

SPORTS

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Retirement awaits for longtime girls sports advocate

As a young woman, Marie Sugiyama would take any game. Pickup softball? Sure. Field hockey? Yup. Even that weird thing they called girls basketball that wasn't really basketball? That game with 12 players on the court and rules about who could and who could not cross the half-court line?

Sure, Sugiyama said yes to those offers, too, but that version of basketball had to rankle. Sugiyama, 79, never did like people telling her or other women where they can go, what they can do, what line they can cross.

Sugiyama, who next month will retire as the commissioner of the North Bay League after 42



**KERRY
BENEFIELD**

years on the job, started her journey as a tomboy who liked to play whatever sport was out there. But she finished as a local hall of fame coach, athlete, administrator, teacher and champion for all young athletes, but especially female athletes.

"I just enjoyed sports," she said. "I used to go out and play recreational (games) with whoever was around,

most of the time with the guys. I thought all girls should have that opportunity."

In no small part because of Sugiyama, local girls do have that opportunity.

Sugiyama was, by all appearances, the perfect

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Marie Sugiyama, who is retiring as athletic commissioner for the North Bay League, coached girls basketball, volleyball, softball, gymnastics and badminton at Montgomery High School.

CHRISTOPHER CHUNG / The Press Democrat

"I was just a small cog in a big wheel. I happened to be the assistant commissioner at the time, so I was out there, but a lot of other people were involved in it."

MARIE SUGIYAMA, Montgomery High School, on her role following the passage of Title IX



Courtesy of Marie Sugiyama

Marie Sugiyama, front right, shown with her 1982 Montgomery High junior varsity girls basketball team, was co-athletic director at the high school for 23 years.

BENEFIELD: As a physical education teacher in the '60s, Sugiyama rallied girls to play sports

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person to come along just as the doors to athletics, especially high school and college athletics, began to creak at the hinges and inch open for girls — thanks to Title IX.

"She has a heart of gold, but she can be a pretty strong disciplinarian at times, too," said Russ Peterich, Sugiyama's colleague and co-athletic director at Montgomery High School for decades. "So when she talked about girls sports, people listened. She was so active as far as women's sports were concerned, it was hard to say no."

Sugiyama's life is steeped in perseverance.

When she was 6 years old living in Sebastopol, her family — her parents and seven siblings — were taken from their home and transported by train to Merced and then to Colorado. It was 1942 and the United States forced more than 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry — the vast majority of whom were U.S. citizens — into internment camps.

It would be four years before Sugiyama and her family came home.

"They didn't really tell me so much as a 6-year-old. They accepted it and did whatever we needed to do," she said of her parents and older siblings. "My father was really good about it afterward. He was one of those who said, 'You can't do anything about it now so move on with your life.' But he said, 'Don't forget about it.'"

Sugiyama didn't forget. For years, she has spoken of her family's experience to groups as part of the Sonoma County Japanese-American Citizens League.

But Sugiyama also moved on with her life. She graduated from Analy High, enrolled at Santa Rosa Junior College, all the while playing any sport she could. Trouble was, there were not many options.

"I think women were always kind of second-class citizens," she said.

She played on a recreational softball team and took up field hockey at SRJC under the guidance of Ernestine Smith. There was no conference, no league play — you lined up against whoever you could find, including high school squads. She also played that version of basketball that sounds so weird I hesitate to even call it basketball. When she transferred to Chico State, she ended up officiating more than playing because she had bills to pay.

So in 1966 when Sugiyama took a job at Montgomery High as a physical education teacher, she immediately took over the Girls Athletic Association on campus, a purely recreational, let-the-sweet-girls-perspire-a-little deal.

But Sugiyama rallied girls to participate. And in 1972, when Title IX passed, requiring gender equity for boys and girls in all educational (and athletic) programs receiving federal funding, Sugiyama rallied even harder.

Gym space, practice times, uniform budgets — these things had never been debated before. Girls played in the tiny girls' gym and that was that, right?

"We played all of our games in the small gym," she said of pre-Title IX friendlies. "When we had spectators we had to put chairs along the side. We didn't have a lot of spectators. We didn't even have too many parents coming."

Peterich, who describes Montgomery's campus as welcoming to the change, said it was, in part, Sugiyama's fortitude that made it so.



KENT PORTER / The Press Democrat file, 1999

Marie Sugiyama after she retired from her job as athletic director at Montgomery High.



Courtesy of Marie Sugiyama

Marie Sugiyama, shown in 1978, was a field hockey player into her 50s.

"She sure put a lot of time in putting her marbles in a row," Peterich said. "Marie is the type of person who is very organized. It's hard to argue with her because she's usually right."

Sugiyama said she was just in the right position to push the movement forward.

"I think it would have eventually happened. I was just a small cog in a big wheel," she said. "I happened to be the assistant commissioner at the time, so I was out there, but a lot of other people were involved in it."

Sugiyama went on to coach badminton and basketball, was the Vikings co-athletic director for 23 years and the NBL commissioner for 42 years.

And she remained a competitive field hockey player into her 50s. She has been inducted into the Athletic Hall of Fame at both Montgomery High and Santa Rosa Junior College.

That's a long time dedicated to athletics. Sugiyama said she's thankful for that.

"I think I have been very privileged to work in the sports field," she said.

And Sugiyama doesn't mind taking a walk down memory lane if it means prompting younger generations to learn that how things look now isn't how they have always been.

"The younger people don't realize those opportunities were not there for them in the early years," she said.

So, like her father told her, she has moved on with her life, but she will not forget.

She won't forget because of what sports mean to her and what she has seen them do for countless girls and boys.

"I think for some students, it gives them a place to be a part of something in school," she said. "I think for students who need structure, it's responsibility — you need to be at practice, you need to be at competitions on time."

And Sugiyama always knew girls need that just as much as boys do.

Back when she was a girl playing basketball, the rules said girls were different, that they couldn't play the game the boys did, that they couldn't cross the line. Sugiyama made sure they could.



Courtesy of Marie Sugiyama

Marie Sugiyama with two of her badminton players in 1991.

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RUSS PETERICH, longtime colleague of Marie Sugiyama at Montgomery High School

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