

Rutgers Oral History Archives Podcast
7. ROHA Spotlight of Marge Howes

[Audio excerpt from Marge Howes' interview] "Girls weren't allowed. I usually was the scorekeeper for my brother's teams."

[Audio excerpt from Marge Howes' interview] "Even in high school there was pressure that women didn't play sports."

This is the voice of Marge Howes. Howes was a pioneering athlete and collegiate coach and administrator who laid the foundation for women's athletics at Rutgers University and beyond in the era before Title IX. This episode will shine a spotlight on Howes, who was interviewed by Rutgers Professor of History Paul Clemens for the Rutgers Oral History Archives in 2012. I'm Kate Rizzi. Welcome to the Rutgers Oral History Archives Podcast.

[Music Intro]

This is a big year for women's athletics, nationally and locally. We're celebrating fifty years of Title IX. We're applauding the U.S. Women's National Soccer Team winning pay equity. At Rutgers, we're lauding the career of C. Vivian Stringer, the legendary women's basketball coach, who announced her retirement in 2022 after a 50-year career.

Stringer is a trailblazer: one of the first Black coaches in collegiate women's athletics and the first Black woman to take a team to the Final Four. She coached in the very first NCAA women's basketball championship in 1982. She is the first coach to take three different basketball programs to the Final Four—Cheyney State, Iowa and Rutgers. As the head coach of the Rutgers women's basketball team, she led the team to more than 500 wins and 17 NCAA Tournament appearances, including two Final Fours.

For Coach Stringer, her contemporaries and all that they built in the Title IX era, the groundwork had been laid by the athletes and coaches who came before them and competed at a time when women's sports were underdeveloped, underfunded and overlooked. Today's podcast will focus on Marge Howes, one of the early athletes and coaches who paved the way in the mid-20th century for women's collegiate athletic programs. Marge Howes started the intercollegiate basketball, field hockey and softball programs at Rutgers University's Douglass College. She served as the basketball chair for New Jersey and Connecticut and went on to become a Rutgers

Athletic Hall of Famer. As we recognize the strides made in women's sports under Title IX and the iconic career of Coach Stringer, let's take a look at a pioneer who grew up in her brothers' shadows, fought her way on to the court and field, and established programs for women at Rutgers that would eventually become big-time collegiate athletics.

Born in 1936 during the Great Depression, Marjorie Myers Howes grew up in Ohio in a little town near Cincinnati. Marge Howes had two brothers. Her father was a florist and her mother a homemaker.

Howes remembers when she was in sixth grade, her public school got their first physical education teacher, who encouraged her to pursue athletics.

[Audio excerpt from Marge Howes' interview] So I had a sports background. Back then we didn't have those games and TV. We went outside and played sports. My older brother taught me everything I knew. His "dumb sister" had to learn a hook shot, and so that's how I learned my sports. They played baseball on our backfield. We had a little basketball net. So, the school was rural, but believe it or not, back then, had a big emphasis on sports, even as an elementary school.

Howes considers herself fortunate that her father coached local baseball teams and, in fact, coached Pete Rose, a local player who went on to become the all-time Major League Baseball hits leader. Howes' father coached her in baseball, so that she could provide some competition for her brothers.

[Audio excerpt] I was very lucky. I went to a big high school in Cincinnati, and once again, very lucky, had an outstanding physical education teacher who coached basketball and softball. So I played those two sports in high school, and then I went on and played three varsity sports in college.

Howes played slow pitch softball and then fast pitch softball in college. In the summer, there was a local women's softball team, a touring team, a travel team, that tried to recruit Howes. Picture a bunch of barnstorming ballplayers, except these were women and it was circa 1950, so Howes' parents at first balked at the prospect of their daughter joining the team. They did give in, and Howes got the chance to play on the softball team. She says her mother never missed a game. Howes played infield, mainly second base, but she could play every position.

Howes also played basketball in high school. In modern professional basketball, there are slight differences between the men's and women's games: the size of the ball and the distance from the basket of the 3-point line. In college hoops, since 2021 men and women have played

with the 3-point line set at the international standard. When Howes began playing, it was a totally different game. It was six versus six, instead of five on five, as it is now. Dribbling was not allowed. This changed to a player being able to dribble two and later three times before passing. A player could only hold the ball for three seconds. Stealing the ball, termed "snatching," was prohibited. The court was divided into two zones, in which there would be three offensive players, called forwards, in the forward court, and three defensive players, guards, in the backcourt. Players could not cross the center-court line. There were no roving players even at this point.

Howes remembers how women were discouraged from playing sports:

[Audio excerpt] But even in high school there was pressure that women didn't play sports. So every time we played other teams, we'd call them "play days" in high school. We would go to other schools, but it was always a play day. But yet, my high school coach would coach us like we were, [in] my terminology, a varsity team.

Howes comments on the competition involved:

[Audio excerpt] We were supposed to be nice. [laughter] On the play days, we were supposed to be nice, and we always socialized afterwards, with little snacks. That was part of it. My high school coach, coached me the right way to play, but, it was not win, do or die. It was have fun.

During college, Howes commuted to the University of Cincinnati, which was twenty minutes away from her home. She majored in physical education and minored in health and biology. In addition to softball and basketball, she took up field hockey. In her future, she envisioned she would be a physical education teacher. This is what she recalls of her collegiate playing career:

[Audio excerpt] I went from season to season. Fall was field hockey. Winter was basketball. Spring was softball. But because I was very involved in what they called the Women's Athletic Association--I was president of that my senior year, I was involved in that all four years--I played a lot of sports. I was the only lady, I think at that time in school history, to shoot a perfect score in prone position on the rifle range. So I did lots of sports. I wasn't a dance major by any means. Social dance, yes. But modern dance, no. I played everything. Coed volleyball. You did that if you wanted to be a good teacher.

In college, Howes joined a sorority. This was a defining moment for her.

[Audio excerpt] The sorority, because of the value system and their purposes, gave me the confidence to be the leader that I became.

When Howes graduated, she received the C-Ring for Women's Leadership Award and also made the Dean's List. It was the encouragement from a female coach that led Howes to pursue a career in higher education.

[Audio excerpt] I decided, about my junior year, that I wanted to be a college teacher. It was my basketball coach at that time who told me I could do it and that I should do it. She really encouraged me to do it.

Even before graduating college, she landed her first job at Douglass College at Rutgers University in September 1958. The fact that Douglass was the women's college of Rutgers-New Brunswick did not enter her mind. She knew Rutgers because the University's president, Mason Gross, had been a TV personality on the shows *Think Fast* and *Two for the Money*. Howes moved East, and it would be more than forty years before she returned to her alma mater.

Howes taught in the Department of Health and Physical Education at Douglass, where there was an emphasis on health, dance and synchronized swimming. At that time at Douglass, there were no club sports and no varsity sports. Basketball was the first women's sport that Howes launched at Douglass.

[Audio excerpt] I guess it was inbred in me being a varsity athlete myself. I wanted to start a varsity program. I put a sign-up sheet on the bulletin board to get people to sign up--and back then, before all the wonderful gadgets, that's what you did. You put a sign up on the bulletin board, and because the department did have physical education majors, those were the first kids to sign up. But looking through all my memories, I found a piece of paper where my boss told me I could not call the team varsity. No way. It had to be extramural. So from that point on, the word varsity could never be used. I started an extramural basketball team.

It's important to note that official varsity sports for women at Rutgers University did not begin until 1974.

Howes coached two basketball teams; each team had six players. Basketball was popular, so there was no problem recruiting players. Women in her classes, along with non-phys. ed. majors, signed up to play. Field hockey was the second sport started by Howes, followed by softball. She remembers that there was a softball team for only four years, but the team never lost a game.

There was no women's track and field program. That would come later, in 1974, after Rutgers hired Sandra Petway, the first Black head coach at the University.

This is Howes' memory of how she recruited players:

[Audio excerpt] Because I was, after the first year, given more responsibilities because I guess they knew I was one of the few people on the staff who was actually good at team sports. So, as I started teaching more of the teachers and more of the classes, I would promote my teams through my classes because I wanted non-majors on the team too. And notes on the bulletin board. So it was just my personal talk, and then I convinced the players that they had to go out and recruit, too, their friends who they know that played sports in high school. That's what brought in a lot of kids--it was the phys. ed. teachers who brought in their friends who were interested in sports. I remember when I knew I needed a taller person on my basketball team, and I'm serious when I say I would just go around college and look up--and this is a true story. I finally saw a tall girl come into the gym. She went to Highland Park High School. I said, "Have you ever played basketball?" She said, "A little bit in high school." I said, "Do you like basketball?" She said, "I'm not very good." I said, "I really could use you on our basketball team." She didn't really want to play, but I convinced her to come to a practice, and she met the girls and she really liked them. I taught her how to shoot and she became one of my better players for her last two years.

For Howes, her teams were not under the aegis of the NCAA, the National Collegiate Athletic Association. Instead, it was the Division of Girls and Women's Sports, DGWS. Because of Howes' coaching reputation in basketball, she became the New Jersey basketball chair for DGWS. In 1962-'63, women's basketball rules changed to allow two players to rove the entire court. Howes led the transition in the state and taught coaches at colleges and high schools the new rules.

When the Douglass basketball and softball teams played games against other schools, there was no University-funded transportation. Coaches, friends and significant others drove the players. There were no locker rooms for female student-athletes. At home games for basketball, they played in the old Douglass gym, where there were no seats for spectators, only sideline seats for the teams. Softball and field hockey games were played on Antilles Field. Custodial staff would line the fields before the games. The softball team played on grass, without a backstop. After the games, the teams would have refreshments and socialize. The threadbare level of support for the women's programs stood in stark contrast to what existed for the men across town at Rutgers College: more athletic offerings; multiple levels, varsity, JV, freshman teams, within a given sport; and better-equipped facilities.

By 1963, the women's basketball team played at the Barn, where the Rutgers College men's basketball team played. As noted by Paul Clemens in his chapter of *Rutgers Since 1945*

that explores women's basketball, the women's team played in front of larger crowds than the "mediocre" men's team.

But, in the era before Title IX, the question of whether athletics was a proper arena for women still loomed large.

[Audio excerpt] I would say, "Winning is everything," but to me, it was how they played the game. I was a big stickler on sportsmanship. To me, it was how they played the game. If I saw any kind of poor sportsmanship or anger, they just sat there next to me on the bench. If they were lazy and didn't play like I knew they [could], they'd get pulled out. I did yell a lot, but it was not the yelling like you see today in women's sports. It was more correctional type things. I don't think I pressured them to win because back then, I knew there was a shadow over my shoulder, that I wasn't supposed to be winning. But how could you be a good coach if you don't coach to win? But if we lost, they didn't get in trouble. They didn't get chastised or screamed at or anything like that. The important thing for me is how well they played. If they lost and played well, they really heard praise from me and got applauded for that. If they won and played lousy, they heard about that too. That was the way I did things. Heaven forbid, their grades [were bad]-- their grades came first. I knew I wasn't supposed to be pressuring them.

Howes left Douglass in the mid-1960s. Her spouse had finished his Ph.D. at Rutgers and got a job in Connecticut.

[Audio excerpt] I wasn't asked back. That was the first thing. Had I stayed in NJ, I would not have had a job at Douglass because I was told I won too many games. The reasons for not being hired back is I won too many games, I put too much pressure on my kids to win, and the same sort of thing that hung over me the whole time: I treated it as a varsity program. It all had to do with my ability to coach these kids and how I treated them.

She became the basketball chair in Connecticut and, for years, was involved in officiating and training college coaches in basketball. She coached the women's basketball teams at Connecticut College for one year and then the University of Connecticut at Avery Point. While raising her three children, she coached all of their teams. Howes jokes that she drew the line at Pee Wee football and refused to coach.

Modern rules of women's basketball took effect just prior to the passage of Title IX. By 1966, there was unlimited dribbling allowed, and by the early 1970s, the game became five on five, with each player able to play on the entire court.

Howes comments on Title IX and the development of the modern game:

[Audio excerpt] Thank goodness for Title IX, allowing the women to play. Somebody once asked me if the women were as talented when I coached as they are now. Back then, the women didn't have the jump shot like the guys do, that the girls can do now. But I feel they were every bit as--actually, I did have one girl who could do [a jump shot]--I think they were just as talented. It's just that they had never been taught. That stupid three-on-one-side and three-on-the-other-side game, which some of them played in high school, thwarted their ability to be as good as they are now.

When the University of Connecticut women's basketball team led by Coach Geno Auriemma came to national prominence in the 1990s, Howes jumped at the chance to get involved. Howes had helped lay the foundation of women's collegiate basketball; she was certainly going to enjoy the game in its finest form. She remembers, with her son, watching UConn play:

[Audio excerpt] So we saw on TV where UConn was playing in a Final Four, I think it was in '94. My son said, "Look, mom. Look, they're playing the game the way you used to coach." That sort of brought me out of retirement. It's funny. This long story goes 360 [degrees], but their post player, Jamelle Elliott, was playing the game the way it should be played, and so I got really then involved with UConn women's basketball, and would just go to the games. Then I ended up working there as event staff, and helping the [Women's BB] office, doing player comp., etcetera, just so I could see the games, because you couldn't buy tickets because they were sold out.

Jamelle Elliott was a 4-year starter for the UConn Huskies. In 1995, Elliott's junior year, the team went undefeated and won the NCAA National Championship, the first of eleven in the program's iconic rise to become one of the best collegiate programs—men's and women's—ever. Elliott went on to become an assistant coach at UConn and then head coach of the women's basketball team at the University of Cincinnati, Howes' alma mater.

[Audio excerpt] What's really funny about this story is now Jamelle Elliott, who brought me out of retirement in '94, is now the women's basketball coach at the University of Cincinnati. Because I moved there in 2001. So now I'm helping her. Last year, I got the most valuable supporter for that program just because I'm always around and helping her, but that's a 360 story.

In 2012 and then again in 2016, Marge Howes won the award as the Most Valuable Supporter of the Bearcat's women's basketball program.

In 1997, Howes was inducted into the Rutgers Athletic Hall of Fame. The Hall of Fame recognizes Howes as a "pioneer in women's basketball," with "a vision to provide women with

intercollegiate athletic opportunities." Her Hall of Fame inscription reads: "Women's basketball today is a reflection of Howes' solo efforts in the sport nearly 40 years ago."

Ten years after Howes left Rutgers and two years after the passage of Title IX, Rutgers began the varsity women's basketball program and hired Rita Kay Thomas as the director of women's athletics. Theresa Grentz became the women's basketball head coach in 1976 and took the program to new heights. Rutgers tallied 20 or more wins in fourteen seasons under Grentz, a member of the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame and Women's Basketball Hall of Fame.

Coach Stringer took over the program in 1995, after Grentz left to coach at Illinois. She took the Scarlet Knights to the Final Four in 2000 and 2007. Notably, she led her team through the aftermath of Don Imus' racist comments in 2007, bringing to the forefront discussions of race and gender. A member of the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame and Women's Basketball Hall of Fame, Stringer has coached in the international arena as well. She won gold as an assistant coach for U.S. Women's Basketball at the Athens Olympics in 2004. Over the course of her over fifty-year career, Stringer has coached hundreds and hundreds of student-athletes. Her players have gone on to careers in the WNBA and in international basketball; many have gone on to careers as coaches.

In the years before Title IX provided opportunities for women to play sports, Howes' groundbreaking efforts led to the establishment of intercollegiate basketball, field hockey and softball programs at Douglass College of Rutgers University. Her legacy at Rutgers endures in the women's athletic programs at the college level and in opportunities for women coaches, officials and collegiate athletic administrators.

For all of Howes' accomplishments, this is what she is most proud of:

[Audio excerpt] The kids that they came to be. I like to think that I had a lot of input into, not just their lives as a collegian, but as a collegian athlete. What it meant to work hard and accomplish your goals, what it meant to be the best in your field as a phys. ed. teacher, had a lot to do with the value system that I tried to teach and gain friendships. I guess the most rewarding thing was seeing my students go on to such great success. Some went on to college teaching. Some just went on to high school teaching. Some went on to play those sports after they graduated. I still hear from many of them. A lot of it is just to see the great successful kids that they turned out to be.

This is the Rutgers Oral History Archives Podcast, and I am Kate Rizzi. Thank you for tuning in.

[Music Outro]

This podcast has been recorded in the Rutgers College Class of 1948 Sound booth at 1 Spring Street building of the Rutgers School of Arts and Sciences. The Rutgers Oral History Archives is an affiliated center of the Department of History. Visit the ROHA website at oralhistory.rutgers.edu. Follow ROHA @RUOralhistory on Facebook, Twitter, Soundcloud and Apple Podcasts. The interview of Marge Howes can be found in its entirety on the ROHA website. The interview was conducted by Dr. Paul Clemens in 2012. The interview of Rita Kay Thomas can also be found on the ROHA website. For more information about the history of women's athletics at Rutgers, see Paul Clemens' *Rutgers Since 1945: A History of the State University of New Jersey*, published by Rutgers University Press in 2015. This podcast was written, narrated and produced by Kate Rizzi. Fact checking was done by Isabella Kolic, Rutgers School of Arts and Sciences Class of 2021 and recipient of the Tom Kindre Oral History Legacy Award of the Rutgers Living History Society.

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