

MaryAnn Wehrheim



Tonight marks the latest, and perhaps biggest, stop on a memorable sports journey by **MaryAnn Wehrheim** that began half a century ago.

That's when Brien McMahon High School's first standout female basketball player made her debut. The year was 1965 and it was also the first year girls basketball became a varsity sport at the still fairly new high school on Highland Avenue.

Unfortunately, MaryAnn Forcellina, as she was still known back then, was already a senior and had only one season to display her talent on the hardwood. But what a one season it was, leading the 10-0 Lady Senators in scoring and rebounding. It was the start of what would be a long association between Wehrheim and Brien McMahon High School.

It actually began in the fall of 1960 when the new school opened. She was still in eighth grade and a student at Benjamin Franklin Junior High School (grades seven through nine back then). But because Franklin was undergoing renovations, Wehrheim spent that year at the new high school a few blocks away.

She officially enrolled at BMHS two years later as a sophomore in 1962-63, and it was two years later that Mary Kehoe, the future Hall of Fame coach and 1998 Old Timers honoree, formed the first varsity

girls basketball team. At the time, it was the only varsity sport for girls at McMahon.

Title IX, the federal law that assured gender equality in athletics, was still seven years away, and it would be nine years before girls basketball became part of the FCIAC. But McMahon's first team, led by the 5-foot-9 Wehrheim, compiled the best record in Fairfield County that inaugural season.

The Senators also provided plenty of excitement with three down-to-the-wire one-point victories, including a 29-28 win over Central Catholic, another first-year team from Norwalk. They also beat Darien by one point that season and nipped New Canaan 51-50 in the final game to complete its 10-0 campaign. McMahon also beat New Canaan 31-29 earlier in the season when Wehrheim hit a shot from half-court with four seconds left to win it.

While basketball was the only varsity sport at Brien McMahon that year, female athletes had what was known as 'Play Days' where a handful of schools congregated at one location and competed against one another a few times a year. This allowed Wehrheim the opportunity to display her all-around athletic talents in field hockey, volleyball, and softball. Her senior photo is on the wall right outside the gymnasium as the 1965 Female Career Athlete.

But Wehrheim's athletic career began even before she arrived at McMahon. At Ben Franklin Jr. High, she played basketball, volleyball, and softball on 'Play Days.' Then during the summer months, she stayed involved in sports by volunteering to work at a six-week sports camp held at a park that later became the Oak Hills golf course.

Those popular sports camps, incidentally, were coordinated and run by the late Sandy Weed Austin, the assistant supervisor of Health and Physical Education in Norwalk and Wehrheim's fellow Norwalk Old Timers honoree tonight. Weed also ran recreation basketball and softball leagues for girls, which Wehrheim played in during her high school years while also bowling in two leagues.

Following her graduation from McMahon in 1965, Wehrheim was married in 1966 and gave birth to two sons, Brian and David, in 1968 and '70, respectively. When they both started school, Wehrheim returned to Brien McMahon in 1976 to work part-time in the school's database program. She eventually became fulltime and remained at her alma mater in a number of positions for 38 years before officially retiring in January 2014.

Wehrheim also stayed close to the athletic scene at McMahon all those years. She worked crowd control at girls basketball and softball games, kept the official scorebook at home field hockey games, was a line judge at varsity and JV volleyball matches, and worked at the ticket table at football and basketball games. She even coached the junior varsity girls basketball team one season in the late 1970s.

When her sons played football at McMahon, Wehrheim became involved as an active member of the team's booster club, serving as president, vice president, and treasurer at different times during her 10 years.

Her involvement with Brien McMahon hasn't been limited to just athletics. Wehrheim was also a class advisor for eight years, headed graduation ceremonies, and organized the school's 50th year celebration in 2012. In addition, she has been involved with the BMHS Alumni Association since its inception and earlier this year was inducted into the school's alumni Hall of Fame.

Wehrheim's community involvement includes serving as a Eucharistic minister for 15 years at her church, where she also taught religion for four years. Besides their two sons, she and her husband Al have four grandchildren.