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Carrying the torch

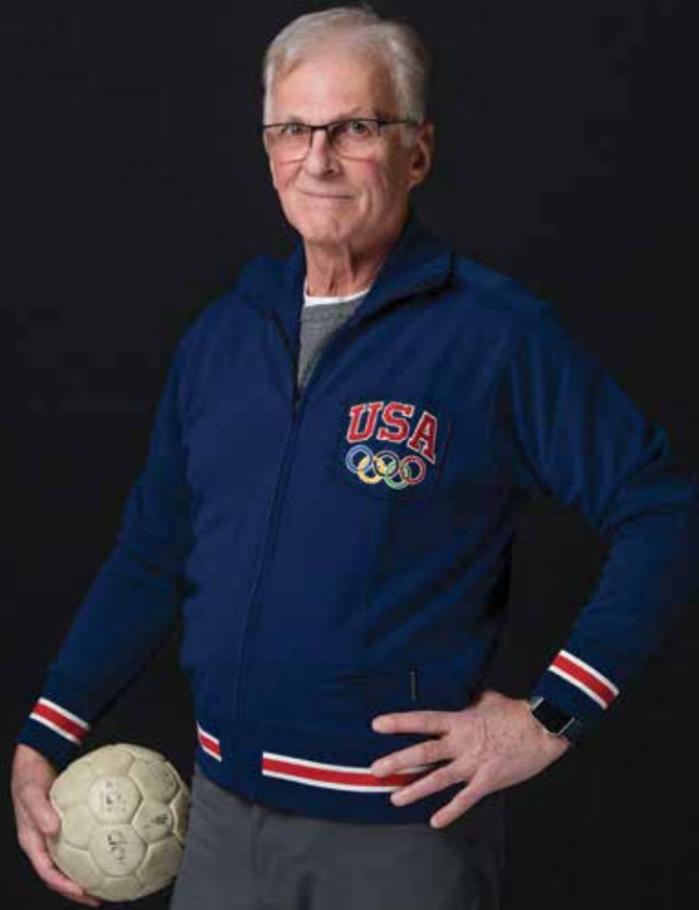
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Carrying the torch

Linfield Olympians and Paralympians through the decades

By Eric A. Howald

Annie Flood '25 couldn't move into her Linfield University residence at the beginning of the fall 2021 semester. But, as far as excuses go, the first-year student had an epic one. When her classmates were in orientation and eating their first meals in Dillin Hall, Flood was in Tokyo winning a gold medal with the U.S. sitting volleyball team at the Paralympic Games.

Flood was already among a small number of athletes – 613 to be exact – to compete for Team USA at the 2020 Games. But, when she stepped onto the McMinnville campus, she joined a more exclusive circle. Flood became one of four Linfield students or alumni to compete for Team USA on the global stage.

The following pages share stories of Wildcats who have participated in the Olympic and Paralympic Games, including a two-time medalist and two founding members of the U.S. national handball team.

Two Wildcats, two Olympiads and one unforgettable September day

A dark tunnel led to the field inside Munich's Olympiastadion. Roger Lewis Baker '68 braced himself as he stepped into the bright sunlight, but it was the wall of sound – cheering from an estimated 100,000 people – that set him on his heels.

"That yelling and screaming in the stadium was when it hit me. I was finally there," Baker said of the opening ceremonies of the 1972 Olympiad. "Like marrying my wife and the birth of my daughter, it was something I'll never forget."

Baker and future Linfield alumnus Kevin Serrapede '95 were about to be part of some of the most memorable moments in Olympic and Team USA's handball history. And it was only the first of two Olympic Games they competed in.

Starting a new sport

Serrapede was working his way through college as an assistant basketball coach at Adelphi University in New York in 1970. After a pick-up basketball game, a man named Laszlo Jurak approached him and asked what he was doing the next Friday night.

"I asked him what he had in mind. He told me to come to the gym and he would teach me handball," Serrapede said.

Jurak, it turned out, was an assistant coach on the budding U.S. national handball team and a former player on the 1956 Hungarian Olympic handball team. He was quietly enlisting local athletes for the first U.S. Olympic handball team roster.

LINFIELD'S TEAM USA MEMBERS (FROM TOP, L-R): Annie Flood '25, Kevin Serrapede '95, Roger Baker '68 and Jennifer (Snook) Butcher '95.



Photo by Disney General Entertainment content via Getty Images

HAVING A BALL: The U.S. men's handball team, including Roger Baker '68 (pictured wearing #6 on the left), competes against the Danish team at the 1972 Olympics.

Handball – a sport akin to basketball played with a smaller ball and a net shaped like a soccer goal – was still in its developing stages in the United States. It was added as an Olympic sport for the 1972 Munich Games, and Gen. William Westmoreland, who had seen handball played while commanding forces in Europe, and Peter Buehning, president of the United States Handball Federation, wanted an American team on the court for the inaugural competitions. To finish building the roster, Jurak's team received an influx of new talent from the U.S. Armed Forces.

Moving in the troops

Baker was one of the Army basketball players who joined the team. He had been an all-conference athlete on the Linfield basketball team under coach Ted Wilson. After earning his degree in business, the draft put him on a path toward Vietnam. He completed the U.S. Army's basic training and medic school before a conversation with the Army's basketball team coach earned him a new assignment on an elite team of athletes representing his base.

That eventually netted him an invitation to learn handball and join the forming U.S. team.

"There were probably guys on the bench in the Army team who were much more skilled than me, but they didn't have the mentality and work ethic I had learned from Coach Wilson," Baker said. "So many of the fundamentals of basketball carried over (to handball), but most of us knew nothing about the game."

The newly-minted U.S. national handball team benefited from trips to Europe before the Olympics to play elite club and national teams. On one such trip, Serrapede felt the team began coming into its own.

"In the last three games of the trip, we played the A and B rosters of the Romanian National Team, and we were able to hang with them," he said of playing against the three-time world champions. "That was when we realized we'd come a long way and were maybe worthy of a trip to the Olympics."

History in the making

Two of the matches from the Munich Games are still recognized as standouts in U.S. handball lore.

In only their second game of the 1972 Olympics, the relatively inexperienced Americans made it surprisingly competitive against the eventual gold medal-winning Yugoslavia team. The final score, 25-15, was hardly the blowout most at the tournament expected.

The stunner was a 22-20 victory over Spain, which was ranked in the top 10 in the world.

"When I talk with people in the sport, it still seems to be remembered as one of the U.S. team's biggest victories ever," Baker said of the win.

Games, interrupted

Two days before that game, Sept. 5, 1972, the Olympic festivities were overshadowed by politics and violence. That morning, eight Palestinian militants affiliated with a group known as Black September entered the Olympic Village, forced their way into the dorms where members of the Israeli national team were staying and demanded the release of Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails. The daylong standoff with German authorities resulted in the deaths of 10 athletes and two coaches along with five of the hostage-takers.

Serrapede was likely one of the first athletes to discover what was happening. Around 5 a.m., he awoke to banging on his door in the Olympic Village.

"We opened it, and all these Hungarian athletes were standing there," he said. "They were begging us to let them in and saying they were under attack."

The Hungarians had been housed next door to the Israeli athletes in the village.

Later that morning, Baker and other teammates were in their dorms when they heard about the attack, and like many others, they rushed to the scene.

"There were pictures that came out in the following weeks of one of the Palestinians with a machine gun on the second level of the dorms. I wasn't 50 yards away from him," Baker recalls. "If he hadn't had a mask on, we would have been able to see facial features."

The moment likely felt more intense for those watching it unfold on television with a running commentary, "But I simply couldn't believe it was happening," Baker said.

Serrapede said disappointment was as powerful as any fears he had when the attack was happening.

"It was incomprehensible," he recalls. "The Olympics were the symbol of the world coming together and people living peacefully side-by-side. What happened (in the attack) was the complete opposite."

The attack and fallout suspended competition for two days, but Baker said "the village felt like a military camp after Sept. 5."

Returning to action

Despite the tragedies, the U.S. handball team ended the Games on a relatively positive note. It finished in 14th place, a surprisingly positive outcome for a ragtag group of

basketball players figuring out a new-to-them sport.

Given the adrenaline spikes of the 1972 Games, Baker said the return trip to the 1976 Olympics in Montreal feels more like a footnote in his memory.

“We didn’t train nearly as intensely leading up to 1976,” Baker said. “A lot of the guys had wives or full families at that point. We’d meet once a month to practice for two days and go back home.”

In Montreal, though, it was Serrapede’s turn for a memorable moment during the opening ceremonies.

“We were standing out in the heat for hours and wearing full suits with shirts buttoned all the way up, ties on,” Serrapede said.

As Serrapede looked around the throng of athletes waiting to enter the stadium and hoping to find someone who had found a way around the dress code, he discovered he was standing next to John Thompson, the 6-foot-10-inch Georgetown University basketball coach and assistant coach with the 1976 men’s national team.

“He was suffering like the rest of us, but he came up with the idea to take off our ties and wave them to the crowd inside the stadium,” Serrapede said. “The word passed through the U.S. team and that’s exactly what we did.”

In the Montreal tournament, lack of a left-handed shooter put the team at a disadvantage.

“All they had to do was load up defense on the right side and we were shut out,” Baker said.

The U.S. team finished 0-5, including losses to eventual silver medalist Romania and bronze medalist Poland.

Sustaining legacies and friendships

Not long after the Montreal games, Serrapede made his way to Bend, lulled by his friendship with Baker and another Olympic teammate from McMinnville, John Abramson. When Serrapede decided to finish college, which had been sidelined by his Olympic journey, he chose Linfield’s online degree program to do it. He graduated with a business management degree in 1995, making good on a promise to his parents to finish his degree.

As time passed, members of the core Olympic handball team remained friends. Serrapede became the network’s correspondent, sending out an annual newsletter.

“At some point, we stopped talking about the good old days and handball news, and the newsletter was a way for everyone to keep up with the families,” Serrapede said.

Depending on health and pandemic cautions, there’s hope to meet in Munich in 2022 for the 50th anniversary of their first trip.

Baker credits the experience of competing together at the highest level with forging bonds that stood the test of time.

“I would put Linfield basketball right there with my Olympic experiences. You learn that not everything can be measured in dollars. The six or seven of us that still get together all know each other’s wives and families, and the kids all know each other. We’ve all been successful in our own ways and in those friendships,” said Baker, hesitating as he tried to find words to sum it all up.

“After 50 years, we’re still getting together.”

“Everything at that level was so big and grand”

Our perception of water – its depth, expectations of how it will feel and the potential dangers it poses – tends to be deeply rooted in our sense of sight.

Jennifer (Snook) Butcher ’95, a physical education teacher at the Washington State School for the Blind, said some of her students will never know what it’s like to immerse themselves in a pool or ocean because they simply cannot overcome the fear of water’s unknowns. Unlike most of her students, Butcher started swimming before her sight deteriorated.

“I think that’s what helped me at the Paralympics,” said Butcher, a two-time bronze medalist at the 2000 and 2004 Paralympic Games. “I knew how water felt and how swimming should feel before I was legally blind.”

Winning as a Wildcat

Butcher started swimming when she was 12 years old but credited the swimming coaches at Linfield with helping her achieve true competitiveness in the pool. Butcher and her Wildcat teammates competed in the NAIA National Championships all four years she was part of the team.

Butcher was diagnosed with Stargardt macular degeneration as a sophomore in high school. This rare genetic eye disease worsens over time, and as she graduated from Linfield with a degree in health education, Butcher reached the point of legal blindness.

“By the time I was done with college, I expected to be done with swimming,” she said. “I had to pay close attention to the sounds of other swimmers to stay in my lanes and develop a

sense of when to turn. I could no longer check my time on the clock. It became hard to win because I had to follow one of the other competitors to keep my bearings.”

She decided to focus on her career and earned a master’s degree in special education at Portland State University in 1998. She was working for the Washington State School for the Blind the following year before she’d even heard of the Paralympics, which offers top-level competition for athletes with disabilities worldwide.

Taking home the bronze

“A co-worker talked to me about it and knew I was a swimmer. If I was fast enough, he said, why wasn’t I doing it,” Butcher said. She didn’t disagree and started training.

Telling friends and family about her new dream was something of a double-edged sword. Many were excited, but there were some who were not aware of her past vision struggles or the extent to which her sight had declined.

“It wasn’t something I really talked about,” she said. “I think there were probably a lot of people who would wave to me while walking around the Linfield campus and thought I was being rude because I didn’t wave back.”

Meanwhile, Butcher was enjoying her career and had become a role model for students, many of whom knew she was on the cusp of a monumental opportunity. Her first Olympic trip, to the 2000 Paralympic Games in Sydney, included some of her most vivid memories as part of the national team.

While walking through the city, a group of children rushed the U.S. team and asked for autographs.

“We were told that the Paralympic Games in Australia were just as big, if not bigger, than the regular Olympics,” Butcher said.

Evolving her role in the sport

Butcher took third in the 100-meter freestyle in Sydney and said the sound of the national anthem playing for her achievement is a cherished memory.

“Everything at that level was so big and grand,” she said. “It was just amazing.”

When she returned stateside, students from the Washington State School for the Blind met her at the airport with signs and banners to welcome her home and celebrate her achievements.

Butcher competed again in the 2004 Paralympic Games in Athens and brought home the bronze medal in the 100-meter backstroke. This time on the podium, though, she realized that she was done with swimming competitively.

“I was 32 at the time and competing against swimmers much younger than me,” she said. “It wasn’t that I thought I was too good for that, but my new goal became to help train my students so one of them could be at the Paralympics one day. I wanted my participation in the games to evolve.”

Swimming is still the focus of many of her lessons in physical education, but the experience is different for each student.

“For a student who was born blind, we have to build trust in water,” she said. “Their fears become embedded over time, and some will never overcome them.”

For students with degenerative conditions, like Butcher’s, the loss of sight can mean the end of things many people will take for granted for all their lives. But Butcher is living proof that dreams, too, can be reincarnated.

“It can feel a lot like you are losing more than just your ability to see,” she said. “But it’s my role to teach them how to push through that because you never know when a big opportunity is around the corner.”



DOUBLE VISION: Jennifer (Snook) Butcher ’95 won the bronze medal at the 2000 Athens (pictured, back) and 2004 Sydney (pictured, front) Paralympic Games, making her Linfield’s most decorated Olympian or Paralympian.

PLAYING TO WIN: Annie Flood '25 prepares to serve in the Sept. 5 sitting volleyball match. Team USA defeated China 3-1 to claim gold.

Photo by Joe Kusumoto/U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee



Lessons from a gold medal day



Before heading into the gold medal match in sitting volleyball at the 2020 Paralympic Games in Tokyo, Annie Flood '25 had a few moments with fellow teammates who were also making their first trip to the games.

"We were all just in shock about what we were about to do," said Flood, a Salem native. "When I was on the podium and the anthem was playing, I couldn't have imagined everything I felt. I was so proud of myself and my team."

The U.S. national team beat China 3-1 in the gold medal round after losing to them in pool play. Flood was called up as an alternate mere weeks before the team was due in Japan.

Flood was born with fibular hemimelia in her right leg, a congenital limb deficiency that results in a shortened or non-existent femur. Her parents opted to have her foot amputated when she was three years old due to the difficulties she experienced trying to crawl and balance in infancy.

She began training with the national team in 2017, mostly from home in Salem. In August 2020, Flood moved to Oklahoma to be with the team full time. When the roster for the national

team was released in July 2021, she was named an alternate and returned to Salem.

After health problems sidelined another member of the team, Flood headed to Tokyo in late August.

"I was taken aback – nervous – but excited about what was to come in Tokyo," she said. "When I arrived, the play was intense."

Fortunately, Flood was able to pick up where she'd left off inside the team dynamic.

After winning gold, Flood's parents were her first phone call. They had arranged a backyard watch party for the final contest without telling her and had seen the whole thing with friends and family.

"They answered the phone, and I immediately started crying," Flood said. "They were so proud and happy for me. It was such a cool moment. It was the first time that they got to call me a gold medalist, and hearing it from them felt so good."

In addition to Paralympic gold, Flood brought back a lesson from Tokyo she doesn't expect to forget anytime soon.

"It's not to stop," she said. "Things can change so quickly, and you never know if you will be a part of a new plan. Always be ready for plans to change and for new ones to arise."

 Read more in Flood's own words at linfield.edu/magazine.

More Wildcat connections to the Games

- Sharon Shepherd '60 was a shot put and discus thrower who served as an alternate for the U.S. Track and Field Team in the 1960 Rome and 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games.
 - Scott Carnahan '73 served as business manager to the 1996 Team USA baseball team. The United States won a bronze medal that year in Atlanta.
 - Steven Hayes '79 qualified for the U.S. Olympic Track and Field Trials in the hammer throw. Unfortunately, by the time the trials were held, the U.S. had decided to boycott the 1980 Moscow Olympics.
 - Diana Palmer-Tessada '87 served as a U.S. Olympic Committee athletic trainer between 2006 and 2012.
 - Scott Brosius '88 is senior director of player development with USA Baseball. He served as manager for Team USA in 2019, when it was playing in Olympic qualifying tournaments.
 - Curt Heywood '94 won a gold medal in the Canadian Trials in the pole vault but did not end up attending the 1996 Games.
 - Stacy Michael-Miller '96 is the director of support and services for the USA National Swimming Team and co-leads the organization's anti-doping compliance efforts.
 - Mike Westphal '96 served on the coaching staff of the Ukrainian Swimming Team for the 2008 Beijing Olympics.
 - Elyssia Tsai '99 developed the Si Board, a progressive training and rehabilitation board, that is used at the USOPC's Chula Vista Elite Athlete Training Center.
 - Sarah Edstrom '07 served as Nike's senior product line manager and helped develop the women's Team USA bag for the 2022 Beijing Winter Games.
-  Read more about Stacy Michael-Miller '96 and Elyssia Tsai '99 at linfield.edu/magazine.