

Greater Flint Afro-American Sports Hall of Fame ceremony leaves 2016 inductees 'speechless'



2016 Basketball Inductee Paulette Backstrom wears a flower to represent her upcoming induction before the Greater Flint Afro-American Hall of Fame's 32nd Annual Induction Ceremony on Sunday, March 20, 2016 at Riverfront Banquet Center in Flint. Rachel Woolf | MLive.com
Rachel Woolf | rwoolf@mlive.com

By Eric Woodyard | ewoodyar@mlive.com

on March 21, 2016 at 2:30 PM, updated March 21, 2016 at 2:32 PM

FLINT, MI – All the [2016 inductees](#) mingled in a small room outside of the Riverfront Banquet Center on Sunday before the start of the 32nd annual Greater Flint African-American Sports Hall of Fame .

Former track star Carlos Benton still couldn't believe the moment was truly happening as he greeted all the athletes. He started preparation for the event early in the day as his thoughts wandered all over the place.

"It goes through your mind, with all of these great athletes that you know, 'How did you make it?'" Benton asked himself. "I told my wife last night that I didn't need to write a speech that I've just got to come from my heart. I prepared that way."

Benton played track and football at Flint Central High School, where he earned five varsity letters before graduating in 1981.

He went on to become a five-time All-Conference runner at Grambling State University, and then returned home to coach track and cross country at Flint Central and Grand Blanc. For the past 32 years, he's also helped with the CANUSA Games.

Benton's 96-year-old grandmother, Willie B. Douglas, was in attendance as well as more than 40 other supporters, including his wife, Rhonda. Benton is originally from El Dorado, Ark., but moved to Flint before he entered teenhood.

"It's speechless," Benton said. "It's great going into the Hall of Fame - today is so wonderful. With all the things that have happened to me, this is a blessing."

Benton's hall of fame class included former heavyweight boxing champion Chris Byrd, Terrence "Terry" Edwards (football, basketball, and baseball), Ron Peaks (basketball), Terry Thames (football, wrestling and track), basketball great Paulette (Backstrom) Wallace, Eddie Watkins (track and field) and the Bud Lite U.S. Flag Football national championship teams of 1986-88.

Byrd was training in California and couldn't be in attendance, so his father, Joe Sr., accepted on his behalf. Chris is the seventh member of the Byrd family to join the hall of fame. The special group is known as the "Byrd's nest." His father, mother, brothers and sisters are all inducted.

"My mother had 12 kids and she used to keep us so busy," Joe Byrd Sr. said. "So what I learned from that is if you keep a young man or young lady busy all of the time, then you won't have no problem out of them."

Edwards, 54, also drew a large crowd.

The 1979 Flint Northwestern graduate entered the hall of fame a decade after his younger sister, Tonya, who played in the WNBA.

"I thought the train had passed the family and everything so I was just happy with her being in (the hall of fame)," Edwards said. "But it's pretty special to have two of us in there. Everybody's really supporting us."

He was drafted by the Chicago Cubs in the fourth round of the 1983 MLB June Amateur Draft from Central State University. He grew up on the north side of town, attending Pierson

Elementary and Bryant Junior High. Playing baseball was more popular during his era, and Edwards said he wishes more local kids would "take a swing at it."

"It's wonderful as an African-American to be representing baseball because I've seen it decline so much over the years in Flint," Edwards said. "To be able to support it and to show there is an avenue in that sport, besides football and basketball, is great."

Backstrom Wallace, 48, was a two-time state champion in basketball for Northwestern. She graduated in 1985 then went on to Bowling Green State University and led the program to three NCAA Tournaments. She [entered the BGSU Sports Hall of Fame in 1995](#).

She now stays in Shelby Township, where she still hoops casually, and sometime reflects on the town that Flint was when she grew up. The Flint hall of fame ceremony gave her an opportunity to see folks she hadn't been in touch with for nearly three decades.

"When you were involved in sports, the town just totally gravitated to you," said Backstrom Wallace. "Sports was huge in Flint at that time, and all of the schools were competitive. You just felt that love from the community and people just pushed you."

GFAASHOF founder Norm Bryant said this year was special for him to enshrine the Bud Lite U.S. Flag Football team that won three national titles. Bryant was the first person to bring competitive flag football to Flint area.

More than 600 people also showed up to the event to help fill up the Riverfront Banquet Center.

"I think it's only fitting and proper to advertise how great Flint is rather than to be bogged down in the water problem," Bryant said.

http://www.mlive.com/sports/flint/index.ssf/2016/03/greater_flint_afro-american_sp_4.html

