

Remembering Mary Jo Haverbeck, ‘Catalyst’ for Women’s Sports

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I’ll never forget how I felt when I showed up to cover the first really big event of my journalism career, the 1995 Women’s Final Four. I was a nervous wreck, and I was trying my hardest to hide it. I was pretty sure I was failing.

Then I ran into Mary Jo Haverbeck.

I’d barely arrived in the media room, so this was (A) a wild coincidence, or (B) the direct result of Mary Jo watching out for me. (Spoiler: The answer is B.) She was an associate sports information director for Penn State and part of the committee that planned the Final Four, and she must have had official duties to perform. But she smiled, asked about my flight, and said, “You need to meet some people.” And we were off.



Within a half hour, she’d introduced me to everyone on the NCAA committee, the sports information directors for three of the four teams, and Debbie White, who moderated the news conferences. By the time the official events started, I was at ease. I raised my hand, Debbie called on me, UConn coach Geno Auriemma answered my question.

I belonged. Thanks to Mary Jo.

That was the kind of thing **Mary Jo ’76g** did all the time. She forged connections, made people comfortable, and—this is not incidental—did both in a way that helped to bring the attention to women’s sports that she believed, passionately, they deserved.

When she died last month, at age 74, all of the obituaries called her a pioneer, and no wonder. This is quite a career:

First Penn State employee to promote the women’s sports program. Co-inventor of a box score for field hockey. Creator of the first newsletter—with computerized statistics—covering women’s basketball. Integral part of the first national women’s basketball poll, conducted by The Associated Press. Developer of Penn State’s first athletic department website. First woman inducted into the Hall of Fame of CoSIDA, the national organization for collegiate sports information directors.

Those aren't the kind of achievements that normally bring headlines—that don't show up in the box score, to use a phrase I bet Mary Jo would have appreciated—but without the work of her and other women like her behind the scenes, the headlines female athletes get today aren't possible. Says Rosa Gatti, a retired ESPN executive who got her start as an SID at Brown University in the 1970s: “Her impact is indelible. ... She was a driving force, a catalyst.”

Women's sports needed one. More than one, actually, and Mary Jo helped to take care of that, too.

When she started writing about and publicizing women's sports in the mid-1970s, press passes routinely included this condition: “No women or children in the press box.” At the annual CoSIDA convention, the handful of women attending didn't get nametags, because those were designed to fit only into a man's suit coat. Getting coverage of a female athlete in the local newspaper often meant writing the story yourself.

Mary Jo's master's thesis summed up the problem with a typical turn of phrase. The only women in the sports pages most days, she wrote, were female horses.

None of that stopped Mary Jo. “She had wisdom in how she engaged people who had different mindsets,” Gatti says. “She was able in a non-threatening way to engage those guys, and they had respect for her. She had a sense of humor.”

Joyce Aschenbrenner, who was the SID at Pitt during Mary Jo's early years, admired how Mary Jo's innate kindness sustained her even in the face of rampant sexism. “She was so accepted by everyone, she would appear not to be a threat. But she worked quietly behind the scenes to make sure there was equality and things were right, to make sure that people got a fair shake.”

Mary Jo was also savvy. When the Penn State women's lacrosse team was in the market for new uniforms, she suggested putting the name of the school on the front. When *Time* did a cover story on women's sports in 1978, the magazine used a photo of a Penn State lacrosse player. Instant national publicity. Combined with Mary Jo's efforts to beef up the statistics and rankings for women's sports, the coup, says Wisconsin's athletics website director, Tam Flarup, made her “a rock star.”

“She could see down the horizon line that this would bring credibility to women's sports, that the polls were something that everybody could understand,” Flarup says. “She was advocating for others to get on board. She was an original.”



Women's sports had a long way to go to get media attention. In 1980, when Rene Portland took over as Lady Lion basketball coach, the team had just stopped playing games in White Building. Portland's first preseason media day was held at mid-court in Rec Hall's South Gym with four people in attendance—Portland, Mary Jo, a *Collegian* reporter and John Dixon, who covered the team for the *Centre Daily Times*. Practice continued around them. “No radio,” Dixon wrote in an email. “No TV. Just MJ and two writers. Welcome to Big Time Basketball!”

The *CDT* gave the team coverage, but didn't pay Dixon's mileage when the Lady Lions were on the road. He drove anyway—with Mary Jo in tow. “MJ was patient enough,” Dixon wrote, “to not put any pressure to write the story on me so that we could get on the road.”

Slowly, that's how women's basketball found an audience.

“I knocked on doors to sell advertising for women's programs, and walked the streets talking to people, trying to get their support. I visited newspapers, TV, and radio stations. I wrote releases and made phone calls,” Mary Jo told **Cathy Bongiovi '87** for [a story about her receiving the CoSIDA Trailblazer award](#). “When they told me, ‘We don't have time or space to cover women's athletics,’ I just kept pitching good story ideas to them. I think people want to read interesting stories about athletes, whether it's a man playing basketball or a woman playing tennis.”

If there were a Mentoring Hall of Fame, Mary Jo would be in that, too. I'm a twig on Mary Jo's proverbial coaching tree, which would look like one of those giant Redwoods. Gatti says, “Mary Jo must have set the record for people mentored.”

Mary Jo's gift for making meaningful connections helped. But I bet her background did, too. Most of the women who entered the sports information profession in the 1970s did so immediately after graduating from college. Mary Jo, who graduated from the University of Delaware in 1961, had already taught sixth grade, done publicity for a bank and her alma mater, reported for radio stations in Wilmington and Philadelphia, then moved to England and produced and hosted a weekly BBC radio show, “An American in Merseyside.” (Wish I could find a clip!) Says Aschenbrenner, “She was older than the rest of us, a little more mature, had a few more life lessons.”

Bongiovi, now associate director of athletic communications at Temple, had never heard of sports information as a profession until she took a class—designed and taught by Mary Jo—as a Penn State senior. “The word trailblazer,” Bongiovi wrote in her CoSIDA piece, “isn't a strong enough word to describe the words, the actions, the career of Mary Jo Haverbeck.”

Sue Edson met Mary Jo at an Association for Women in Sports Media convention after she graduated from Syracuse in 1990, and Mary Jo helped her get her first sports information job—at her alma mater. In 1997, when Edson, now assistant athletic director for

communications, was promoted to sports information director, she called Mary Jo immediately after hanging up with her husband. “I couldn’t wait to share this news with her,” Edson says. “That’s how much she means to me.”

Mary Jo was also instrumental in forming a group, FAME, that provided more formal support for women in athletic communications and athletic administration. Spurred on by a *NCAA News* report that the number of women in the field were dropping, she brainstormed with Ann King, now director of athletic communications at The Sage Colleges, and other colleagues on an evening out at the CoSIDA convention—and then, laughing, took the piano player’s tip jar and walked around the restaurant/bar, saying, “We need funds to start a women’s mentoring group.”

It’s because of Mary Jo and women like her that by the time I tried out for the *Collegian* in 1988, it was unremarkable (although still unusual) that I chose the sports staff. Yet Mary Jo shunned the spotlight. When King was president of CoSIDA, she always got calls or emails from Mary Jo, who was nominating people—often women—for various awards. “She was always looking to honor other people,” Gatti says. “Not herself.”

Mary Jo’s influence spans generations. She retired from Penn State in 1999, but until just weeks before she died, she was still covering the Lady Lions for *Blue White Illustrated*. (My husband, BWI editor **Matt Herb ’87**, had worked with Mary Jo since his *Collegian* days and wrote this tribute.) Of course, she went out of her way to introduce herself to Katie McKenna, who’s covering the team for the *Collegian*. Katie learned so much that she walked into a meeting of our AWSM student chapter in December and said, “We have to invite Mary Jo to speak at a meeting. She’s amazing. She knows everything.”

That she did. Better yet, everything Mary Jo knew, she shared.

Lori Shontz, senior editor

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