

50 Years of Nelson Fieldhouse

Robert Dunkelberger, 2005H and Ed Coar, 1978

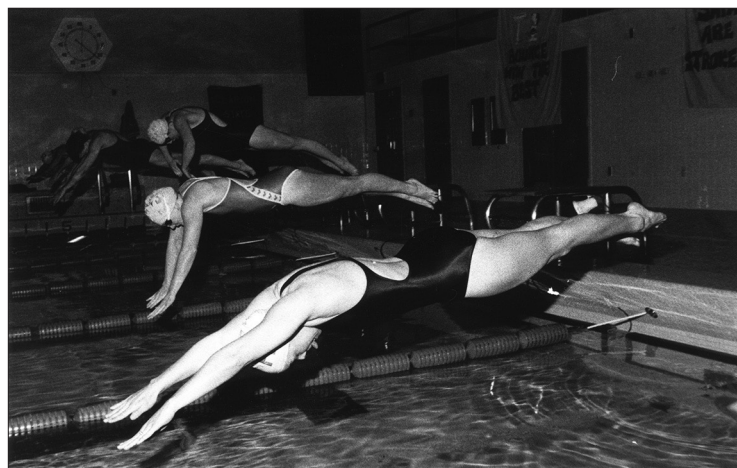


Throughout the 2022-23 basketball season, program inserts for each conference game will mark the 50th anniversary of the opening of the E. H. Nelson Fieldhouse. These inserts will feature various aspects of the histories of the five longest running sports housed by the fieldhouse: men's and women's basketball, men's and women's swimming, and wrestling. Today's installment features a history of women's swimming at Bloomsburg, its many All-Americans, and the tradition of excellence that has lasted for half a century.

The first varsity sports for women at Bloomsburg State College, field hockey and basketball, began play during the 1962-63 academic year. Over the next decade schedules were brief and there was little administrative support for the efforts of these student-athletes. It would not be until the passage of Title IX in 1972 that money and a firm commitment expanded athletic activities for women.

Two new sports were added in early 1973, the first of them swimming, followed by tennis. The inaugural event for the swim team took place at a tri-meet in State College on January 20 with Penn State and Madison College. The first meet in Nelson Fieldhouse was on February 7 versus Mansfield, the program's first varsity win, by a score of 61-54. Two more dual meets followed, wins over Lycoming College and on the road at Lehigh, as the Huskies concluded their first season under coach and physical education faculty member Jackie Adams with a record of 3-2.

The second season in early 1974 was once again a brief one of five meets, this time under coach Mary Lou Wagner. The team went 2-2-1 against a schedule that included new-



The start of another successful meet in Nelson Fieldhouse, 1983

comers Bucknell and Lock Haven. There was also a one-year change of home pool, as scheduling conflicts with the men moved competition to Centennial Gymnasium.

Longterm stability in coaching came to the program in 1974 with Bloomsburg's hiring of East Stroudsburg graduate Mary Gardner as a physical education instructor. In addition, the women's meets were moved back to Nelson. Gardner had young teams to start with and a record of 8-10 her first two seasons, before going 6-4 in 1976-77 and having the program's first All-American, Tina O'Hara.

It would not be until 1978-79 that the Huskies began reaching their potential. They had a perfect season at 10-0 and a fourth place finish at the conference championships, their highest yet. But it would be in the Association of Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (AIAW) championships that Husky swimmers would make a name for themselves nationally. The AIAW, founded in 1971, was at the time the governing body for women's collegiate athletics.

The 1979 small college championships were held in Reno, Nevada, and five Husky swimmers earned All-American status, Linda Smith in five events. The Huskies set a team record each time and finished 18th as a team. The next year in Meadville, Pennsylvania, at the AIAW Division III



Mary Gardner with her team at practice, 1980

championships, the team improved to a 10th place finish. Another five Husky All-Americans were crowned and Linda Smith was once more a five-time honoree.

With more talented swimmers coming into the program the future looked even brighter. In 1981 Bloomsburg began a run of 12 consecutive years finishing second in the PSAC tournament, every time behind the one team they could not defeat, Clarion. The Huskies then traveled to the AIAW championships in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, where they did better than ever. As a team they finished seventh and had six All-Americans, three (Linda Smith, Sue Brophy, and Cathy Sheridan) in five events, both individual and relays.

The 1982 season would mark the high point of the early years of women's swimming. The team went 9-1 in dual meets and returned to Meadville for what was the final AIAW championships. The Huskies were outstanding, as a still school-record ten, including nine swimmers and a diver, became All-Americans. They accomplished a first, winning all five relay events while setting two national records, and as a team Bloomsburg had its highest-ever ranking, finishing second in the nation. Leading the way was Gwen Cressman,

who earned honors in seven events, while Linda Smith, for the fourth consecutive year, had five. It was by any definition a dominant performance.

The team again went 9-1 in dual meets in 1983 but this time, because of a reorganization in women's athletics, Bloomsburg was now in the NCAA Division II. Success continued at this new level, even with much tougher competition, as a trip to Long Beach, California, proved. Eight more All-Americans were crowned, in the course of which ten school records were set, and earned the Huskies an 11th place team finish.

Mary Gardner would step down as coach in 1986 after 12 seasons to move into administration and was succeeded by Dave Rider. He continued the success of the program for 22 seasons, reached a high of eight All-Americans in 1990, and extended the run of consecutive winning seasons to 18 through 1993-94. Current coach Stu Marvin took over in 2008, with more wins and national honors. It is no wonder that the women's swimming program, with its success over the past 50 years, earned the nickname in the 1980s as the "Choice of Champions."



The nine returning All-Americans on the 1982-83 women's swimming team, from left: Sue Young, Gwen Cressman, Sue Boyer, Colleen Grimm, Angie Kramer, Cathy Sheridan, Kelly Reimert, Tina Klamut, and Sue Snedden.