

Fredina Iffert helped blaze trail for women athletes



Fredina, now Athletic Director at Penn State-Altoona Campus, won the National Racquetball Championship in 1988.

By Bob Kasun

As a young girl, Fredina Iffert dreamed about being a Rockette dancer and performing at Radio City Music Hall on Broadway.

At that age the thought of being one of the best women's racquetball players in the nation never crossed her mind.

Iffert, 36, practiced to be a dancer for 12 years, but her dream faded away when she didn't grow tall enough to become a Rockette. She stands a hair over 5-feet-2.

But 12 years of dancing lessons didn't go down the drain. Just like many football players who take ballet to improve their agility, the same was true for Iffert.

Iffert teamed agility and natural talent with desire to become one of the most accomplished female athletes from Blair County.

"I don't know how racquetball came so easy to me," Iffert said. "I guess I owe it all to my parents. They started me with dance lessons when I was three years old. So I think that has something to do with developing coordination when you're young. That (theory) carried out and this is the first racquet sport I ever played. I have played team sports, but this was fun."

Iffert was a late bloomer in the sport of racquetball. She started playing at the age of 28 when she had to teach a racquetball class at Penn State-Altoona Campus. Iffert, who learned the sport from reading a book, is presently the athletic director at Penn State-Altoona.

"It was a challenge because it was a new sport," Iffert said. "So it was interesting and once I had gotten on the court it was fun and enjoyable and easy to pick up."

Iffert's hustling, fearless style of play impressed many at her first tournament.

"I started playing regularly and then I played in a tournament in Johnstown," Iffert said. "I really didn't understand the game but I hustled like crazy and everyone was impressed. The Head (Sporting Company) representative was there and he confronted me after my first tournament and asked me if I would like to be a sponsored player. I told him I would have to think about it and I accepted."

In just eight years, Iffert has carved quite a name for herself. She won the

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prestigious North American women's masters tournament in New Mexico two years ago, and is the defending Pennsylvania women's singles champion in the 30-and-over age group.

Other accomplishments include two other women's state singles titles, two open doubles state titles, and two mixed doubles championships.

This past year, she was elected to the board of directors for the Pennsylvania Racquetball Association.

Iffert, who is married to Wally Iffert, had to overcome obstacles even before she played in the national tournament. A couple weeks before the tournament, Iffert's father, Frederick, passed away. Fredina was emotionally crushed.

"I did so well by surprise especially after the death of my father," said Fredina, who was named after her father. "It's ironic because he died on Mother's Day and I am such a family person. I didn't think I would be able to play, but I rose to the occasion. It would be tough to play that well again.

Iffert's mother, Mary Ingold, passed away when she was in high school.

At Altoona High School, Iffert played girls' basketball when the sport was in its growing stages. She admits that women's sports have come a long way.

"When I played basketball at Altoona it was a six-man team" Iffert said. "We

had one rover who played the middle and that was me. Women's sports have come so far even though they are pretty young. It is amazing the number of sports which are offered at the high school level.

After graduation from Altoona, she went on to Penn State-Altoona and, later, to the main campus. At University Park, Iffert played varsity softball and volleyball for two years.

"We just called her Fred at Penn State," said retired Penn State men's and women's coach Tom Tait. "She was just one of those athletes who had extra ability that you just didn't see those days.

"She had quickness and good jumping ability and such a great work ethic. Our first two years of the volleyball program at Penn State we worked on developing players. She is one who would lead the team in the drills and show the hard work to become an outstanding player."

Iffert, who in her spare time enjoys spending time with senior citizens of the area and taking up new sports like bocce, has been involved in a wide array of sports. From volleyball to softball to racquetball, Iffert has epitomized an all-around athlete.

"I love the idea that I can be a role model and I hope that I can be a good one." Iffert said. "Not only in the sport

physically, but for the proper attitude and how I am perceived by others."

Iffert feels she has a two-fold reason to be proud of her induction into the Blair County Hall of Fame.

The first is the honor itself, of being singled out by the community to be inducted into the Blair County Hall of Fame. Secondly, Iffert is pleased to represent the many fine women athletes in the area as the first woman inducted.

"It is just a great honor for me to be inducted into the Blair County Hall of Fame," Iffert said. "Women's sports in general have progressed so much and I'm glad to be a part of it. Women are playing more sports and receiving scholarships to play in college."

Iffert admitted that her initial reaction was one of surprise.

"I was just speechless when I got the call," Iffert said. "I was just taken back, I was wondering why me. I don't think I'm the normal type of athlete. I have a good time when I play sports and I do it for the joy of it.

"I've tried to be a role model and I don't know if I have or not. But women in athletics — it is a joy to see them and that is why I officiate volleyball. Not for the money, but the interaction with young female athletes that hopefully look at me and see the enthusiasm. I try to present a positive outlook and hope they continue in sports and it is not a turnoff."



Fredina (front, center) played varsity softball and volleyball at Penn State.