

# Mike Iuzzolino

## Work ethic took him to NBA, long run in Europe

By NEIL RUDEL

**M**ike Iuzzolino can't remember when his love of basketball began.

He had success in his elementary school days playing for Bob Seitz's old East End teams in the various local leagues, at St. Luke's and the Jewish Memorial Center, and he would often accompany his father Bob, an accomplished referee, to high school games.

"I had a lot of exposure to the game at an early age, and everything I did, I remember having a ball in my hand," he said.

It paid off. A unique basketball odyssey led him from Bishop Guilfoyle to Altoona, from Penn State to St. Francis and ultimately to the NBA and a long career in Europe.

In all, Iuzzolino played 12 professional seasons.

"I feel very fulfilled," he said. "I was fortunate I was able to leave the game on my terms and not after somebody told me I couldn't play it anymore."

As Iuzzolino gets set for enshrinement into the Blair County Sports Hall of Fame, he pointed to his experiences with Seitz and his high school mentors, Tom Lane at BG and Larry Betar at Altoona.

"I got started with Bob Seitz, and in high school, I was fortunate to play for two outstanding coaches — Tom Lane, who took a chance on me as a skinny ninth grader on a team of seniors, and Larry Betar, a great offensive coach who helped take my game to another level," he said. "And I was fortunate to play with some great players — Doug (West), Bobby Bradfield, Craig Curry. That made the game easy."

A true scorer as a 5-foot-11 point guard, Iuzzolino's career hit a roadblock at Penn State, and he transferred after two seasons.

"I wasn't developing into the player I had worked so hard to be," he said.

That work ethic left an impression on those who watched his development. Iuzzolino routinely shot hundreds of jump shots daily — morning, noon and night, often at Building II.

"I know how much time he spent honing his skills," said teammate and friend Doug West. "His work ethic was unmatched by kids in the area, including myself. That allowed him to contribute right away at the high school level and be recruited at Penn State. Even after that, he wasn't content with just being another face. He went to St. Francis and changed the whole face of their program."

Indeed, Iuzzolino scored a St. Francis single-season record of 772 points as a senior in 1991. He averaged 24.3 per game and led the Red Flash to a 24-8 record and their first (and only) berth in the NCAA Tournament.

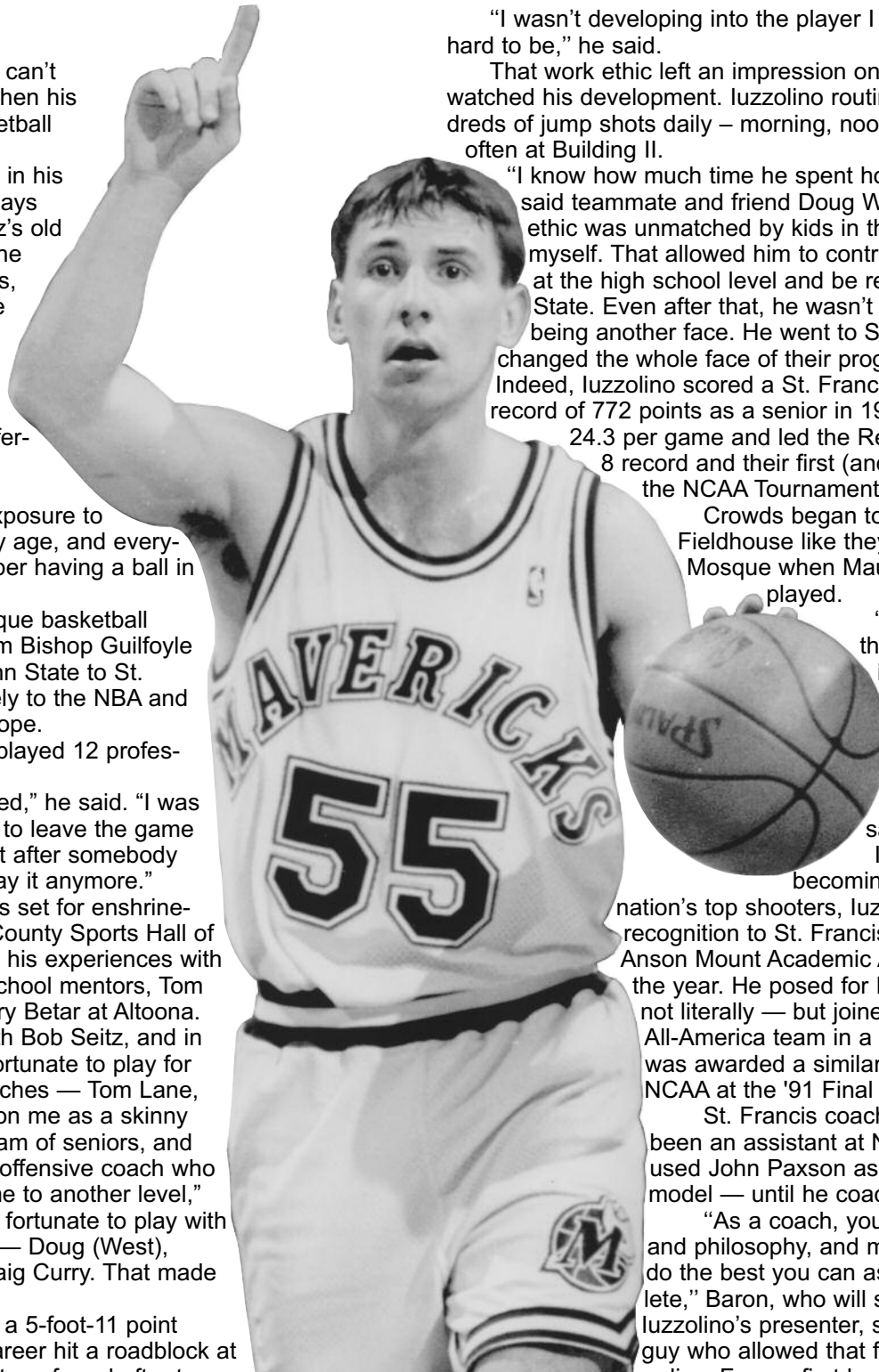
Crowds began to pack the Stokes Fieldhouse like they did the Jaffa Mosque when Maurice Stokes played.

"I think one of the things that makes it so special is how hard it is to get there, and how hard it's been to get back," Iuzzolino said.

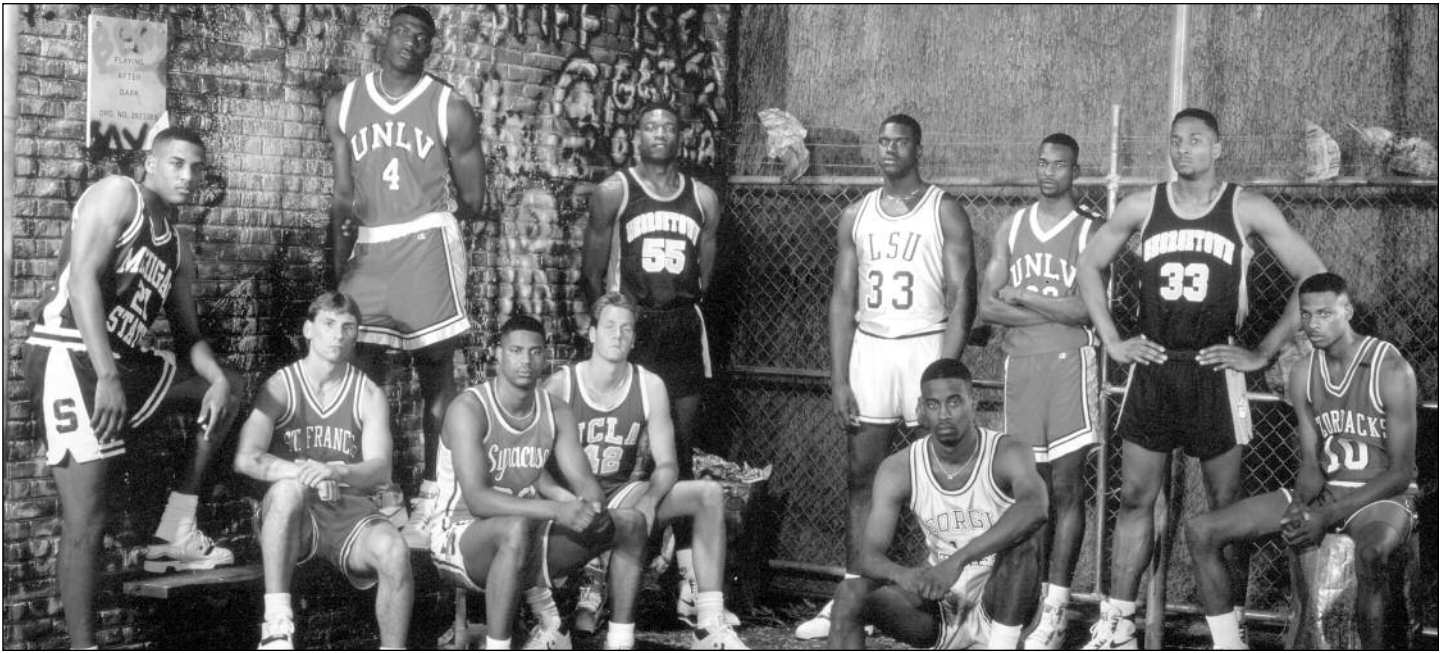
In addition to becoming one of the nation's top shooters, Iuzzolino brought recognition to St. Francis by earning the Anson Mount Academic All-American of the year. He posed for Playboy — OK, not literally — but joined the national All-America team in a photo shoot. He was awarded a similar award by the NCAA at the '91 Final Four.

St. Francis coach Jim Baron had been an assistant at Notre Dame. He used John Paxson as his No. 1 role model — until he coached Iuzzolino.

"As a coach, you pick up models and philosophy, and mine is always to do the best you can as a student-athlete," Baron, who will serve as Iuzzolino's presenter, said. "Mike was a guy who allowed that formula to materialize. For my first head coaching job, it was phenomenal to have the oppor-



Mike averaged 9.0 points in 122 games with Dallas.



Mike (second from left) was the national Academic All-American of the year as a senior at St. Francis in 1991 and joined Playboy Magazine's All-America team for a photo shoot. The other All-Americans included, from left: Michigan State's Steve Smith, UNLV's Larry Johnson, Syracuse's Billy Owens, UCLA's Don MacLean, Georgetown's Dikembe Mutombo, LSU's Shaquille O'Neal, Georgia Tech's Kenny Anderson, UNLV's Stacy Augman, Georgetown's Alonzo Mourning and Arkansas' Todd Day.

tunity to coach him. He was special."

Iuzzolino was picked in the second round of the NBA draft by the Dallas Mavericks, becoming the third Blair County player ever to be drafted behind Johnny Moore (1978) and West (1989).

He spent two seasons with Dallas where he averaged 9.0 points, 4.3 assists and 2.0 rebounds in 122 games. He ranked fourth in the NBA in 3-point shooting (.434) during the 1991-92 season and drew votes for the league's all-rookie team.

"Mike was a longshot to make it in the NBA because he had been a scoring guard and he had to convert to the point guard position on a higher level," former Dallas coach Richie Aduvato. "Through sheer determination and hard work, he was able to develop the skills needed to play in the NBA and mix up his game as far as directing a team. We were rebuilding at that time, and he got an opportunity, and he made the most of it. He did an excellent job in the NBA and had a couple of very solid years."

Iuzzolino then spent two years in the Continental Basketball Association (CBA) where he played for the Fort Wayne Fury in 1993-94 and for the Rapid City Thrillers in 1994-95. He continued his professional career overseas, playing in Italy and Spain. Iuzzolino spent six seasons with the Italian Pro Basketball League where he helped win the European Korac Cup, was a four-time Italian League All-Star and tabbed as the MVP of the 1997 Italian League All-Star Game. From 2001-2003, he played for the Spanish Pro Basketball League.

"I kept getting chances for (NBA) tryouts, but by then things were going so well in Europe, and I kept signing two and three-year deals," he said. "It was an incredible experience. It gave me a chance to see places I never would have seen before and meet some great people. And it gave me a chance

to see where my great-grandparents were born."

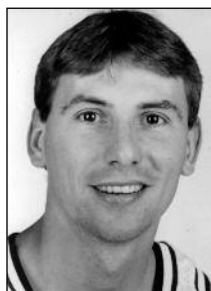
After starting a family — he and his wife Dana have two children — Iuzzolino ended his playing career in 2003. He recently finished his first season of coaching as an assistant in the Duquesne University women's program.

Iuzzolino has a unique view of his induction to the local Hall.

"I'm honored and excited," he said. "But when I think of a Hall of Fame, I think of extraordinary accomplishments, and I never thought I did anything extraordinary. I just did what I thought was natural."

Others disagree.

"Every coach," Baron said, "should have a chance to coach someone like Mike."



## *Iuzzolino bio*

**Sport:** Basketball.

**Hometown:** Altoona.

**College:** St. Francis

**Hall of Fame achievement:** Hall of Fame achievement: Played 12 years of professional basketball – including two in the NBA and eight in Europe.

**Current residence:** Pittsburgh