

SPORTS

Chasing after his 'first love'

■ Walt Howard becomes the first Citrus High boys basketball player to sign with a Division I school.

By **DAWN REISS**
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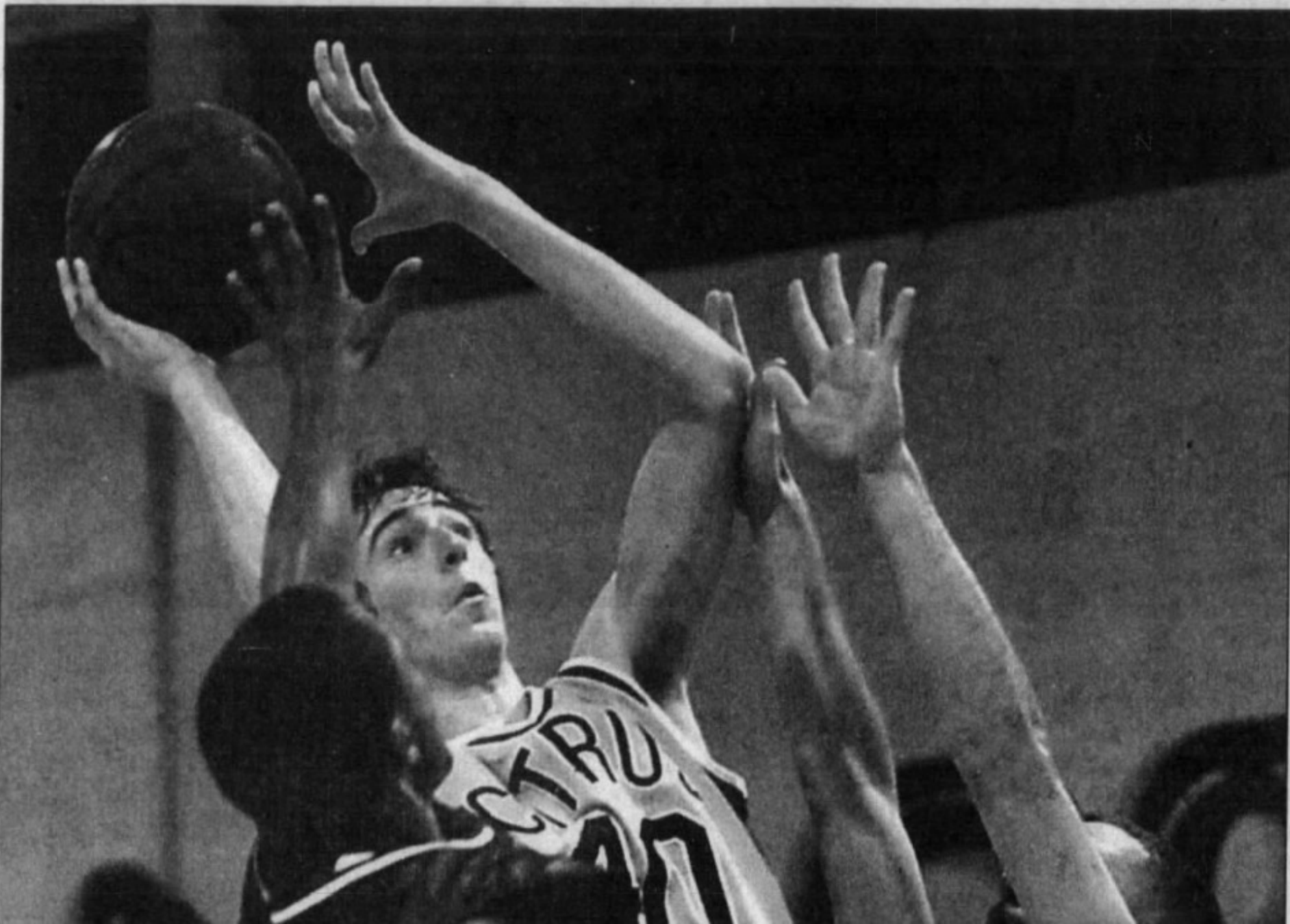
INVERNESS — Flanked by two Citadel baseball caps, Walt Howard sits grinning at a Citrus High conference table.

BOYS BASKETBALL

He is the first Division I boys basketball player in the school's

history, the second in Citrus County. Drew Zimbardo, a 2005 Lecanto graduate, signed last year with Jacksonville University.

Howard, in his newly shorn crew cut, poses with family, friends and school officials. His parents, Julie and Stephen, are there along with Howard's maternal grandfather, Chris Blanton. Citrus High athletic director Vicki Overman flits in and out as Howard's long-time Junior Hurricanes and AAU



coach Ron Bachman shares a laugh with Howard's high school coach of two years, Tom Densmore.

After monthslong debate, Howard has signed with the Citadel to play basketball.

In the trite sense, it is a dream come true.

"Basketball has always been my first love," Howard said.

As a child, Howard was always active, full of energy and into mischief, Blanton joked.

"He was always into something," said Blanton, who owns a farm in Tavares. "He was hard to keep up with."

Not much has changed. Though Howard played soccer and Little League baseball when he was younger, basketball was always present. The summer before his junior year, Howard took what many might consider a risky move by broadening his focus to football.

Howard won the starting quarterback position and led the Hurricanes in Cinderella fashion to their first playoff victory in 30 years with a 13-6 decision over North Marion.

Howard passed for 1,720 yards



Times photo (2005) — TED McLAREN

Walt Howard of Citrus, above playing against Gulf, averaged 18 points and 10 rebounds his senior year. Below, Howard signed with the Citadel to play guard after several months deciding between football and basketball.

and 11 touchdowns; he then averaged 13.4 points and 10 rebounds during basketball season, in which the Hurricanes won the district championship.

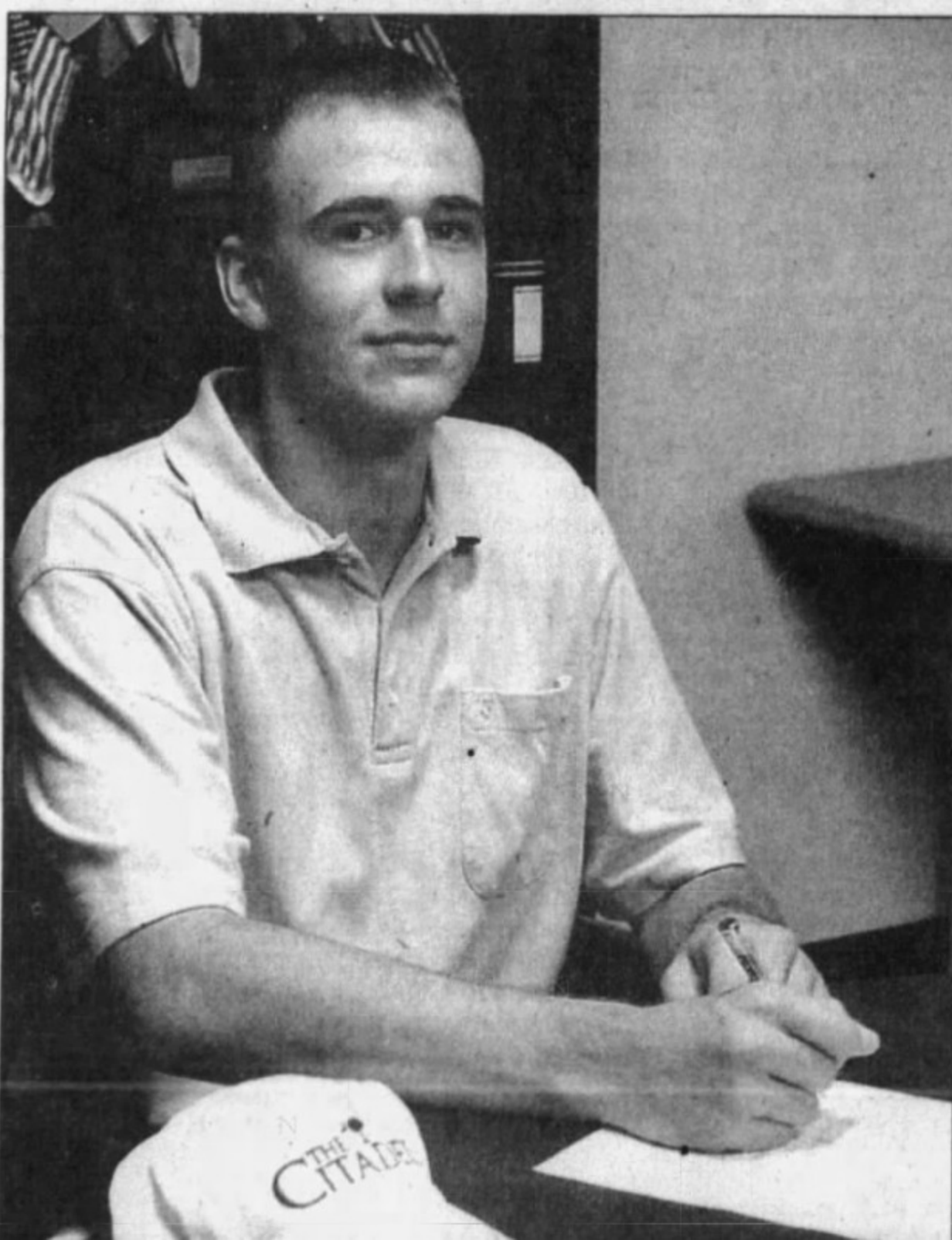
He blocked 76 shots to lead Citrus County, and was second on the team in assists with 56. He also was named the *Times* county Player of the Year twice, once for each sport during his junior year.

"He likes to lead," Densmore said. "He's not a kid that's going to shy away from taking the last shot of the game with the game on the line. He's the kind of kid that wants that."

The summer before his senior year, Howard played on the Tampa-based AAU Florida Elite basketball squad that won the 17-and-under title but quit early for football showcase camps, including one at the University of Alabama.

After an 0-3 start in the fall, Howard helped Citrus make another playoff run and win a district title, its first since 1987. He completed 85 of 153 passes, for 1,257 yards and 10 touchdowns.

Howard has had his share of troubles. He started his senior basketball season late after injuring his shoulder in football and later rolled his left ankle. Citrus struggled, falling into midseason slump, before finishing 9-15 overall. How-



Anderson.

After visiting the Division II program during spring break, Howard realized Anderson wasn't the right fit. Howard told then-Anderson coach Doug Novak, who has since taken an assistant position at the Citadel, of his decision to keep looking.

"So (Novak) asked me if he could send my tape to his best friend at the Citadel," said Howard, who will play small forward in college.

Novak's best friend was Conroy. He was interested enough to offer Howard an official visit, something Howard's father calls "divine intervention."

For Howard, who plans on studying business, it's a perfect ending to his high school career. But he knows the Citadel will need to revamp its program after going 10-20 overall and 1-14 in the Southern Conference.

"It's where God wants me to be; it's his plan for my life," Howard said. "Going to the Citadel is not the end of basketball — it's the beginning. Getting there is not enough. Now it's time for me to prove something."

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ard received unspecified disciplinary action for nearly a week in December after a locker room incident.

Despite that, Howard led Citrus County for the second consecutive season with an 18-point, 10-rebound average and was selected to the Class 4A Florida Sports Writers Association's third team.

The college offers began to trickle in, but Howard wasn't sure what he wanted. Finding the perfect fit — a glass cleat or high top — proved difficult. Dartmouth College was interested for Division III football. Miami told him he could be a preferred walk-on for its Division I basketball team.

Howard said other Division II programs, such as University of Tampa, Anderson University (S.C.), Pfeiffer University (N.C.) and North Alabama, made him

basketball offers.

So Howard, an honors student, and his father prepared a professional kit, including video tapes from his games, a resume and other information and sent it to more than 50 universities.

Though playing football took time away from basketball, it increased Howard's strength, size, footwork and mobility. He could dunk, but also sink a 3-pointer with less than four seconds to play to send a game against Wildwood into overtime.

It was exactly what new Citadel coach Ed Conroy said he looks for in his players, specifically players

who also play football. Conroy was "pleasantly surprised" to find Howard unsigned at the end of his senior season.

"But sooner or later the talent rises to the top, even from smaller areas," said Conroy, a 1989 Citadel graduate who most recently served as an assistant at Coastal Carolina. "It just takes a little longer to get noticed, but it usually pans out if you can play at that level."

Blanton helped push the issue by calling one of his steer-roping buddies and sending his grandson's recruiting DVD. Blanton's friend knew the athletic director at

Times photo — RON THOMPSON

Casual

Distinctive P

