



Madison's best all-around high school athlete

In a class by himself: Five decades later, Pat Richter still is No. 1

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Governor Jim Doyle was a junior high student on Madison's West Side in the 1950s when he began to hear tall tales about the athletic exploits of a tall, slightly older kid from the other side of town.

"The rumor was he hit a home run over the left-field wall at Breese Stevens Field and that's about 750 feet or something like that," Doyle said. "We believed it. That's how big Pat Richter was."

The legend of Pat Richter would only grow in the years after that.

After starring in football, basketball and baseball at East High School, Richter won nine letters in three sports at the University of Wisconsin and spent eight seasons as an end and punter for the NFL's Washington Redskins. Years later, after a successful career as an executive at Oscar Mayer, Richter returned to UW as athletic director and orchestrated an athletic revival at his alma mater.



The Richter legend began during his days as a youth growing up on the near East Side, first on Rutledge Street, then on Yahara Place. Like most kids in the 1950s, Richter moved seamlessly from sport to sport, playing football in the fall, basketball in the winter and baseball in the spring and summer. The difference was Richter was bigger and better than everyone else.

Richter's athletic career is best summed up in one sentence: He went to Wisconsin on a basketball scholarship, became a two-time consensus all-American in football and everyone, including Richter, will tell you his best sport was baseball.

"He was the consummate three-sport star," said Rob Hernandez, longtime prep sports reporter for the State Journal. "He not only played each sport, he played all of them at a high level. He was a true neighborhood hero before Madison grew too big to have them."

And he was a true all-around athlete before high school sports became too specialized to have them. Richter's athletic career represents one of Madison's grandest traditions: the many outstanding multisport athletes produced by the city's high schools prior to the mid-1980s.

Due to the changing nature of prep sports, the three-sport athlete has become virtually extinct in urban high schools. To celebrate this once-grand tradition, however, the State Journal gathered a select panel of 48 voters and asked them to choose the greatest all-around male athlete in the modern era (post-World War II) of Madison prep sports.

In all, 60 former athletes received votes from the panel, but the race for No. 1 turned into a landslide for — you guessed it — Richter. The 1959 East High graduate accumulated 29 first-place votes and was named on 45 of the 48 ballots, earning 422 points ([read an explanation of the voting process](#)).

Rounding out the top five in the voting were West's Jim Bakken (1958) in second with 273 points, East's Dale Hackbart (1956) in third with 253, West's Stu Voigt (1966) in fourth with 226 and La Follette's Gary Anderson (1970) in fifth with 152. Bob Falk (1972) and Tim Stracka (1978) of West also received more than 100 points.

In addition to Richter, other first-place votes went to Bakken with five, Hackbart and Voigt with three each, Falk with two and Anderson, West's Don Page (1945), East's Donald Hayes (1994), Memorial's Mark Johnson (1976), Central's Al Dockery (1947) and West's Bob Mansfield (1947) with one each.

For the purposes of this story, an all-around athlete was defined as someone who made a significant mark in at least two sports sponsored by his high school. Voters were allowed to consider an athlete's post-high school accomplishments in compiling their list.

The vote was limited to the post-World War II era because that's when prep sports began to expand, when all-state and all-conference teams were formalized and when sports such as football and basketball began to take on their modern form — thus making comparisons easier. The vote was limited to males because the opportunities at the college and professional levels were (and still are) so much greater for boys than for girls that it was thought such post-high school acclaim would give males an unfair advantage in the voting.

Given the above definition, some noteworthy Madison athletes were not considered for this story.

Limiting the voting to the post-World War II era eliminated some legendary all-around athletes from earlier decades, including Bill Schmitz and Bob Alwin of East, Ted Scalissi of Central and John Cuccia of West.

Even though prep girls sports didn't start until 1970, Madison produced some fine all-around athletes over the next 15 years who also weren't up for consideration in this vote. They included Lori Monk and Sandy Botham of West; Connie Carpenter and Jane Dwyer of East; and Sue Tallard and Pam Moore of Memorial.

For voting purposes, cross country and distance running in track were considered to be the same discipline. That eliminated elite-level athletes such as Dan Cautley and Phil Downs of Memorial, Bob Gordon of West and Gabe Jennings of East.

And because athletes were required to make a significant impact in at least two high school sports, Olympic stars such as West's Eric Heiden and La Follette's Jeff Nygaard were dropped from consideration, as were basketball greats such as West's Reece Gaines and Memorial's Keaton Nankivil, Jeronne Maymon and Vander Blue.

In the end, though, the 6-foot-5 Richter stood head and shoulders above everyone.

As a junior at East, he teamed with Ron Staley and Bob Powers to lead the Purgolders to the WIAA state basketball championship, beating Bakken and West in the semifinals. As a senior, he scored 50 points in one game, grabbed 40 rebounds in another and was named to prep all-American teams in football and basketball. There were no all-state or all-conference teams in prep baseball at the time, but Richter's power-hitting exploits at East and with the Monona Grove Lakers in the semi-pro Central Wisconsin League created a huge buzz.

It was more of the same at UW, where Richter remains the school's only nine-time letterman since 1927. As a receiver in football, he led the team in catches as a sophomore, the Big Ten in catches as a junior and the nation in catches as a senior. He didn't have nearly as much success in basketball, in part because he always reported late due to football. But he was an all-Big Ten outfielder in baseball, where in 82 games over three seasons he hit .353 with 20 home runs and 74 RBIs.

A first-round draft pick of the Redskins in 1963, he ended an up-and-down NFL career with 99 catches, including 14 for touchdowns.

It was a marvelous athletic career that had its beginnings in pick-up games with his buddies at Yahara Park and took root when, at age 10 or 11, he became a batboy for Bowman Dairy in the old Madison Industrial League.

"You really didn't think twice about playing three sports," Richter said. "The seasons just morphed into each other. Growing up on the East Side, you played against guys that were three, four, five years older. You had to either try to be as quick as they were or as tough as they were or whatever. Otherwise, they wouldn't let you play. So it was great motivation. Everybody just seemed to be playing."

No one in Madison ever did that better than Pat Richter.