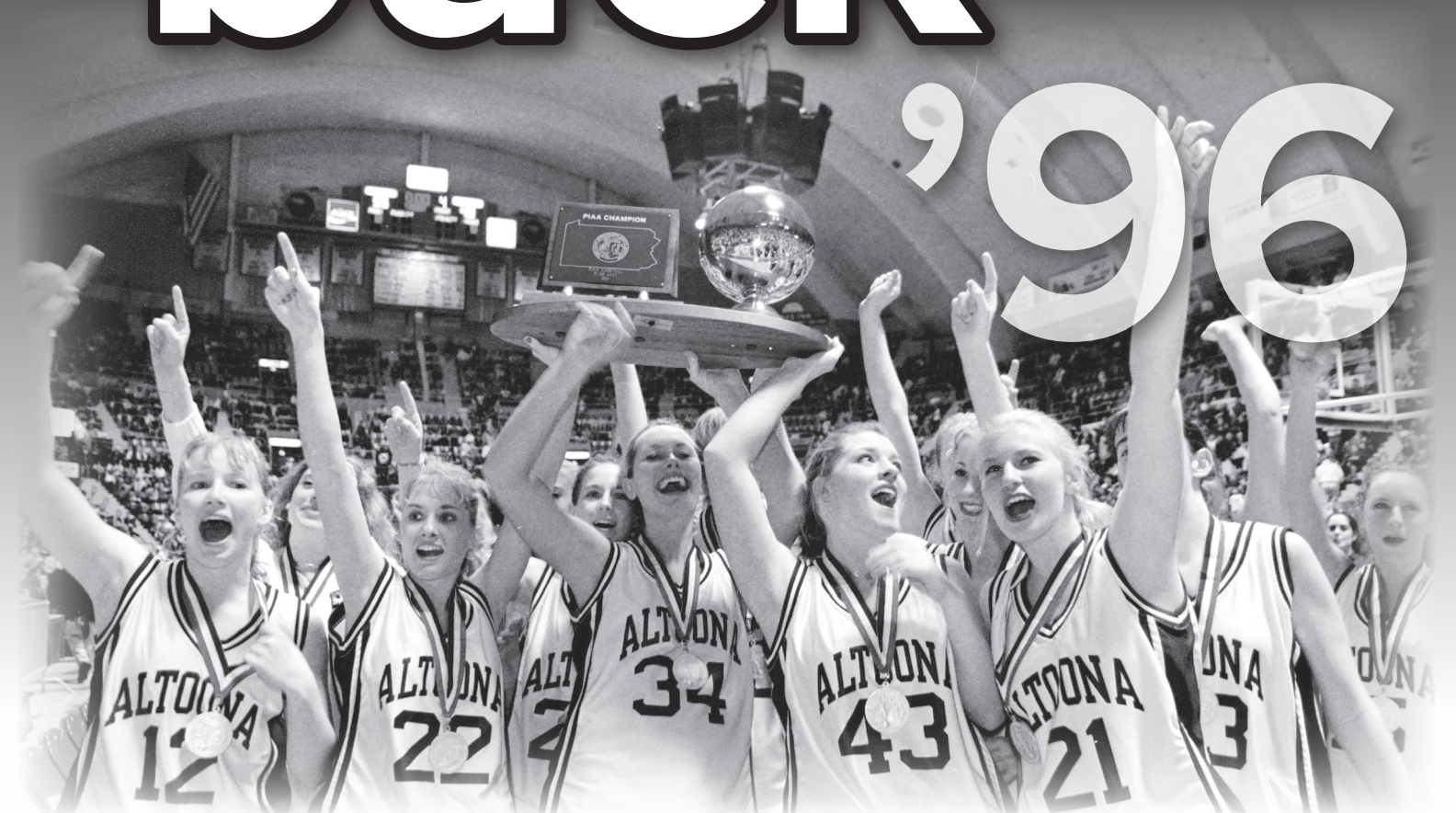


HALL OF FAME TEAM AWARD

HALL OF FAME TEAM AWARD

Back to '95

back '96



The 1994-95 Lady Lions team, with five seniors who went Division I, defeated Allentown Central Catholic to win the PIAA title.

The 1995-96 team went 26-4 and beat Northampton to win the 1996 championship.

1995 and '96 teams both overcame bumpy starts and finished strong to win PIAA gold medals

By Buck Frank
Altoona Mirror

The Altoona Area High School girls basketball team won its third PIAA Class 4A championship in 1995 under legendary coach Art Taneyhill.

The team had gone through its ups and downs over the previous seasons, and with five key seniors set to move on to play at NCAA Division I programs, Taneyhill contemplated his future with the Lady Lions.

"I thought about quitting as coach," he said. "I talked to (superintendent) Dr. (Denis) Murray and (assistant superintendent) George Cardone and told them I thought it might be time for me to just be the full-time (athletic director)."

With Taneyhill still running the program into the summer of 1995, a funny thing happened. The Lady Lions, with just two key players returning from the state title team — point guard Courtney Kaup and reserve Jill

Humbertson — won the area's competitive summer basketball leagues.

It made Taneyhill have second thoughts about departing the program he had guided for 19 seasons.

"At the end of the summer, I thought, 'I'm not quitting. I can win a state title with this group, too,'" Taneyhill said. "It wasn't going to be easy — it would be tough — but we could do it. And we did."

Taneyhill and the Altoona girls won the

PIAA championship again in 1996 to become the first teams in Blair County history to win back-to-back state basketball championships. The two teams' successes — accomplished in some similar fashions but in many different ways — led to them being inducted together into the Blair County Sports Hall of Fame Class of 2026.

"That was a great time for Altoona basketball," Taneyhill said.

The beginnings

The potential of the 1994-95 senior group began to show at an early age. Three of the members — Julie Sommer, Krista Thomas and Michelle Lenhart —

won a Catholic Youth Organization state basketball title, and once they joined forces with Jill Bartley and Jessica Montrella in the Altoona School District in seventh grade, the expectations began to increase.

Altoona had gone to three straight state championships under Taneyhill, winning in 1986 and 1988, and the young girls had a championship model to follow.

"We watched those teams of the 1980s and saw all the success they had at the local, regional and national levels," Sommer, now Julie Leach, said. "It was incredible. It gave us something to shoot for."

When the group entered ninth grade in 1991, Taneyhill decided to move Bartley,

Thomas and Montrella up to the varsity team. It was the first time ninth graders played for the Lady Lions.

The Altoona girls teams lost in the PIAA Western finals to Penn Hills in 1992 and Oakland Catholic in 1993. In 1994, they got over the hump and advanced to the state championship game in Hershey against Coatesville.

With a junior-oriented team, the Lady Lions appeared to be on their way to their third state title by holding a 54-45 lead heading to the fourth quarter. But Coatesville turned up the intensity and outscored Altoona 23-4 in the final period to snatch

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**1994-95 SEASON
FINAL RECORD: 26-4**

REGULAR SEASON

12/2 vs. Columbia (NY)	W, 99-39
12/3 vs. St. John's (MD)	W, 71-30
12/8 vs. Christ the King (NY)	L, 79-42
12/10 vs. Bishop Guilfoyle	L, 60-58
12/16 vs. Upper St. Clair	W, 85-54
12/22 vs. Punxsutawney	W, 83-12
12/27 vs. St. John Vianney (NJ)	W, 74-50
12/29 vs. Baltimore Western (MD)	L, 56-46
1/4 vs. Johnstown	W, 70-44
1/5 vs. State College	W, 83-43
1/7 vs. Penn Hills	W, 42-39
1/11 vs. Williamsport	W, 45-43
1/13 vs. Franklin	W, 74-19
1/14 vs. Erie McDowell	W, 70-38
1/18 vs. Bishop Guilfoyle	W, 62-38
1/20 vs. North Allegheny	W, 63-44
1/24 vs. Hollidaysburg	W, 66-36
1/26 vs. Johnstown	W, 85-42
1/28 vs. North Schuylkill	W, 46-43
1/31 vs. State College	W, 84-49
2/9 vs. Punxsutawney	W, 80-41
2/13 vs. Hollidaysburg	W, 66-51
2/16 vs. Bishop Guilfoyle	W, 71-64
2/21 vs. Williamsport	L, 54-48

DISTRICT 6 PLAYOFFS

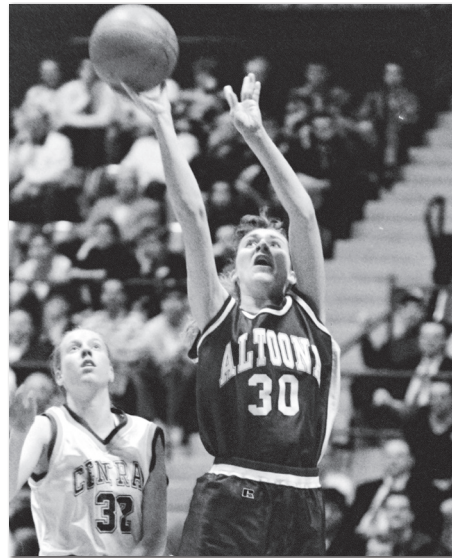
3/4 vs. Hollidaysburg	W, 67-53
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PIAA PLAYOFFS

3/10 vs. Kiski Area	W, 61-37
3/14 vs. Bethel Park	W, 69-39
3/17 vs. Upper St. Clair	W, 68-55
3/21 vs. Penn Hills	W, 64-61
3/24 vs. Allentown Central Catholic	W, 54-37



Hugs all around: Jill Bartley basks in the moment with Krista Thomas and Jessica Montrella.



Julie Sommer (left) was the Lady Lions' leading scorer. Michelle Lenhart (right) was one of five Division I seniors on the 1995 team.

the state title.

The loss was devastating, but the team quickly turned its attention to the following season.

"It still hurts," Leach said. "We should've won that game. But you can look at it one of two ways. Either you were not good enough or you can use it as a learning experience. We, as a team, used that as a great learning experience and addressed the things we needed to after that game."

Memorable season

Before the 1994-95 season began, the pressure on the Lady Lions reached an even higher level.

Five seniors signed Division I scholarships — Bartley with George Mason, Len-



hart with Marshall, Montrella with Davidson, Sommer with William & Mary and Thomas with Duquesne — and the team received a No. 4 national ranking by USA Today.

1995: Five Division I players helped shape season

"Coach Taneyhill built a winning culture, so expectations were always high," Thomas, now Krista Rehm, said. "You had to give it your all and play hard every second that you were on the court. Having five Division I signees on the team and

a solid bench, we always had a target on our back."

The team faced a big early-season matchup with Chamique Holdsclaw and Christ the King (N.Y.) in the Great Chevy Shootout and was beaten soundly, 79-42. Before the Lady Lions had a chance to regroup, they were knocked off by Bishop



Jill Humbertson (left) and Courtney Kaup celebrate the 1996 championship.

Guilfoyle in the tournament consolation game, 60-58.

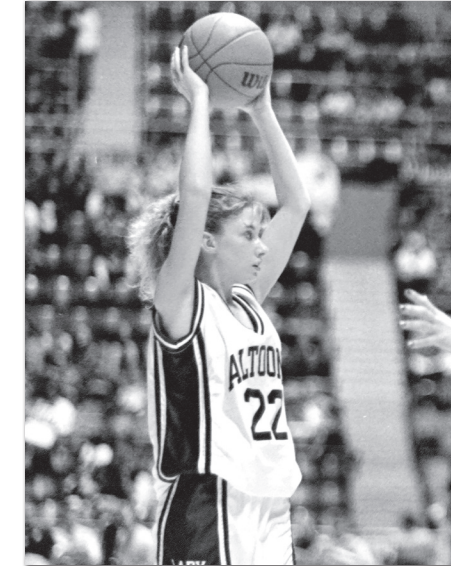
A few weeks later, Baltimore Western beat them, 56-46, in the Altoona Rotary Club tournament finals. The Lady Lions ended a tough December with just a 5-3 record.

"It was a wakeup call," Bartley, now Jill Helsel, said. "Everyone thought we were going to do big things, and so did we. It was shocking to us because the community did not have nice things to say about us, but it gave us a new-found concentration. And (Taneyhill) made sure of that. The practices were not the funnest at that time, but it made us come together as a team. ... I will go on record to say if we don't lose those games, we don't win the state championship."

The Lady Lions got back to their winning ways in January by going on a 15-game win streak, while dominating their Mid-Alleghenies Conference opponents and beating some top teams like Penn Hills, Williamsport, North Allegheny and North Schuylkill.

A loss at Williamsport ended the streak and got the team refocused on the post-season. Altoona beat Hollidaysburg for the District 6 crown and then got by WPIAL teams Kiski Area, Bethel Park and Upper St. Clair in the inter-districts.

Facing Penn Hills in the Western final at Pitt-Johnstown, the Lady Lions found themselves down eight points (59-51) with just 2 minutes, 10 seconds remaining in the game.



Kim Stetter was Altoona's top scorer in the 1996 final.

"We had a rivalry with Penn Hills," Taneyhill said. "Their coach, Bill Lind, when he knew he was going to win a game, he would put a lollipop in his mouth. When he did that, we all knew what that meant, and it fired everybody up. I had called a timeout, and we were all in the huddle, and (the seniors) looked me in the eye and said, 'we're not going to lose this game.' And I said, 'OK, let's go do it.'"

Altoona rallied for a 64-61 victory to earn a trip back to Hershey to face Allentown Central Catholic, which had upset Williamsport in the Eastern side of the bracket.

The state final experience Altoona gained the previous year paid off in the 1995 final. Sommer, who needed just five points for 1,000 in her scholastic career, hit

her first three shots in the championship game, including two 3-pointers, and Lenhart added a 3-pointer to put the Lady Lions up 11-1 in the first five minutes.

"We had great fan support," Leach said. "When

we got that lead, the crowd was going crazy, and it felt like everyone was behind us. It was a great start, and we kept our foot on the gas."

With Sommer collecting 22 points and eight rebounds, Lenhart scoring 13 points and Bartley grabbing 11 rebounds, Altoona dominated Allentown Central Catholic, 54-37.

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**1995-96 SEASON
FINAL RECORD: 25-5**

REGULAR SEASON

12/1 vs. Woodland Hills	L, 57-53
12/2 vs. Salem (VA)	W, 71-51
12/15 vs. Baltimore Inst. of Notre Dame (MD)	W, 81-34
12/16 vs. Baltimore Seton Keough (MD)	L, 50-39
12/27 vs. Cranberry	W, 48-37
12/29 vs. Livingston Academy (TN)	L, 62-36
12/30 vs. Shelbyville Central (TN)	L, 41-37
1/4 vs. State College	W, 62-50
1/6 vs. Penn Hills	W, 58-37
1/10 vs. Williamsport	W, 37-28, OT
1/17 vs. Bishop Guilfoyle	W, 53-43
1/23 vs. Hollidaysburg	W, 75-56
1/25 vs. Johnstown	W, 66-44
1/27 vs. Erie McDowell	W, 57-53
1/30 vs. State College	W, 56-38
2/3 vs. Johnstown	W, 94-35
2/8 vs. Punxsutawney	W, 77-22
2/10 vs. Egg Harbor Township	W, 43-33
2/12 vs. North Allegheny	W, 66-64
2/14 vs. Hollidaysburg	L, 68-38
2/15 vs. Punxsutawney	W, 69-41
2/17 vs. Bishop Guilfoyle	W, 48-47
2/20 vs. Williamsport	W, 54-34

DISTRICT 6 PLAYOFFS

2/27 vs. Somerset	W, 76-20
3/2 vs. Hollidaysburg	W, 55-41

PIAA PLAYOFFS

3/8 vs. North Allegheny	W, 71-61
3/12 vs. Penn Hills	W, 42-29
3/15 vs. Oakland Catholic	W, 37-35
3/19 vs. Woodland Hills	W, 56-55
3/22 vs. Northampton	W, 55-48

As was the case throughout the season, different players led the statistical categories.

"On any given night, one of us could have been the player of the game — there wasn't any jealousy," Rehm said. "We had great chemistry, and we all had the same goal."

That goal had been realized after coming so close the previous year.

"It was truly pure joy," Leach said. "(The Hersheypark) Arena was a special place to play, and we had a different experience the year before. But we felt more comfortable and more prepared, and we had high expectations. To win that game, it was just pure happiness."

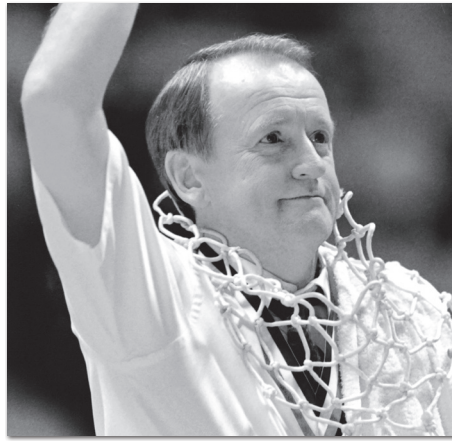
Surprising year

As the 1995-96 season approached, and with Taneyhill still on board, the expectations for the Lady Lions had significantly dipped from the previous year.

With the team hit hard by graduation, Kaup, who had started at point guard the previous two seasons, took on more of a scoring role. Humbertson moved into the starting lineup, along with fellow senior Kim Stetter, and underclassmen Deanna Jubeck, Michelle Curran and Heather Mielnik stepped into bigger roles.

"Looking at it logistically, we didn't have the size and we may not have had the shooters, on paper, that the '95 team had," Kaup said, "But the '96 team, we had as much heart and a lot of hustle. We went into the season with not much expectations. A lot of people doubted us, but we didn't doubt ourselves."

"The '96 team was the team in practice pushing the '95 team, even the '94 team. ... We were used to playing against that caliber of team, and we got used to being tough. We just shed those low expectations that people had on us, and that would circle back right to the helm of Coach Taneyhill, and (assistants) Amy Palfey and Jenny Moran creating an atmosphere — they had a belief system in



The 1996 PIAA title was Art Taneyhill's fourth.

us. We had systems in place, based on fundamentals, that allowed us to keep pushing forward and believe in ourselves to get another state championship."

Just like the previous season, a brutal December schedule tested the team. The Lady Lions lost to Woodland Hills in the opener, fell to Baltimore Seton Keough and went 1-2 in the Altoona Rotary Tournament. They were 3-4 heading into the new year.

But just like the previous season, Altoona went on a big winning streak, piling up nine straight victories over teams like Penn Hills, McDowell, Egg Harbor Township (N.J.) and North Allegheny.

And, again, like the previous year, the Lady Lions suffered a defeat before the postseason. Rival Hollidaysburg beat the Lady Lions, 68-38, on Valentine's Day with the District 6 playoffs looming in two weeks.

"I don't remember the losses," Taneyhill said. "We started the playoffs 0-0 and paid no attention to what happened in the regular season. We approached it as one game at a time."

Altoona avenged the loss to Hollidaysburg with a satisfying 55-41 District 6 championship victory over the Lady Tigers and then won its first three inter-district games over WPIAL powers North Allegheny, Penn Hills and Oakland Catholic.

A rematch against Woodland Hills in the Western final at IUP was the last step

toward a return to Hershey. The Lady Lions trailed, 55-54, with just seconds remaining.

"We had an inbounds play where Humbertson would get the ball in front of the basket," Taneyhill said. "Every time we practiced the play, she missed the shot. We had never showed it in a game. When I called the play, everyone looked at me like I was crazy. ... But we got the ball to her, and she made the shot."

Tracy Tyler inbounded the ball to Humbertson, who banked in the shot for a 56-55 thrilling victory.

"It was magical," Humbertson said. "Before that game I had a premonition that that was going to happen."

In the state title game against the Northampton Konkrete Kids, Altoona got off to another big start, opening up a 34-19 halftime lead behind Stetter's 11 points.

Northampton cut its deficit to 50-44 with 2:04 remaining in the game, but Kaup hit the last five free throws for a 55-48 championship win. Kaup finished with 16 points and 12 assists, Stetter scored 17, and Curran added eight points and nine rebounds.

"I knew we had a great team," Stetter, now Kim Hammond, said. "We had played together for so long, and we had the experience of being to the state championship the two years prior. We knew we could do it."

The aftermath

After the celebration of the back-to-back championships had died down, Taneyhill decided to go out a winner — a year later than he originally thought — by moving over to coach the Altoona boys basketball team.

Kaup and Humbertson kept up the NCAA Division I tradition by continuing their careers at George Mason and Robert Morris, respectively.

The Lady Lions program continued to enjoy success throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s, but 30 years later, the 1994-95 and 1995-96 teams are the last two Altoona girls basketball teams to win state championships.

"It's still a great source of pride — not only being a Lady Lion but being with such a special group of players," Leach said. "As the years go on, and athletics are still a big part of my life with my kids both competing, you realize it was the relationships that matter the most."

"It's still a great source of pride — not only being a Lady Lion but being with such a special group of players."

— Julie (Sommer) Leach