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## Faculty Scholarship in Action; Remembering Linfield's HERstory

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## Remembering Linfield's HERstory

### Unearthing the legacy of women's sports at Linfield

By Mercedes Rose

Professor Laura Kenow teaches a fall course titled Gender Issues in Education and Sport. In it, she asks students the question, "Did you realize we had an athletic director who was here for 32 years?" Students are often familiar with Ad Rutschman, former Linfield head football coach, baseball coach and athletic director. The latter role he served in for 25 years. Not a single time, Kenow says, has someone correctly identified Jane McIlroy, who served Linfield for more than three decades as a physical education professor, coach and women's athletic director.

Forty years after her retirement, McIlroy remains a significant figure not just in Linfield's history but on the national women's sports scene (read more about her on pages 38-41). She was the first woman to lead an athletic program in the nation and she coached Wildcat teams in an astounding five different sports

to conference titles, yet she is largely unknown on Linfield's campuses. Her story is one, among hundreds, that Kenow is working to share with the wider Linfield community.

### Piecing together an untold history

Kenow first found a gap in the athletic department's documented history in 1992, when she began coaching softball at Linfield and requested the records from previous seasons.

"I got the statistics for the year prior to my arrival and that was it," she said. "I asked, 'Well where's everything else?' and they said, 'We don't really have that,' and so I decided to fix that."

When Kenow started to dig, she found few archives of team statistics or rosters. For the vast majority of Linfield women's

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-Professor Laura Kenow

athletic programs, documentation didn't exist until the late 1980s.

"Before the 1980s, it varies by sport," she said. "Some have longer documented histories than others, most likely from the efforts of (individual) coaches."

Kenow started documenting the history of softball, and in the process, she stumbled across something larger – a desire to preserve the history of women's athletics, in general, at Linfield.

### Connecting to Title IX's anniversary

After sorting through boxes of materials from archives, basements and closets across campus, Kenow spent the spring 2022 semester on a sabbatical, traveling to other colleges to unearth more information.

The timing of her efforts, as it turns out, coincided with the 50th anniversary of the 1972 passage of Title IX, a federal law prohibiting sex-based discrimination in any school or educational program that receives federal funding.

"I didn't begin this sabbatical project with any intended connections to the anniversary of Title IX," she said. "I simply wanted to continue a project I had begun over 30 years ago. However, as I began preliminary work for my sabbatical, I became consciously aware that the 50th anniversary of Title IX was rapidly approaching. The timing was pretty remarkable."

She hopes to utilize Linfield's Title IX celebrations to inspire interest and the sharing of information, ultimately assembling an accessible archive of Linfield's women's sports past. To date, she has compiled a list of more than 250 Linfield women athletes

who competed from the 1920s through the mid-1980s. But she isn't done yet.

"Most of my work has focused on digging through archival documents to identify participants from the era of lost data," she said. "Over the summer, I hope to begin gathering some of the narrative histories from women who played in the '50s, '60s and '70s, to tell us what their experience was like and how that experience influenced what those women did later in life."

### Sharing the Wildcat women's story

So far, Kenow has interviewed five people. And boy (pun intended), does she have some stories to share already.

Sharon Shepherd '60, for example, became the first woman athlete to be enshrined in the Linfield Athletics Hall of Fame in 2001. Shepherd competed for the Wildcats in volleyball, swimming, softball, field hockey and basketball. Her best sport, though, was one she didn't compete in at Linfield.

"She actually held the U.S. record in women's shot put," Kenow said. "Most people don't know that Linfield had somebody of that caliber at that time. She barely missed qualifying for the '56 Olympic team."

Shepherd is one of many female athletes who called Linfield home in an era before their accomplishments were celebrated the way they would be today. While Kenow's sabbatical will end shortly, she admits that the work is nowhere near done.

"It can be overwhelming at times," she said. "Ever since I started, I can't tell you how many times I wake up at 2 a.m. thinking about how much there is to do. There is a ticking clock. People's memories fade, and some women on this list are deceased."

It's a passion project for Kenow, but it's one she's happy to share.

"The length of the list provides opportunities for future faculty-student collaborative research and to build a comprehensive archive of women's sports," she said. "In the end, I want to represent the history of women's athletics at Linfield. The stories have always been there; I am trying to create a way that they can be preserved and shared with the community."

### Get involved.

If you would like to share your Linfield women's athletic story with Kenow, she would love to hear it. Please email her at [lkenow@linfield.edu](mailto:lkenow@linfield.edu).