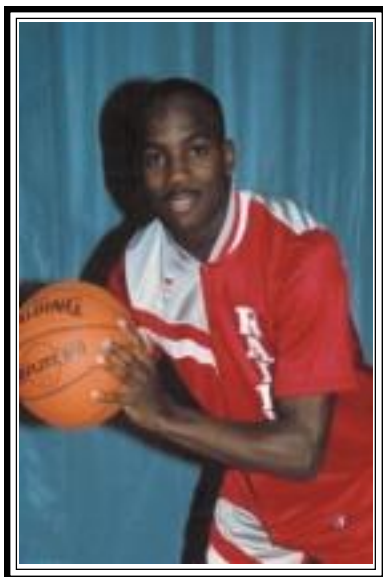


Darren Bennett - 1990



When Darren Bennett arrived at Academy Street in the fall of 1986 much was already expected of this young fifteen year old, and by the time of his graduation in June of 1990, much had been achieved. Today we will honor Darren Bennett with his induction into the FHS Athletic Hall of Fame for his exploits on the basketball court, but we will also remember his tremendous achievements at Crocker Field in the springtime for the track and field program and also on the gridiron for the Red Raider football squad during the autumn months.

Fans of FHS sports first became aware of Darren Bennett as a member of Doug Grutchfield's "Little Team That Could" the Red Raider basketball squad of 1987-1988. For a long time Red Raider fans remembered this squad as one of their favorite fives. The undersized Raiders included co-captains Derrick Bennett and Mike Goodchild, point guard Nick Pappas, center Pete Ghilardi, the Trainor twins, Mike and Tim and our inductee Darren Bennett, a young untested sophomore. Not a great deal was expected of this group,

which seemed too small and too inexperienced to continue the excellence of the Raiders of the 1980's? But as the Christmas season rolled around, FHS fans began to notice some very positive results as the Raiders defeated opponent after opponent. Goodchild and Derrick Bennett stepped forward, and filled the scoring void left by the graduation of Norbert Pickett. Pappas was running the offense smoothly from the point guard position. The Trainors were playing killer defense in the "Chinese" and the youngster Darren Bennett was scoring in double figures and lending a rebounding presence upon the boards. Darren was playing like a veteran and the Raiders never missed a beat when he stepped upon the floor.

As the long winter evenings of January stretched into February, the hottest ticket in town became the Brickyard as Wachusett Regional, Leominster, St. Peter's, St. Bernard's and mighty St. John's fell before the rabid defense which Coach Grutchfield called the "Chinese". A priest from St. John's who was filming the game for Bob Foley told the public address announcer that he "loved the Red and Gray squad which attacked opponents as soon as they exited the locker room. He said they played like the inner-city kids from Baltimore," high praise indeed. Even as a young sixteen-year-old sophomore, Darren Bennett's long arms and legs, along with his quick reflexes made him a major cog in the "Chinese Defense," and his neat ten to twelve foot jump shot became a key to the Raider offense. As March approached Fitchburg, once again qualified for the District Championship, but still, not much was expected from the "Little Team That Could."

But soon that perception would change forever, and sophomore Darren Bennett would be in the middle of a great run. After a fantastic comeback against Marlboro at the Brickyard, the Raiders knocked off Wachusett Regional, and marched into the Worcester Centrum to face unbeaten Milford for the District E Championship. Darren Bennett had come a long way from middle school games played before a few dozen fans at Memorial Middle School. Before five thousand screaming Red Raider fans, Darren and his teammates completely out played a shocked Scarlet Hawks squad, which had entered the tournament ranked number one in Central Massachusetts. As his older brother Derrick and Mike Goodchild held the championship plaque at mid-court, it had to be a tremendously satisfying moment for the young sophomore, who had just completed his first varsity season. Following their great victory at the Centrum, the Raiders headed west to Springfield to face a very talented Chicopee High squad, unfortunately the dreams of the "Little Team That Could" were shattered by the excellent Chicopee squad, but certainly young Darren Bennett looked forward to two more seasons of outstanding basketball under Coach Grutchfield.

As the 1989-1990 basketball season approached, Raider nation was abuzz with a terrific veteran squad led by Darren Bennett, Jack Scott, Randy Shoemaker and outstanding youngsters from the junior varsity program like Danny Brasili. Things looked very good as Coach Grutchfield opened practice shortly after Thanksgiving, and became even better as the Raiders began play early in December. A young freshman sensation Luis Cotto emerged as a dynamic force at the center position and with Darren, Jack Scott and Randy Shoemaker the Raiders began to dominate Central Massachusetts. Scott's wonderful outside jump shooting, Cotto's amazing skill around the hoop and Darren all round excellence made FHS an almost unstoppable machine.

Then disaster struck in a seemingly meaningless game in mid-January against a weak Algonquin squad. With the Red and Gray leading by thirty points early in the second half, Jack Scott was undercut as he went up for a shot, and hit the floor breaking his wrist. The hearts of the Raider fan sunk as they watched Scott being led off the floor. But senior captain Darren Bennett rose to the occasion as he rallied his teammates like Randy Shoemaker and Luis Cotto to continue their excellent season. The Raider machine led by Darren and his young teammates continued to roll into the playoffs while Jack Scott was on the mend. Darren did it all with his scoring, rebounding, defending and most importantly his overall leadership as FHS rolled to a 17-3 regular season record. After knocking off Westboro rather easily in the first tourney game, the Raiders took on archrival St. John's where Darren went wild with thirty points as the Raiders marched into WPI's Harrington Field House for the final game against powerful Burncoat of Worcester. In a game for the ages, the Raiders were nipped in the last seconds by Burncoat 75-73, which some old-time fans call the best District final ever. Darren Bennett's basketball career at FHS was finished, and he did not get that second District trophy, but he and his teammates had come, oh so, close.

Most Red and Gray fans remember Darren Bennett for his exploits on the basketball court, but there was much more to Darren's Hall of Fame career at FHS than basketball. In fact his greatest individual accomplishment might have occurred as a member of Raider's track and field squads during his four years at Fitchburg High. He was a wonderful hurdler in the 100-meter highs and 300 intermediate as well as a solid long jumper and championship level triple jumper. Starting in his junior year, Darren became a major contributor to the success of the Red and Gray squads of the 1980's. He was the leading point getter for the Raider squad, which captured the District E Division I Championship with the aid of his second place finish in the 300-meter hurdles, and third place finish in the 100 meter high hurdles. He also raced with the 4x400 relay squad of Evol Stewart, Nick Pappas and Brandon Auger, which captured the District title in a school record time. But the best was yet to come!

Darren was selected as a tri-captain on the 1990 FHS track and field squad, which would establish records unique in the long athletic history of FHS. Simply stated the 1990 squad was loaded with superstars. The squad was 11-0 in springtime meets, which extended the undefeated streak from the previous two campaigns to 24-0.

Then it was on to the State Track and Field Championship, where Darren, Craig, Evol and their fellow teammates led FHS to a magnificent third place finish in the state competition, a terrific accomplishment on the senior's graduation day. Team members walked into Crocker Field on that Saturday afternoon clad in their track uniforms under their cap and gowns.

One cannot forget Darren Bennett's efforts on the gridiron for the Red Raiders in his senior season. After foregoing football in his junior season, Darren decided to give the game a shot in his final season and Coach Ray Cosenza's initial campaign. It was a somewhat difficult season for the squad, but Darren rose to the occasion with an excellent effort from the quarterback position. He was selected to the Mid-Wach All Star squad and was awarded the Anthony Martines Award, as the team's most valuable player. Coach Cosenza has stated that he personally feels that Darren's best sport could very well have been football.

Darren Bennett has come a long way from the gymnasium of Memorial Middle School, and today the Fitchburg High School Athletic Hall of Fame gladly inducts this unique three sport athlete and gentlemen into its midst. Congratulations Darren!