

INDUCTEE PROFILE

Shooting for the stars

On and off floor, at Tyrone and St. Francis, Leasure excelled

By Cory Giger
Altoona Mirror

The big Tyrone redhead who lit up the Mountain League before becoming a standout for the Red Flash is one of this year's inductees into the Blair County Sports Hall of Fame.

Nick Leasure used his 6-foot-7, 210-pound frame and smooth jump shot to set the Tyrone career scoring record with 1,757 points in the early 1970s. He then spurned the big schools in the recruiting process and chose tiny St. Francis, where he ranks 12th on the all-time scoring list with 1,360 points.

"I was always a shooter," Leasure said. "I always had a feel for shooting."

That made him very difficult to stop, and few teams did when Leasure was in high school. He led Tyrone to a Mountain League title as a junior and averaged about 32 points per game his senior season in 1974-75.

"He was just a phenomenal shooter," said longtime local coach Don Appleman, whose Central teams competed against Leasure back then. "He was 6-foot-7 and could shoot the ball from anyplace on the court. He had a quick release, and he moved well without the ball."

No one taught Leasure how to shoot so well. He did so himself, often trying unusual tactics.

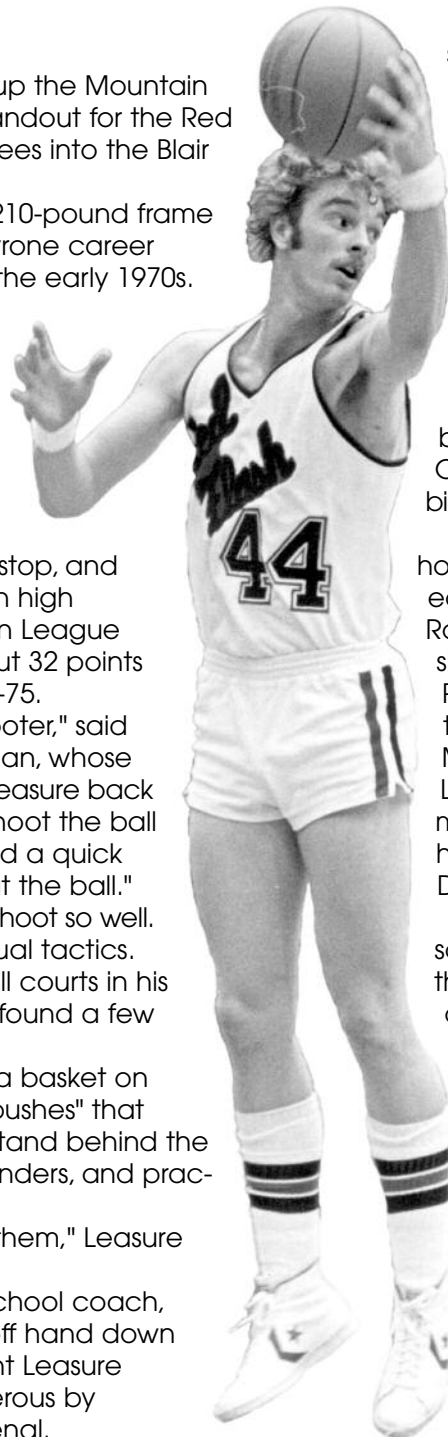
There weren't a lot of basketball courts in his Tyrone neighborhood, but Leasure found a few places he could practice.

One local family, he said, "had a basket on their garage, and they had some bushes" that were about six feet tall. He would stand behind the bushes, using them sort of like defenders, and practice 18-foot jumpers.

"It forced me to shoot up over them," Leasure said.

He also learned from his high school coach, Dave Erney, how to score with his off hand down low. Erney is left-handed and taught Leasure how to become even more dangerous by adding that component to his arsenal.

"He could just catch and turn and shoot from anywhere," Appleman said. "When he got hot, he made every shot."



Nick was a key part of four straight winning seasons at St. Francis

A young assistant coach in his first season at St. Francis was handed the assignment of recruiting Leasure.

"When I got hired, they told me this is the kid we've got to get. That was sort of my main directive," said Dave Magarity, who later became St. Francis' head coach.

Magarity is now the women's head coach at Army.

"He was just a real special kid,"

Magarity said.

St. Francis knew just how special because it started recruiting Leasure early. Once the word got out about him, some bigger schools began to show interest.

Leasure earned first-team all-state honors as a senior at Tyrone, then was invited to play in the prestigious Dapper Dan Roundball Classic in Pittsburgh. The contest showcased high school stars from Pennsylvania against others from around the country.

Magarity, who claims he rarely missed Leasure play in high school, worried he may lose out on the recruit once the hordes of coaches saw him play in the Dapper Dan.

"He got to that all-star game, I was scared to death," Magarity said. "Sitting there looking in the stands, you had hundreds of college coaches there."

Leasure scored in double figures in the Dapper Dan, and Magarity said Leasure "played well, shot the ball well" and added he was "impressive enough that a lot of people wanted to know more about him."

"He was a 6-7 shooter, and the kid was a terrific athlete, so the word got out," Magarity said.

Maryland, Villanova and Penn State were among the most interested in Leasure, but all the work St. Francis had done in recruiting him helped sway his decision to go to Loretto.

Leasure also wanted more out of life than just basketball and fig-

ured he could get it at St. Francis. He spent one afternoon with the head of the school's science department and was impressed that St. Francis wanted him as a scholar and as a person, not just a basketball player.

"It was a great opportunity for me to be exposed to some people with different cultural backgrounds than me," Leasure said of his four years at the school.

Leasure also was exposed to and helped sustain one of the better eras of basketball at St. Francis. The team went 14-14 his freshman season under head coach Pete Lonergan, then was 15-11 and posted some of the most impressive wins in school history the next year.

"The basketball highlight of (my St. Francis) career was the win against North Carolina-Charlotte," Leasure said. "That's the one that everyone remembers."

The Red Flash handed Charlotte a 96-87 loss on Feb. 5, 1977, and less than two months later, Charlotte advanced to the Final Four.

"If you look at that year, we were a really solid team," Leasure said. "We got off to a slow start, but we also beat Georgetown and West Virginia and Duquesne that year."

Leasure played a big role in the success, averaging 16.8 points per game, up from 7.6 as a freshman. He scored 12.9 per game the following season as St. Francis again finished 15-11.

Lonergan moved onto to Niagara, and Magarity was hired to take over the program beginning with Leasure's senior season.

"We were all tremendously relieved whenever they named Dave the coach," Leasure said.

Leasure was one of the captains as a senior and averaged 15.9 points as the team went 13-13. He led the squad in scoring each of his final three years.

He also never suffered a losing season during his four years at St. Francis, a feat unmatched by any player since his graduating class.



Nick was inducted into the Tyrone Monogram Club Hall of Fame in 2001. Here he poses with Monogram Club president Harry Sickler.

Leasure had an offer to play professionally in Sweden after college, but he instead decided to go to medical school.

"I was a little tired of playing basketball at that point," he said.

Since graduating from St. Francis with a biology degree in 1979, Leasure, 50, has devoted much of his life to treating cancer patients. He earned his doctor of medicine degree from Hahnemann University Hospital in Philadelphia in 1983, then did six years of residency there.

In 1989, he joined Berks Hematology Oncology Associates in Reading and has worked there ever since. He's now the senior member and president of the practice and specializes in treating patients with breast cancer.

"He was sort of mature beyond his years in a lot of ways," Magarity said of his former player. "He was an incredibly bright kid, and it never surprised me when he went on to become a doctor."

Leasure married the former Veronica Covalesky, a cardiologist in Philadelphia. The couple has three children – sons Nicholas (18) and Michael (13) and daughter Emilie (9).

Leasure called his induction to the Hall of Fame "humbling."

"It is obviously a tremendous honor," he said. "I've always been appreciative of the support from our local communities. That support has provided me with the confidence and inspiration to pursue my goals and dreams when my athletic career was over. The encouragement I have received from so many people I have met along the way has greatly influenced who I am today. For that I will always be indebted."

Leasure bio

Sport: Basketball
High school: Tyrone
College: St. Francis
Hall of Fame achievement: Three-year starter (1977-79) and leading scorer for the Red Flash.
Current residence: Pottstown, PA

