

SPORTS FEATURE

Lyons sees change in women's sports

By EDO VAN BELKOM

"It's hard to get people to realize that there is really good competition among women athletes," says Mary Lyons, women's athletic co-ordinator at York University.

Lyons, a Mississauga resident since 1972, should know. She's been at York administering to the needs of women's teams as well as their provincial and national governing bodies since 1967.

She says women's university sports don't always get the media attention they deserve, even though the quality of the programmes are at a high level.

There is also a problem securing money for women's teams because of the low profile they have at institutions across the country. "Men's football and hockey get more finances because they're more visible, and because they're more visible they get more finances," she said.

But despite the uphill battle, Lyons still enjoys the job she's had for the last 19 years and has fond memories of her early days at York. She says she has often been called "mother" by many of the athletes because they frequently turned to her in times of trouble.

She got the job in 1967 by answering an ad in the *Globe and Mail* and left her teaching job for the women's athletics program, at the then seven-year-old university. Even though she took a drop in pay at the time, she says she wanted to take on the challenge of building up the programme.

Lyons also coached the women's volleyball team in her first year and says the complexion of women's sports has changed dramatically over the last 20 years. In 1967, she says the level of competition didn't demand as much from those involved as it does today. Inter-varsity competition was more than recreational, but was still not as intense as it is today.

She attributes the rise in the level of competition to the quality of coaching, recruitment, and the commitment of the athletes. "I don't want to take anything away from the coaches at the time, but they just weren't as good as (the ones) we have today. It wasn't something that was just at York, it was the same wall all

across the board."

In 1967, no one was recruiting high school players; whoever was on campus and wanted to play, would play. Today's teams are hand-picked through a careful process of scouting and recruitment which is essential to fielding a competitive team.

Schedules have become more strenuous as well. Lyons says that in her first year a typical basketball season would comprise of 12 exhibition and season games, with just two practices a week. The same team today practices a minimum of four times a week and plays between 30 and 40 exhibition, regular-season and tournament games a year.

As the level of competition rose to new heights, the rivalries between schools also became more intense. "Back then, we thought nothing of sharing a bus to Sudbury with another university like University of Toronto, just to save a little money," she said. Today, she says the same might be possible but not without a lot of pressure.

Even uniforms have changed over the years from the cumbersome tunic, to shirts and shorts with increased mobility.

But of all her years at York she says the most busy and challenging have come in the last five or six years. Much of this is due to the number of women who want to play on men's teams in sports such as water polo. This year, there are two women at Ontario universities playing on men's water polo teams, something Lyons is not particularly pleased about.

"In water polo, only one or two women may be good enough to play (with the men) and that will satisfy them instead of developing a female team," she said.

There is also the reciprocal problem of men trying out for a women's team when a men's team is not offered. "This would probably reduce the number of opportunities for women if we allowed men to play because many men would probably be better."

Although Lyons is a staunch supporter of women's athletics, she says she has not been involved with women's sports in Mississauga because her university job takes up so much time, especially during the evening and on weekends. She is,

however, a member of the University Women's Club of Mississauga, an association of women graduates from various universities, and lists her hobbies as golf, bridge and knitting.

At York, Lyons' work ethic and dedication to women's athletics has garnered respect from her peers. York men's co-ordinator Dave Chambers has nothing but praise for Lyons.

"She's been a leader in women's athletics at the collegiate level in Canada," he said. "She's been at the forefront and certainly is very efficient and personable."

At 54, you might think Lyons wouldn't be thinking as far ahead as retirement, but even though she loves her job she says she'll give it up long before she reaches 65. "I want to retire while I can still have some fun," she said.

TIMES HAVE CHANGED: Ladies, do you remember those nasty tunics and bloomers? At right, Mary Lyons today.



SETTING UP FOR THE BLOCK: Two York opponents jump in unison to reject a Yeowoman spiker, while her teammates view the scene with a look of determination.

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