More than 200 women participate in intercollegiate athletics at CUA. They may not have experienced the inequities for female athletes before the passage of Title IX in 1972, but they are forever shaped by the landmark legislation.

On an early November Sunday, Catholic University’s field hockey team takes the field for the second time in two days. It’s slightly warmer than the previous day’s blustery game, when the Cardinals defeated Susquehanna University. Bundled up fans seek out sun-soaked spots in the bleachers, at least until their source of warmth begins to dip behind Cardinal Stadium.

On the field, the young women run warm-up drills. They seem not to notice the chilly weather. On this day, they are focused on playing Drew University for their second consecutive Landmark Conference championship. The team forms a circle in the middle of the field and taps their sticks.

“It’s our time!” they yell.

Once the game is under way, spectators stomp their feet and rattle the bleachers. A group of male students, passing up NFL football to be at the game, chant “Let’s go, Cards!”

After a hard-fought first half, the game is tied 1-1. In the second half, the team scores two goals within five minutes. That will be enough for CUA. As the last seconds tick off the clock, fans stand and clap, calling out the names of friends and family members on the field. The players run to midfield, celebrating a 3-2 win with hugs, leaps into each other’s arms, championship T-shirts, and a brand-new trophy.

The road to this championship may have begun 40 years ago.

“IT’S OUR TIME!”
The Era of Girl Power

By Lisa Carroll

Senior Catherine Mirsky celebrates with her field hockey teammates after winning the conference championship in November.
Title IX is a Game-Changer

Approximately 215 women are participating in CUA intercollegiate athletics during the 2012-2013 academic year. Since fall 2011, women’s teams have won six Landmark Conference championships. The women’s basketball, field hockey, and lacrosse teams have made appearances in NCAA Division III national tournaments.

When women on these teams were born, Title IX had been in place for about 20 years. Passed by Congress in 1972, Title IX states that any school receiving government money cannot treat females and males differently because of their sex. Academic opportunities and organized sports for girls and young women expanded. During the 1971–1972 academic year, 29,977 women participated in college sports, according to the book Let Me Play: The Story of Title IX. Last academic year, there were 195,657, according to the NCAA.

Women on current CUA rosters grew up balancing academics and practices for sports, a variety of which were available to them. Unlike some generations before them, they had opportunities to attend summer sports camps and development programs. They played on traveling club teams and for their high schools. To them, being feminine never meant you couldn’t also play sports.

“This generation has grown up with WNBA games on TV. That was something I had never seen as a kid,” says Gia Cillizza, he women’s field hockey coach, who had been a goalie at Division I Miami University of Ohio in the late 1990s. “The girls today have such an easy entry to athletics. They have pink shorts and pink and green lacrosse and field hockey sticks. I wore George Brett spikes and an Ozie Smith glove for softball. These girls know Jennie Finch, Diana Taurasi, and Serena Williams, and they grew up in a time where you could put a bow in your hair and still be a bear on the field.”

Today, women’s sports programs can be found in almost every high school and college athletic program. Because of that, Meghan McDonogh, head women’s lacrosse coach, says that she thinks the importance of Title IX has been lost somewhat on the current generation of female athletes.

“Hands down, I wouldn’t be where I am without Title IX,” explains McDonogh, who holds a doctorate in sport administration. “It’s important for those girls to respect the past. If you don’t know what happened in the past, how can you continue into the future?”

The Dawn of Women’s Athletics at CUA

In 1961, at the age of 22, June Dowd came to Catholic University’s athletics department as its first full-time female employee to set up physical education and intramural programs for women. She had just earned a bachelor’s degree in physical education at Southern Connecticut State University.

Dowd taught CUA freshman and sophomore women, who at that time were required to take physical education. She set up a women’s intramural sports program, which often featured sororities competing against each other.

In 1961, during a meeting of women athletic administrators from local universities, the group proposed setting up competitions among the universities’ respective female athletes. The intercollegiate program eventually grew into the Metropolitan Intercollegiate Sports Association for Women.

“We took the best players from each sorority team as well as the best physical education students and asked them if they would like to join a varsity extramural team,” she explains. Beginning in the 1960s and early 1970s, the University fielded extramural teams in field hockey, volleyball, basketball, swimming, and tennis.

There wasn’t a lot of funding for these early teams, almost all of which were coached by Dowd. She would drive teams to games in her nine-person station wagon. The University supplied a dozen red tunics as uniforms that were shared by almost every female sports team.

Although Dowd had often been frustrated by a lack of interest from women in sports participation, she says that changed after Title IX. More women came to the University with athletic experience in high school and an interest in competing on the college level.

Dowd retired in 2008 after 47 years at the University, 34 of them as head women’s tennis coach. She witnessed many changes in women’s sports during that time: the eventual hiring of coaches for women’s extramural teams, the passage of Title IX, the NCAA’s decision to administer women’s sports in 1981, the expansion of women’s sports at CUA, and a shift in cultural attitudes toward women’s participation in athletics.

“When female former students come to me and introduce themselves as having been on a sports team, they often say those were the best years of their lives,” she explains. “That’s very rewarding to hear.”

Since 1981, when the Holy Cross in Kensington, Md., Repas played on a team that put together a winning streak that lasted several years. Many of her teammates earned scholarships to play at the collegiate level. She came to play at CUA in 1977, not long after the passage of Title IX.

Repas received a full athletic scholarship and was a four-year starter for the Cardinals. At that time, the University offered athletic scholarships. She was also the first woman at the school to score 1,000 career points and is the all-time leading rebounder. She was the first woman inducted into CUA’s Hall of Fame, of which her great-grandfather, grandfather, and great-uncle are members. Her daughter Michele was named CUA’s first-ever Capitol Athletic Conference Field Hockey Rookie of the Year.

Of her time at the University, Repas recalls, “We made friends from other CUA sports teams and they would come watch our games and we would watch theirs. The campus was very supportive of girls’ sports.”

During her senior year, Repas’ coach asked her if she was interested in playing professional basketball after graduation.

“Taught and said, ‘What?!’” she recalls. “It’s hard to think about, but I was then thinking ‘What am I going to do at 22?’ because I was the oldest girl in the group. But, Bob Talbot, if she could begin doing it full time. That transition made a difference. She had more time to plan practices, recruit, and focus on the needs of her team. With that came success. Since becoming a full-time coach, Cillizza’s teams have set win records, won conference championships, and advanced to the NCAA Tournament.

Coaching full time also allowed Cillizza to host summer camps, serve as a site director and coach for the United States Field Hockey Association Futures Program (which enables her to connect with potential local high school recruits), and observe national team training sessions, all in an effort to take her program to the next level.

Senior Catherine Mirsky, a nursing major from Chevy Chase, Md., is an accomplished field hockey player. She has been named to the All-Big Landmark Conference teams three times. She initially didn’t consider enrolling at CUA, since it was so close to home. Baseball Coach Ross Nani, a family friend, encouraged her to check out the University. During
“The girls today... have grown up in a time where you could put a bow in your hair and still be a beast on the field.”

Participation in service activities as teams and individuals is also a key component of the student-athlete experience. Athletes often chip in when the University hosts the Special Olympics D.C. each summer. In 2009, the women’s basketball team traveled to Ireland, where they held a clinic in partnership with Peace Hymen International, a program designed to unite children in divided communities through basketball.

Senior media studies major Laura Kinley, who runs cross country and track, traveled with Campus Ministry to Jamaica twice for mission trips, once as a service leader.

“People are always asking, ‘Is it sometimes hard with practices and homework to get into a weekly routine of service?’” Kinley explains. “During spring break, when I don’t have meets and practices, I get to experience this vacation of Christianity and serving others.”

Kinley has also made time for internships, volunteering in the White House mail room, CUA President’s Society, the Student-Athlete Advisory Committee, and academic advising with Campus Ministry to Jamaica twice for mission trips, once as a service leader.

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As director of the undergraduate degree in nursing and a liaison to the athletics department, Assistant Professor Teresa Walsh oversees several female student-athletes. They are among the best students in the program and serve as an example at the school, she says.

“You have to have a balance in life,” she explains. “Every thing just can’t be school. Everything just can’t be sports. They live that balance and they’re young, healthy women who want to be active. I think they can be role models for all of us.”

Off the Field

The same drive that pushes them on the field or court pushes student-athletes in the classroom. They are regularly recognized by the Landmark Conference for academic success. During the 2011–2012 academic year, 152 CUA student-athletes received Academic All-Conference Honors. As a faculty representative for athletics, Rev. John Beal, professor of canon law, can frequently be found in the stands or pacing the sidelines at women’s sporting events.

“One of the things that I have to do is make sure that all people participating are academically eligible,” he says. “That’s not a real problem here, partly because the coaches monitor it fairly carefully; but also because our athletes are aware that there aren’t pro scouts in the stands waiting to give them a scholarship.”

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