

To be elected to a major sports Hall of Fame is a tremendous accomplishment. Each year the honorees are announced with much fanfare. Those elected are said to be “enshrined”. That denotes that they are honored and remembered. However, Raritan’s one inductee in a major Sports Hall of Fame is virtually unknown by today’s local community. That gentleman is Ben Carnevale who coached College Basketball at Navy and North Carolina. He was elected to The Basketball Hall of Fame in 1970. (The Basketball Hall of Fame is for both pro and college basketball.) Ben Carnevale spent his lifetime in Basketball. First playing, then coaching, and finally to serving as a director and administrator. When he was young the game of basketball was still new (it was invented in 1891) – and the rules were evolving. Ben changed with them and he helped define the game.

Ben Carnevale was born in Raritan in 1915. His family lived at 31 Gaston Avenue. His family had deep roots in Raritan as both his parents, Alexander and Emilia, were born in town. They would have 5 kids with Ben being the second oldest. Alexander was one of the first policemen in Raritan. He was also an athlete thus he encouraged the kids to be active in sports. He set up a basketball hoop on the side of their home. Ben took to the sport immediately. Ben’s brother Joe recalled that Ben was a natural at shooting. He seemed to be able to consistently make a variety of shots. In his teens Ben played basketball at Somerville High School in the 1932, 33, and 34 seasons. Basketball was still refining itself at the time - so much that the official size of the basketball was changed twice during his high school years. Each time the ball’s diameter was made smaller by an inch. The pace of the game of basketball back then was much slower as after each basket there was a jump ball at center court. (That jump ball would be eliminated in 1937.) Another significant difference was that the basketball itself was not as firm as it is today. Thus it was harder to dribble so the main method of moving the ball around was passing as opposed to dribbling. As a senior at Somerville High School Ben was the top scorer on the team leading them to a record of 9-5.

After high school Ben went to New York University (NYU) on a basketball scholarship. He would join the varsity team in his sophomore year. Over the next three seasons 1936, 37, & 38 he would be one of their leading scorers. Here Ben was playing at an important time and place for basketball. Previously basketball was much less popular than the other sports. But the College Basketball scene around the New York City area in the late 1930s brought basketball its first large scale popularity. Some college double headers at the old Madison Square Garden drew over 10,000 fans. With basketball’s popularity rising it led to the creation of the first playoff to determine a national champion. The first NIT College Basketball tournament would be held in 1938. Ben Carnevale would play in that tournament as NYU had an impressive regular season and thus was invited to play. There were just six teams in that 1<sup>st</sup> tournament. NYU would win their first game against Long Island. In the semi-final they went up against Colorado. This was an exciting game. Ben almost sealed the win for his team when hit a shot with 25 seconds left to put them ahead by one. But Colorado came back and scored with just a few seconds left to eliminate NYU in a heartbreaker.

After college Ben would play two years on a pro team called the Jersey Reds. When World War II started he signed up for the Navy. He would quickly rise to the rank of Lieutenant and soon joined the fight overseas. In December of 1942 while sailing off the coast of North Africa his ship was torpedoed by a German U-boat. He made it into a raft with many other survivors. The German sub surfaced and

decided to round up any U.S. officers on the rafts. Ben, as a Lieutenant, would have been taken prisoner or killed by the Germans, but fortunately he was not wearing any official uniform at the time that identified him as an officer. Being left on the raft was no salvation as his group drifted for five days at sea before they were rescued. Only half the men from the ship would survive this ordeal. Ben was injured when the ship was sunk - and was awarded a Purple Heart.

He was then reassigned stateside to teach athletics in a military training program at North Carolina University. As the war was ending the job of coaching Basketball opened up at the school and Ben Carnevale took the job coaching at North Carolina. The first year he led them to an impressive record of 22-6 . In his second year, the 1945-46 season, he coached the team to the finals of the NCAA tournament. They would lose the final to Oklahoma A&M.

With an impressive record of 52-11 in his two years of coaching at North Carolina he was recruited by the Naval Academy to coach their team. Back then Navy was considered a better college coaching opportunity than North Carolina. How times have changed. Navy was unique among colleges, or should it be said "handicapped". Because of the cramped conditions aboard Navy ships the Naval Academy would not accept anyone who was over 6 foot 4. That no doubt put the basketball team at a big disadvantage. Another handicap for Navy was that they could not recruit basketball players like the other colleges did. Navy had to select its players from the students that were appointed to the Naval Academy. It would take an excellent coach to make the Navy basketball team a winner. Ben Carnevale was that coach. He taught a team game with a well-disciplined defense. Many opponents hated playing against Navy as their pesky defense frustrated the best of offenses. He was creative in his coaching. Some of the plays he invented such as stacking players up on an inbounds pass were so new and effective that they sometimes had trouble with the referees and the other teams who thought that it was (or should be) illegal.

Ben would coach at Navy for 20 years. During that time they would qualify for the NCAA tournament 5 times. In his first year at Navy in 1947 Ben Carnevale was voted the "College Coach of the Year" as he coached the team to a record season record of 16-1. Over his 20 years as coach at Navy their record was an impressive 257-158. An excellent record for a school that could not compete on an equal footing. To this day he is Navy's winningest coach.

In 1966 Ben Carnevale made the decision to become athletic director at his alma mater New York University. After several years there, he tired of city life thus he moved to be athletic director at William and Mary in 1972. He remained at that post till 1982. He would hold many other important administrative positions in Basketball. Just a couple include President of the National Association of Basketball Coaches, Committee Member for U.S. Olympic Basketball, and positions on the board for both the NCAA and NIT Tournament.

One notable assignment was in 1968 when he was the team manager (basically the assistant coach) of the Men's Olympic Basketball Team. Those games were held in Mexico City. They would win the Gold Medal.

Ben Carnevale passed away in 2008 at the age of 92.

Today in Raritan few know of Ben Carnevale. Since he is Raritan's only member of a major sports hall of fame this author proposes that something should be named after him. Perhaps the gym at JFK School in Raritan, which is just two miles from his childhood home, should be named in his honor. To see photos and old newspaper articles about Ben Carnevale visit [www.raritan-online.com](http://www.raritan-online.com)