

Coppin State set to induct inaugural Hall of Fame athletics class in 2012

By BY JONAS SHAFFER and THE BALTIMORE SUN

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Cornflakes and water, Joe Pace recalled, was sometimes all he had to eat. Even if a hardscrabble existence hardly seemed to fit the profile of perhaps the best there ever was at Coppin State, there were always lean days in college for the big man with the bigger appetite.

It was a good thing, then, that Pace wasn't bad at basketball.

"If we do good out there," the 6-foot-10 Pace said, remembering his playing days in the mid-1970s at Coppin State, "somebody might even invite us to their house to eat, give us a little money to buy the other ball players some food. We took all our little change and put it together and we'd cook a good meal, enough to last us for two, three days."

His legacy as an Eagle has endured a little bit longer. The most prolific scorer in Coppin State history and the centerpiece of the program's 1976 NAIA national championship team, Pace headlines the school's inaugural six-person Hall of Fame class, which will be honored at a ceremony Friday night at the Forum Caterers.

Ironically, it was financial support — or a lack thereof — that pushed Pace to Coppin State in the first place. A star at Maryland-Eastern Shore, the New Brunswick, N.J., native said he packed his bags, "snuck out the back door" and headed for Baltimore after his sophomore year when he realized the Hawks wouldn't have enough money to keep him on scholarship.

He ended up at Coppin State, where he found the living wasn't much better, even if the team certainly was. With guard Gary "Tank" Barnes — whom Pace said he believes is just as deserving of a Hall of Fame induction — the Eagles won 19 games his first season and 39 the next one, including a 96-91 win over Henderson State that capped a five-game, six-day run through the NAIA tournament.

Said Pace: "It was a good struggle."

Joe Pace

Arguably the most talented men's basketball player in Coppin State history, Pace led the Eagles to a combined 58 wins during his two seasons in Baltimore. He was named the most valuable player of the 1976 NAIA tournament after he helped lead Coppin State to its only national title. Pace ranks sixth all time in program history with 1,313 points and second with 978 rebounds, and his career averages of 22.3 points and 18.6 rebounds per game are team records. After being named an NAIA All-American and AP College Division All-American in 1976, Pace was drafted in the second round of the NBA Draft by the Washington Bullets. In two seasons with the team, he averaged 3.2 points and won a championship in 1978.

Larry Stewart

A three-time All-MEAC selection and two-time MEAC Player of the Year, Stewart is the only men's basketball player in school history with more than 1,000 career points and rebounds. He was part of the Eagles' first-ever NCAA Tournament team in 1990 and finished his Coppin State career as the third-leading scorer (1,824 points) and the all-time leading rebounder (1,052

rebounds) in program history. Stewart played four seasons in the NBA with the Washington Bullets and the Seattle SuperSonics and in 1992 became the first undrafted rookie named to the NBA All-Rookie Team.

John Bates

Bates, who left Maryland-Eastern Shore with Pace to become Coppin State's coach in 1975, led the Eagles to the 1976 NAIA championship, their only national championship in program history. Coppin State set a program record for wins (39) that year, and Bates led the program to 32 more the following season. In 12 seasons as coach, Bates compiled a 209-121 overall record, the second-most wins in school history. He also led Coppin State to three straight Potomac Intercollegiate Conference Championships in the mid-1970s.

Nicholas Eugene

Regarded as one of the best distance runners in the school's track and field history, Eugene is Coppin State's indoor record holder in the 1,500 meters and ranks third all time in the 1,500 meters outdoors. After placing third overall in the MEAC Cross Country Championship in 1991, he finished first in 1992, helping the Eagles win consecutive conference titles. Eugene, who also won the 5,000-meter indoor MEAC championship in 1994, finished with six top-five finishes during his indoor career and three top-five finishes at the MEAC Outdoor Championships.

Clayton McNeill

McNeill competed on Coppin State's baseball, men's basketball and men's track and field teams as a student-athlete in the late 1960s, helping the school win its first conference championship in basketball in 1968. After graduating

in 1969, he earned his master's of education in 1975 from the school and later became the Eagles' athletic director. During his tenure, Coppin State won seven MEAC championships in four different sports. McNeill also served as the school's director of student activities and vice president of student life, among other positions at the university.

Diana Pitts

Pitts was the first Coppin State track athlete from either the men's or women's program to earn All-America honors, twice earning the distinction in the 800 meters outdoors in the 1990s. Pitts, the only two-time honoree in school history, won seven conference championships, including three separate races at the 1994 MEAC Indoor Championships. She holds school records in the 500 meters, 1,000 meters, 1,500 meters and the mile indoors and the 400 meters, 800 meters and 1,500 meters outdoors.

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