

ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

by Matt Breach



Joan (Manning) Ensign '64, Women's Basketball & Volleyball

A few years ago, while visiting campus for a class reunion, Joan Ensign caught her first glimpse of the McCarthy Athletic Center.

Ensign, née Manning, marveled at the gleaming facility and all of its contemporary amenities. She was even more stunned by the thousands of fans who turned out to watch, of all things, a basketball scrimmage.

"It was such a shock," she said. "You can't help but think about what it would have been like to play in a place like that in front of that many people."

Ensign graduated from Gonzaga in 1964, a time when women's sports, at least at the intercollegiate level, were just being developed on campus. Still, despite not having the luxury of playing in a state-of-the-art gymnasium, or even being afforded the same athletic opportunities as men for that matter, Ensign is forever grateful.

"I was so fortunate to be a part of that," said Ensign, who participated in basketball and volleyball. "It was pretty special for Gonzaga to have those opportunities."

Ensign currently resides in Morgan Hill, Calif., a bedroom community in the Silicon Valley about 25 miles south of San Jose. She has been married for 42 years to Merle Ensign, with whom she has three children, seven grandchildren and six great grandchildren.

"This day and age, it's something I'm proud of," she said, referring to her long-lasting marriage.

Ensign spent the majority of her childhood in Portland, Ore., before her family moved to California when she was 16 years old. She attended an all-girls school in Pasadena, where, unlike girls at many other high schools, she had the chance to participate in sports.

"I have always enjoyed sports," she said. "I have always liked being a part of teams — building the camaraderie and working with people."

Perhaps that is why, as a young child, she gravitated away from swimming and toward team sports.

"There is nothing like winning when you're part of a team," Ensign said. "The enthusiasm is just contagious. It's such a great feeling to be able to share that."

When she graduated from high school, Ensign could not resist the urge to return the Pacific Northwest. But that wasn't the only reason she chose Gonzaga.

"The ratio of boys to girls on campus was 2-to-1," she joked. "After being with a bunch of girls for all of high school, I was ready for something different, a little more exciting."

Ensign first stepped on Gonzaga's campus as a wide-eyed freshman in 1960. She said women's sports did not have much of a role on campus at that time, so she became a cheerleader.

It wasn't until her sophomore year, and the arrival of Marjorie Anderson, that women's sports really began to take shape on Gonzaga's campus.

Anderson began her career at GU in 1961, teaching physical education. But she is perhaps mostly fondly remembered as the "birth mother to women's athletics at Gonzaga."

In addition to intramurals, Anderson is responsible for creating intercollegiate basketball and volleyball teams for women at Gonzaga. She also served as the coach for all women's sports.

"In hindsight, I really appreciate what she did," Ensign said. "But I didn't realize the impact at the time."

Ensign was too busy enjoying all college had to offer.

"I felt like I was a part of it," she said. "I was a participant in the school, not just sports."

For the next three years, beginning with her sophomore season, Ensign participated in volleyball and basketball. She was even named captain of the basketball team her senior year.

At the time, the Gonzaga women's teams competed in the Pine League. The small cohort consisted of schools mostly in the Spokane area, including Whitworth and Eastern Washington State College, now known as Eastern Washington University. Holy Names College, based in Oakland, Calif., was also part of the league.

Since this was pre-Title IX, women's sports did not enjoy the same opportunities as the men's teams at Gonzaga — or any other school. Ensign and her teammates, for instance, had no locker rooms. They were



FEATURED PHOTOS

TOP: 1962-63 Volleyball team, Joan Manning center #4

MIDDLE: Joan (Manning) Ensign, class of 1964

2ND PAGE TOP: Joan (Manning) Ensign center with the 2011 Women's basketball team after game at Stanford.

2ND PAGE BOTTOM: 1962-62 Women's Basketball Team, Joan Manning center #6

Historical photos courtesy of Gonzaga Archives



also forced to wait for the men's teams to finish using the gymnasium before they could practice.

Additionally, Ensign's teams often drove themselves to games and tournaments, some as far away as Vancouver, Wash. None of the inequities, though, bothered Ensign.

"I think we felt lucky we had the opportunity to play," she said. "We didn't even realize what the boys had and what we didn't have."

Even the rules were different for women's sports. In basketball, for example, players, with the exception of a roamer, had to stay in the frontcourt. They also could not dribble more than twice before having to pass the ball. In volleyball, Ensign said, they were required to serve underhand.

"I was very fortunate to be at Gonzaga at that time," Ensign said. "Many of my friends attended colleges where there were no women's sports."

Title IX, which mandated equality for all women's athletics, was not enacted until 1972. It took many institutions much longer to attain even a semblance of compliance.

Ensign's teams played in Gonzaga Gymnasium, which was usually void of spectators for women's sports. The gym was located on the east end of the Administration Building, which is now called College Hall. Magnuson Theatre now occupies that space.

Ensign, who was a 5-foot-4 guard on the basketball team, said her teams lacked the size most of the opposition possessed.

"We were known as the dainty team," she said. "Most of the girls on the other teams were large women — at least larger than we were."

After graduating from Gonzaga in 1964 with a degree in English, Ensign pursued a teaching career. She taught elementary classes in Seattle, California and even Japan before quitting in the 1970s to raise her children.

Throughout the years, Ensign has never lost her passion for sports. She is an avid tennis player, competing in doubles competitions in the United States Tennis Association League, the country's largest recreational tennis league.

She also enjoys following the Gonzaga women's basketball team. She met members of the team in 2011 when they played at Stanford, but wishes they were on TV more often.

"Once again, we need Title IX," she joked. "They show the men on TV all the time, but not the women."

Ensign does not give much thought to the fact that she, along with her teammates and progressive coach, helped pioneer the advancement of women's sports at Gonzaga. She was just grateful for the chance to play, even if it wasn't in a cutting-edge facility in front of thousands of fans.

"Gonzaga was a good place to be," she said. "I take a lot of pride in being an alum of Gonzaga. But I don't think I've ever met anybody that wasn't proud to be from Gonzaga."

