Rizzotti Enters Women’s Basketball Hall of Fame

Inducted as player, treasured as coach

by Jonathan Easterbrook ’87 M’90

University of Hartford women’s basketball coach Jen Rizzotti distinctly remembers the last time she set foot in Knoxville, Tenn., before this year. It was January 1996, and she and her University of Connecticut teammates were booed off the court after ending the University of Tennessee’s 69-game home winning streak.

Her return trip to Knoxville 17 years later would prove just as memorable—and this time she would be met with two standing ovations.

Rizzotti was inducted into the Women’s Basketball Hall of Fame on Saturday night, June 8, joining five others in a two-hour ceremony in downtown Knoxville’s historic Bijou Theater.

Inducted for her playing accomplishments, Rizzotti is joined in the Hall of Fame’s 2013 class by former players Annette Smith-Knight (Texas), Peggie Gillom-Granderson (Mississippi), and Sue Wicks (Rutgers), and coaches Gary Blair (Texas A&M) and Jim Foster (Chattanooga).

Among the crowd were two dozen Rizzotti supporters, including four of her former players; legendary coach Pat Summitt, whose vision led to the establishment of the Hall of Fame 15 years ago; and Rizzotti’s mentor and college coach, Geno Auriemma, who was present in the theater as well as part of a witty taped video introduction for Rizzotti that also featured former teammate Rebecca Lobo.

In her acceptance speech Rizzotti gave much of the credit for her success as a player and person to her family. She noted that her father gave her the athleticism and drive and “never let me win at anything until I was able to truly beat him”; her mother handed down her work ethic and competitiveness.

Rizzotti also talked about her newest family. “The people I have met in the last 14 years at the University of Hartford have enriched my life more than I could possibly have imagined,” she said.

Rizzotti displayed a gleaming smile throughout the weekend’s events, which included media interviews, an autograph session, and two receptions sandwiched around the ceremony. She admitted it was a bit overwhelming “to stand in the hall and feel you are a small part of this renaissance of women’s basketball in the United States, where we went from being on TV occasionally to selling out arenas to starting professional leagues to having success in the Olympics.”

After being a key component in the University of Connecticut’s first national championship team in 1995, Rizzotti had a remarkable senior season in 1996. She was named national player of the year by the Associated Press and was the recipient of the Wade Trophy, awarded to the greatest female basketball player in the country who not only excels athletically but serves as a positive role model on and off the court.
Rizzotti played professionally for eight years and was a member of two WNBA championship teams.

“I never used my size [5 feet 6 inches] as an excuse,” she said. “I found ways from within to compete. I wanted my playing career to be defined as a player who worked harder than anyone else, who was willing to go through a wall, and who had the biggest heart on the floor.”

Since taking over the coaching reins 14 years ago, Rizzotti has turned the UHart women’s basketball program into one of the nation’s top mid-major programs. She has led the Hawks to six NCAA Tournaments and multiple appearances in the national Top 25 polls. Her coaching success has extended onto the international stage, where she has guided two U.S. national teams to gold medals in the FIBA world championships.

“Coaching is fun for me because it’s so much more challenging. As a player, all I had to do was worry about getting myself ready physically and having the right mental focus,” Rizzotti recalls, “but as a coach, you are trying to instill that into 14 different players.”

The presence of Rizzotti’s former players in Tennessee illustrates the family atmosphere that surrounds the UHart women’s basketball program—and the relationships that have been built.

“All of my players who played for me at Hartford are such a big part of my life,” Rizzotti said. “They know that my past at UConn and my playing career are a big part of who I am. They also know that much of what I take into my coaching career comes from my experience at the University of Connecticut. It’s just nice to be able to share with them this amazing accomplishment and for them to be as excited about it as I am.

“Although I am in the Hall of Fame as a player, and I’m certainly proud of all my accomplishments,” Rizzotti continued, “I feel like I was really meant to be a basketball coach. I do hope, when all is said and done, that I’ll be recognized for my contributions to the sport from a coaching perspective as much as I impacted the sport as a player.”

In other words, stay tuned. No individual has yet been inducted into the Women’s Basketball Hall of Fame as both a player and a coach. If the first 14 years of her coaching career are an indication, Jennifer Rizzotti’s recent trip to Knoxville will not be her last.