

# ‘The Opportunity to Do the Things We Love’

*Celebrating the 40th anniversary of Title IX.*

*By Robin L. Flanigan*



**J**ANE POSSEE FOUND HERSELF IN UNFAMILIAR TERRITORY in 1975. A graduate of the all-female Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, N.Y., Possee had arrived to coach women’s athletics at Rochester, a campus where the male-to-female ratio was 2-to-1.

Male athletes had easy access for five to six practices a week in the alumni gym, which boasted the Palestra, an indoor track, and a field house, while the women generally practiced just three times a week with part-time coaches in Spurrier Gym—with wooden backboards, no bleachers for spectators, and no scoreboard.

Now the associate director of athletics and recreation at Rochester, Possee had long recognized the role that athletics could play in the lives of students. An athlete since high school, she had played basketball, field hockey, lacrosse, and badminton at Skidmore.

Hired to coach the Yellowjackets women’s basketball and women’s field hockey teams, she started the women’s lacrosse team as well.

As she did so, she began to ask for changes.

“Maybe I was a little upstart, but I had no issues raising those questions as standards of what women should have because that’s all I knew,” says Possee, who also taught optional physical education classes. “I don’t think anyone was necessarily keeping anything from us on purpose. I just don’t think they completely envisioned what it entailed to provide for a women’s program.”

Over the past four decades, much has changed at Rochester and other campuses when it comes to athletic opportunities, thanks to leaders like Possee. Some changes were small—a few of Possee’s early requests included a scoreboard and glass basketball backboards for Spurrier Gym and pregame training tables for the women, support that the men had long had. *Continued on page 38*

## Title Team

We spotlight just a few of the Yellowjackets who have helped transform women's athletics since the enactment of Title IX in 1972. PROFILES BY ROBIN L. FLANIGAN



**CAREER CATALYST:** A member of the first women's track and field team in the late 1970s and later a coach of several Rochester Hall of Famers, Blackett says the training regimen helped shape her career as a nationally recognized sports administrator.

## 'Pivotal Part of my Existence in College'

JACQUELINE BLACKETT '81

Not an athlete in high school, Jacqueline Blackett, a three-time MVP in track and field while at Rochester, developed a deep interest in the sport after a girlfriend asked for some company at an informational meeting the first week of their freshman year.

"We end up in this little room and there are only guys in there," says Blackett. "You can imagine their faces."

Mainly because they'd wound up in the men's locker room, but also because, though they hadn't been aware of it, there was only a men's team at the time. Coach Tim Hale did, however, under no University mandate, offer to have them join the few women who liked to work out with the team.

"That's how my love for track and field was born," says Blackett, now senior associate athletics director and a senior administrator at Columbia University. "Without him, I would not have had a track and field career."

A year later, in 1978, with even more interest from other female classmates, Blackett became part of Rochester's first women's track and field team.

"It was the pivotal part of my existence in college," she says. "The skill sets you learn from being an athlete are immeasurable. You have the ability to be quantitative, to overcome adversity, to think and work in a team setting, and to look at problems from a much more holistic point of view. It was pretty much the catalyst for the adult I would become."

Blackett, who coached the women's track and field and cross country teams at the University from 1983 to 1989, feels honored to have trained almost every women's track and field star in Rochester's Athletic Hall of Fame. In 2009, she was one of eight women named Administrator of the Year by the National Association of Collegiate Women Athletics Administrators.

Blackett no longer runs for exercise ("I loved competing, but I never liked training," she admits), but the self-described introvert looks back fondly at how that training helped shape the decisions she made afterward both personally and professionally.

"When you belong to something, it builds confidence," she says. "And when you're confident, you don't hold back on pursuing things. It just increases the ways in which you can be bold."



## 'My Greatest Joy Back Then'

PATTY RUPP HODGE '87, '91M (MD)

Her parents put her in swimming lessons as a small child because they owned a summer cottage on a lake and didn't want her to drown. Patty Rupp Hodge would go on to become an 11-time All-American who won 13 New York State championships, held 15 Rochester records, and become known as one of the finest swimmers in the University's history.

Hodge remembers having been a mediocre high school swimmer who, once at Rochester, was taught by coach Pat Skehan to focus on technique before grinding out yardage, an atypical philosophy in those days. She trained six days a week in the pool, sometimes twice a day, worked out with weights, and attended meets on weekends.

"I always looked forward to practice, which made college even more fun than it would've been otherwise," says the Rochester Athletic Hall of Famer. "I loved the exercise, the camaraderie, the competitive aspects, and the attempts to achieve something positive. Being on the swim team was my greatest joy back then, and I was really happy to have that opportunity."

On the competitive circuit since the age of nine, Hodge continues to compete—her team is the Great Bay Masters—to stay physically fit. "I developed rheumatoid arthritis about seven years ago and I'm convinced swimming helps keep my joints in as good of a condition as possible," she says. She trains mostly by herself, though, given a busy schedule that includes raising two sons and practicing as a physician specializing in infectious diseases.

She runs the infection control program at Frisbie Memorial Hospital in Rochester, N.H., and is medical director of the hospital's Center for Wound Care and Hyperbaric Medicine.

Hodge makes sure to snag some pool time several mornings a week at the University of New Hampshire, five minutes from her home. "It's the only personal time I truly have," she says.

Outside of work, she spends eight to 10 hours a week coaching her boys' swim team, with the hope that her sons, now in the fifth and seventh grades, will have the chance to swim on a college team someday.

"I wanted to be the best swimmer I could, and I felt that Rochester brought that out in me," she says. "Now I'm putting my energy into letting my kids have a chance at the sport."



**DECORATED DOCTOR:** One of Rochester's most decorated swimmers, Hodge continues to compete in the pool—in addition to coaching her sons' swim team and practicing as a physician.



*Continued from page 36* But powered by their sense of fair play and backed by Title IX, a 1972 federal law, Possee and other pioneering sports administrators have seen remarkable changes when it comes to the equitable distribution of athletic resources at universities since the early 1970s.

Celebrating its 40th anniversary this year, Title IX, an amendment to federal education law that doesn't even mention the words "athletics" or "sports," has become best known for opening doors to athletic opportunities for female students. Signed in June 1972 by President Richard Nixon, the first section of the landmark

legislation reads: "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any educational program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance."

Intended to ban sexual discrimination in most federally funded educational programs, the law has transformed women's athletics, a transformation that can be seen at Rochester. In 2012, the undergraduate enrollment is evenly divided among men and women, Rochester has 12 varsity women's teams—one more than the number of varsity men's teams—and the Yellowjackets regularly

## 'A Great Training Ground'

ELIZABETH ARENDT '75, '79M (MD), '84M (RES)

One of the first things Elizabeth Arendt did as a Rochester student was tell the athletic department she wanted to play volleyball. There was no team, but she was encouraged to take a physical education class that taught the sport.

"The first day I was there, the instructor called me over and said, 'What are you doing in this class? This is to learn to play,'" recalls Arendt, who'd been on a volleyball team in high school. "I told her that I didn't care, that I just wanted to play. She said, 'Why don't you help me teach?'"

By the second semester, Arendt was running intramurals and refereeing, experiences that made her instrumental in forming a women's volleyball team in 1972, her junior year. "I benefitted from being at the right place at the right time," she says.

When she complained that men had access to the training room and the services of an athletic trainer, while women did not, she was tapped to be the University's first athletic trainer for women. This led the way to coed medical services, including a coed training room. By the end of her senior year, she was putting therapeutic tape on basketball players and reading about an emerging field called sports medicine. Already pre-med, she decided to pursue a career in orthopaedic surgery.

Arendt, a member of the Rochester Athletic Hall of Fame, is now an orthopaedic surgeon, professor of medicine at the University of Minnesota, and sports medicine advisor to Big Ten and national committees. She credits athletics with preparing her for the workplace. "It's a great training ground for cooperation and multitasking, and a great way to blow off steam and unite for a common cause," she explains. "If we don't learn those skills as kids and young adults, it's harder to learn later."

A 1975 recipient of the Merle Spurrier Award for contributions to women's sports, Arendt feels a sense of pride that she was able to be part of a generation of women who helped put the printed words of Title IX into action.

"Being an athlete gave me confidence in my ability, and the belief that every ability has a role to play," she says. "This is not about trying to be equal to men. It's about having the opportunity to do the things we love."



**CAREER LEADER:** A founder of the women's volleyball team in the early 1970s, Arendt also became the first athletic trainer for women, an early introduction to her future career in orthopaedic surgery.



compete for national titles in NCAA Division III athletics.

George VanderZwaag, the University's director of athletics and recreation, says Title IX has been a guidepost for much more than decisions about how to field teams or develop athletics programs.

"Obviously we have to meet the letter of the law, but the larger goals of gender equity are much more important than that, and at the end of the day we're trying to do the right thing by our students," he says. "What sets us apart from many other institutions in this country is that we're running an educationally purposeful athletics program, not a commercial entertainment enterprise."

The changes that resulted from Title IX "clearly allowed our women to grow personally, compete at a very high level, and push themselves to be strong leaders and teammates," says Possee, who was part of the New York State chapter of the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women, which at the national level was the equivalent of the NCAA for men. She served in that role until the NCAA took over the AIAW in 1982, when she continued to participate on several championship committees within the NCAA.

By that time, the alumni gym was being used by both genders for practice, and men's and women's teams started traveling together



## 'Helped Form My Thinking'

JODY LAVIN PATRICK '82

The youngest of nine, Jody Lavin Patrick often played basketball with her brothers. She joined her first basketball team in elementary school, then tried out for the boys' team as a high school freshman because there was no other option. She made the first cut before administrators announced that they would, in fact, form a team for girls.

Two years later, she watched the first women's U.S. Olympic basketball team practice at Rochester—on the same court that would later be instrumental in a journey that would also take her to the Rochester Athletic Hall of Fame.

"I had a chance to see that the University cared about women's sports, and to me, that was a pretty big statement," says Patrick, named NCAA Division III Player of the Year in 1982 and a former CoSIDA Academic All-American. She's now the physical education teacher and head coach of girls' varsity basketball at the private Flint Hill School in Oakton, Va.

When Patrick arrived at Rochester in 1978, she found the supportive athletic department she'd been anticipating. The shooting guard and three-year captain scored 2,000 points for the women's basketball team—landing herself among the nation's leaders in scoring as a senior—and set 14 school records.

"To be a healthy student, I needed to be a healthy athlete," says Patrick, who still plays basketball informally with several women from church. "The sport helped form my thinking when it came to organization, time management, and forging friendships. I just felt good about myself." And she's proud that her son and daughter have discovered the same positive effects as college-level athletes.

Patrick's career highlights include serving on the USA Basketball Development System and being tapped in 2004 as one of eight coaches to participate in the USA Basketball Women's Youth Development Festival. These days, she works as a TV and radio analyst, and as sports director of a summer camp at her current school.

She talks often with her female athletes about the importance of Title IX, and asks them to share their own research on the legislation.

"I coach with a passion, with a fire, because I want the girls to understand that when you really want something, you have to go after it," she says. "We have to honor the women who came before us."

to out-of-town games. The 1980s also brought a tremendous shift in attitude toward women's athletics, says Terry Gurnett '77, associate director for advancement for athletics and recreation, who coached women's soccer from 1977 to 2010.

The players on his early teams had no exposure to female role models in their sport. When the women won the inaugural women's Division III title in 1986 and came home as champions again in 1987, they earned a level of interest and respect they'd never known before.

"It was a great awakening," says Gurnett, a former Yellowjacket



**COACHING ADVICE:** "I coach with a passion, with a fire, because I want the girls to understand that when you really want something, you have to go after it," says Lavin, the 1982 Division III Player of the Year.



soccer player himself who finished as the winningest women's soccer coach in Division III history, and as the third winningest coach in all divisions. As more women pursued athletic opportunities, female and male athletes were quick to realize that "it was OK for women to get out there and sweat and compete."

Gurnett says that for Rochester, offering ample opportunities for women athletes has been a matter of economics as well. Increasingly, female students won't consider colleges or universities that have an inadequate number of sports teams to choose from.

While Title IX has brought about historic changes, it has not

# 'Couldn't Imagine Not Being Involved'

MARTHA WINTER MCKENNA '90, '95W (MAS)

Martha Winter McKenna grew up listening to her mother and aunts lament the lack of athletic opportunities in their day.

"It seemed like a world apart compared to what I was living," says the former four-year standout for the Yellowjackets soccer team as a sweeper and forward. "We won two national championships at Rochester, and the University built up our achievements so much. I couldn't imagine not being involved in a sport in college."

The 1986 University Athletic Association Player of the Year and All-American found herself with less free time and better grades during the soccer season, and part of an immediate social group and support system. She later was inducted into the Rochester Athletic Hall of Fame.

Over the years, McKenna has been a school counselor and soccer coach for the Stormers Soccer Club, a travel soccer team based in the Rochester suburb of Brighton, where she lives. (As a coach, she embraced advice she once heard from renowned soccer coach Anson Dorrance, which was to teach girls to "keep score and play to win.")

With two boys and two girls, she balances time at home with her work as a part-time counselor. She encourages her children to be active in sports, to build a sense of self-esteem that can carry over into other areas of their lives. But she finds it disconcerting that her daughters—and even women her age—don't fully appreciate what Title IX has meant for female athletes.

"We weren't raised to realize enough that this was an opportunity," she says. "It shouldn't have been just a given."



**LIFE COACH:** The 1986 UAA Player of the Year in soccer, McKenna encourages her children to be active in sports as a way of building self-esteem that carries into other areas of their lives.

McKenna has never taken a break from her favorite sport. This fall, when not attending her own children's soccer games, she can be found playing one or two games a week in women's leagues in the Rochester-area towns of Penfield and Pittsford, "and when people talk me into another league here and there."

"My poor neighbors can still find me juggling and dribbling around my yard, with or without my kids," says McKenna, who'd just returned from a run for an interview.

"It's a little daunting to imagine my life without sports," she admits. "People think of me as athletic and I beam. I really appreciate being considered that way. Maybe it's not important for other people, but it's something I really value."



been without controversy. The legislation has been criticized nationally in some quarters for contributing to a reduction in programs for male athletes as some universities and colleges work to achieve equity.

Colleen Doyle '09W (EdD), a former Rochester women's lacrosse and field hockey coach who specializes in the study of Title IX as a faculty member at SUNY Brockport, says the law has also had its share of "scary times" when advocates have had to fend off efforts to weaken its provisions or its enforcement.

"I want to make it quite clear that women have had to fight for

every right that we have," Doyle says.

But as VanderZwaag sees it, Title IX has been "a huge success story" and a critical tool in bridging the gender gap in athletics. Even so, he acknowledges the challenge in going beyond the prescription of the law to capture its spirit.

"Frankly, it's a tough standard to meet because it's a moving target," he says. "We're always going to have to adapt. But if we want to do this well, we can't get too comfortable." **R**

*Robin L. Flanigan is a Rochester-based freelance writer.*