heyday. After my sopho-



**Dick's new favorite game is golf.**

more year, Farrell coach Eddie McCluskey said if I wanted to move there he could get my dad a job."

Johnston helped the Lions to a couple of District 6 championships and earned first-team all-state honors in both 1965 and 1966.

"I had great junior high coaches (Rice and Tom Foose) and great high school coaches (Mastrocola and Jack Ray)," Johnston said. "They knew their basketball and were good teachers.

"When I went to Tennessee, Ray Mears was considered one of the best college coaches — probably second only to John Wooden at the time — and a lot of the things he did, we had done in junior high and high school."

Johnston chose Tennessee over North Carolina and had a solid career with the Volunteers. His role throughout most of the time was as the sixth man. During his senior season, Johnston finished second in assists, converted 31 straight free throws at one stretch, and was given honorable mention on UPI's Little American Team for players 5-10 and under.

"I was in college at a great time," Johnston said. "I was fortunate to play against guys like Lew Alcindor, Pete Maravich, Dan Issel and Calvin Murphy. Maravich was the best. He could do things nobody else did. UCLA had Alcindor with Lucious Allen and Mike Warren at guard. They were terrific."

Johnston lists two appearances in the NIT at Madison Square Garden among his college highlights.

"That's when the NIT meant something," he said. "There were only 24 teams in the NCAA then."

Although he "enjoyed Tennessee tremendously," Johnston said he probably should have gone to North Carolina.

"Dean Smith and Larry Brown (Smith's assistant) saw me have a couple of good games in high school, and they wanted me," Johnston said. "They played more of my style — running and shooting, whereas Tennessee was more of a half-court team."

The youngest of three boys, Dick grew up watching and playing with his older brothers, Bob and Jim. His brothers and his dad, Harry, fueled

his interest in sports at an early age.

All three brothers were outstanding baseball players. Jim, a first baseman, played college ball in Florida and Bob pitched at IUP before pitching in the Pirates' minor league system for a couple of years.

Dick was a second baseman-outfielder who played at 14th Ward and drew interest from major league scouts while playing for the Altoona South team in the local AAABA league.

"I played against Reggie Jackson in the AAABA Tournament at Johnstown," Johnston noted. "I went 1-for-5 and Reggie was 0-for-4."

At Tennessee, he became friends with Phil Garner, who later went on to have a solid major league career as a player and manager.

"I wish I had played baseball in college," Johnston said. "I used to take batting practice with Phil Garner and he asked me to come out for the team. But, they traveled so much and it was right after basketball, so I never did."

After graduating from Tennessee in 1971, Johnston lived and worked in Virginia, Florida, and Tennessee for a number of years. He's lived in Fort Wayne, Ind. since 1984 and has owned his own accounting firm, Johnston Associates, LLC, for the last 10 years.

He has two sons and a daughter by two marriages. His sons, Rich and Greg, live in the Altoona area.

Johnston said he was surprised when former Blair County Hall of Fame president Steve Sheetz called to inform him he had been selected for induction with the Class of 2002.

"I thought it was a joke at first, and I probably wasn't as excited as I should have been," Johnston said. "But, when I stopped to think about all of the guys who played there, it made me proud to know people thought that much of me.

"I remember when playing at the Jaffa Mosque was big time," he said. "I loved playing there because there were so many great athletes and sports were so respected in Altoona.

"It's nice to be remembered, and I feel very honored and humbled by it."



**Despite being just 5-foot-8, Dick stands tall in local basketball lore.**

## Johnston bio

**Sport:** Basketball.

**High school:** Altoona, 1966.

**College:** Tennessee.

**Hall of Fame achievement:**  
Outstanding player at Altoona who earned full scholarship to University of Tennessee.

**Current occupation:**  
Accountant.

**Current residence:**  
Fort Wayne, Ind.