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Let's face it: the tri-county (Venango, Clarion, Forest) area is not a hotbed of hoops. Go to a high school game around here and you're not going to see the next LeBron, Kobe or Jordan. Or Wilt.

And in Venango County, the players who have done best on The Next Level are girls. Cranberry's Susan Blausner and Carrie Mason and Franklin's Hillary Hager and Martha Williams have either starred or been solid at the Division I level.

The 6-1 Blausner, the mainstay on the Berries' three straight state championship teams on the early '90s, started the trend, first going to Rutgers and then transferring to Illinois. Mason played at Virginia Tech, Hager at Vanderbilt and the 6-4 Williams at George Washington.

What's more, Oil City's Bridget Hale (Pitt-Johnstown) and Venango Catholic's Mary Kay Lynch (Gannon) were Division II All-Americans, while another OCHS graduate, Jodi Gault, after becoming the county's First Big Star in the mid-70s, won 540 games in 25 years as coach at Pitt-Johnstown following a stellar career at Slippery Rock.

Getting back to Blausner, Mason and Hager. They are the only players in Venango County history to score 2,000 points in high school. Their totals:

Blausner, 2,385, 1995

Mason, 2,335, 2002

Hager, 2,299, 2000

Venango County's all-time leading scorer among the boys is Rocky Grove's Dylan Gravatt (2010) with 1,904 points.

Heath leads the boys

The 2,000 points scorers from Clarion and Forest counties:

Garrett Heath, Keystone, 2,212, 2004

Doug Schneider, East Forerst, 2,039, 1999

Tori Obenrader, North Clarion, 2,115, 2018

Geena Sneeringer, West Forest, 2,063, 2010

Venango County bloodlines: Bowen, Rhoads

One of the most famed scoring machines from either district in northwestern Pennsylvania was Warren's 6-9 John Bowen, whose roots were in Venango County – Franklin to be exact. But he moved away before he could don the red and black.

Bowen, District 10's all-time leading scorer, not only totaled 2,884 points – that's one point ahead of Lower Merion's Kobe Bryant on the state's all-time list – but he pulled down 2,163 for the Dragons from 1979-83.

It was announced the summer after his junior year that he would take his talents to Notre Dame. So, the next season, all gyms in Venango County and points beyond were packed when Warren came to town. Everybody wanted to see The Kid Who's Going to Notre Dame.

Bowen played two years at Notre Dame before transferring to Division II power Gannon and was a prolific rebounder for the Golden Knights.

Probably "everybody" knows about Bowen, though.

Now wait until you hear about Jence Rhoads – daughter of Melinda Hale, former standout all-around athlete at Oil City. And I have to admit I had no idea until recently.

I did know Rhoads was a big basketball star at Slippery Rock High School, scoring 2,149 career points – a Butler County record at the time, boys or girls. (Ethan Morton, the 6-6 point guard from Butler who is headed to Purdue, finished his career this season with 2,198 points.)

As with Hillary Hager, Rhoads went to Vanderbilt, and began to follow a similar athletics/academics path as the former Franklin star.

At 5-11, Rhoads was a starting point guard for the Commodores, graduating in 2011 after earning all-SEC first team honors twice. Then off she went to grad school at Auburn, earning not only master's degree *but* a PhD in kinesiology.

Rhoads played pro basketball for three years in Europe, but most recently the 31-year-old has been a stalwart in team handball -- a member of the U.S. team since September 2014. Google her, and you'll find a long list of impressive credentials in that sport. She even has a Wikipedia *page*.

So, like mother, like daughter.

What has always killed me about Rhoads is it has always mentioned, namely in Mercer County, that she is the daughter of the late Bob "Posey" Rhoads, former basketball star at Mercer when the Mustangs were dominating with state championships in the mid '60s. Not that there's anything wrong with that, but never a word about Melinda, who was a member of the U.S. team handball squad that played in the Olympics in 1984.

Now that's changed.