Women’s Athletics: The Early Years

When the Wofford women’s basketball team traveled in 2004, players rode in a chartered bus and dressed in classy uniforms. They played in the same Southern Conference arenas and stayed in the same hotels as the men’s team.

What a difference a generation makes.

Although Wofford began admitting women resident students in 1976, it wasn’t until 1980-81 that the college fielded intercollegiate women’s athletics teams. In those early years, the men’s and women’s programs did not receive equal support or attention.

Karen Rhodes Cable ’82 was a pioneer women’s student-athlete at Wofford. “I had played ball all my life,” she recalled. “When I went to college, I didn’t think I wanted to play varsity sports. But during my freshman year, 1978-79, I began to miss competing.” Cable first looked into club sports because she remembered college brochures stating women’s athletics teams were being planned, but she found that none were yet available. As a result, she played with a fraternity’s intramural teams.

In 1979, Patricia Gainey was hired to direct the women’s athletics programs and to move the Terriers into varsity status by 1980-81. She coached both the volleyball and basketball teams through 1983-84.

Karen Weishuhn Harris ’83 was the captain for both the volleyball and basketball teams during her time at Wofford. She had received an academic scholarship, and basketball at the club and later intercollegiate level was an added attraction. “I was already coming to Wofford, so my attitude was, ‘I play ball. Do you offer it?’”

Meg Hunt ‘84, the first woman to receive a Wofford athletics scholarship, averaged 23 points in her first five games as a Terrier. Amy Harrison ‘85 was the only other scholarship player on the 1980-81 squad. Hunt and Harris both recalled some unusual challenges as well as initial resistance. “Nothing vicious was ever said to our faces,” says Hunt. “Any resistance we felt was much more subtle. Professors didn’t always want to let us out of lab for games or practice. And sometimes we would hear snide comments about our being women athletes.”

The most serious problem stemmed from the fact that there was only one full-sized court on campus, in Andrews Field House. The scheduling of it was so difficult that women often had to practice at 6 a.m. Hunt recalled having to work around the men’s practice and game schedule. “We even had to surrender the gym floor to the fencing team and intramural tournaments at times.”

“Once women entered Wofford,” she said, “there was more of a sense of inevitability [regarding athletics opportunities]. What I do recall was the sense that we were an afterthought—that Wofford would do this as cheaply and as simply as possible.”

Hunt recalled, “We had to sell programs at the football games to raise money to buy warm-up suits. We rode in vans rather than buses, and the food on road trips wasn’t great either. [A good meal was a box lunch with a
piece of chicken in it instead of a sandwich.] Sometimes we would forego food altogether on a shorter trip so we could have more money for food on the longer road trips."

Although the women endured less-than-attractive conditions, Hunt noted, "We never did think about quitting."

There were some students and faculty who actively supported the women in their new venture. Hunt recalled Dr. Dennis Wiseman, Dr. Lee Hagglund, Dr. Philip Racine and Dr. Deno Trakas coming out and scrimmaging with them, because the team did not have enough players for five-on-five practice sessions.

"I remember several varsity athletes, including James Blair, Mike Howard and Tim Renfro, who really supported us," said Hunt. "They would practice with us and come to our games. Only occasionally did we have to remind any of them that their role wasn’t to win, but to help us improve."

"We didn’t have depth, height or skill," concluded Cable of that 1980-81 squad. "Our center, Janet Nixon, was 5 feet, 8 inches, and she was a fashion model. Teams like Winthrop had players well over six feet tall. One of our teammates didn’t even play high school ball. She played church league. But we finished with a winning record."

Despite the many obstacles they faced, the 1980-81 women finished with a 12-10 record. In their sixth game of the season, Wofford and Converse met in athletics for the first time. Pam Parnell and Amy Harrison carried the team with a 27-point combined first-half scoring performance, and Hunt scored 15 second-half points as the Lady Terriers defeated the All-Stars 64-48.

Those first years had less tangible positive outcomes, added Harris. "I remember a lot of camaraderie, a lot of silliness," she said. Harris recalled that, as one home game approached, it became public that Winthrop intended to score 100 points on the Lady Terriers. Wofford held the Eagles to 90-odd points. The women received windbreakers as a reward. "Our uniforms that year were Wofford shorts and T-shirts from the bookstore, so getting windbreakers was a big deal."

The women’s volleyball team endured a similar beginning. Roberta Hurley Bigger ’81 played with Harris and Cable on the college’s first volleyball team, a club team, in 1979-80. The men’s basketball coach did not want to adjust his team’s practice schedule, so the women ended up practicing at 6 a.m.," recalled Bigger. "The only people who came to the games were friends and boyfriends." Still, she said, "It was fun to be one of the first women athletes."

—Sarah Ross Cohen ’88