



Celebrating 50 Years of Title IX

50 For 50:

Women in Officiating



By Brad Hallier

It was 1990, and Fran Martin was coaching the El Dorado High School girls basketball team during the midseason Lady Wildcat Classic.

As Martin's team took the floor, she noticed something unique about the referee crew - it was all female.

Among those in stripes that night was Meredith Grusing, who recruited Martin to join the track team at Hutchinson Community College while she played basketball for the Blue Dragons.

Martin took note of the rare moment. An all-female referee crew, which is still far from ubiquitous in 2021 but was even more so in 1990.

Others sitting in the stands took note too, but didn't have the same reaction that Martin or her players did.

“For my kids to see three women officials in 1990 was huge,” said Martin, who is now KSHSAA’s Assistant Executive Director. “But the fans were horrible. They had to throw one out.”

Women sports officials, referees and umpires have become more mainstream, from youth sports to professional. Sarah Thomas has been a full-time NFL official since 2015. There are five full-time female referees in the NBA. Nine women worked in Major League Soccer in 2020, including Kathryn Nesbitt, who was named the league’s Assistant Referee of the Year and was an assistant referee for MLS Cup.

Kansas has had its share of pioneering women officials, which helped pave the way for Martin, who continues to officiate volleyball and basketball; soccer referee Naomi Omenski; and multi-sport official Carmen Doramus-Kinley.

The late Clemma Stone was the first female to officiate a boys basketball game, at the Tournament of Champions in Dodge City no less, in 1962.

Stone’s impact on Kansas girls athletics went deeper than officiating. A multi-sport athlete and graduate of Barnard High School in Kansas, Stone had a 30-year teaching career in physical education. She also coached girl’s basketball, volleyball and track and field.

Grusing was likewise a pioneering official, known for her wit and work ethic, as well as her whistle and sternness.



Meredith Grusing was inducted into the KSHSAA Hall of Fame in 2017.



February of 2020, Robyn Hobson, Nancy Tooley and Susan Decker became the first all-female basketball crew for a boys varsity game.

Andover Central softball coach Rita Frakes was close friends with Grusing, who died after battling pancreatic cancer in 2009. Through their friendship, Frakes said she learned to watch how officials worked and ways to handle disagreements.

“She was a good official with the kids,” Frakes said. “She was proactive. She talked to them. She tried to keep them calm, but she would talk them up if she had to. I learned to

appreciate and respect (umpires) a great deal. If you talk to them, like saying ‘Yes sir’ and ‘No ma’am’, you’ll get a lot further along the way if you treat them right.”

Even up to the months before her death, Grusing was constantly on the move. A volleyball official who worked six state tournaments, and a collegiate basketball referee, Grusing was one of the most trusted officials in Kansas.

“I believe coaches respected her and players were glad to see her at games,” Frakes said. “That’s when you know you’ve done a good job, when players are saying, ‘Oh man, I’m glad

she's our official.' ”

Doramus-Kinley has continued the legacy of pioneering women officials in Kansas. She has officiated state volleyball and state basketball tournaments. What could be next for the Clearwater native?

How about a state championship football game?

“I started football in 2019. My husband (Keith) was asked if he could put together a crew, and he asked if I would help,” Doramus-Kinley said.

Doramus-Kinley knows that football, and the officiating profession in general, is male dominated. But, just maybe, she can help alleviate that stigma.

“Only a couple of women do high school football in Kansas,” Doramus-Kinley said. “Some encourage it, and some say, ‘You shouldn’t be on the field.’ I’m out there working and deserve to be seen as an official, and not just as a woman.”

Doramus-Kinley may have already made a slice of history. Last year, after officiating the Class 4A state volleyball tournament on a Friday, Doramus-Kinley moseyed across the parking lot to Gowans Stadium to help referee a Class 5A football playoff game between Newton and Hutchinson. State volleyball and a playoff football game on the same day.

While female officials are still slowly breaking into male sports, it is more common to see female officials working volleyball, girls basketball, softball, etc. One sport that appears to be an exception is girls soccer.

This spring, Omenski was one of a couple females to work the three KSHSAA state girls soccer tournaments, although Omenski said she has worked with all-female crews at Missouri high school state tournaments. Omenski said that there doesn’t seem to be as many women working soccer games in and around Kansas City, a hotbed of youth soccer.

“I wanted to see more females in the middle,” said Omenski, who also referees at the college level and has worked under-23 games. “I wish I had the solution for that, to get more



Carmen Doramus-Kinley is a three-sport official for the KSHSAA.



girls in the middle. It's kind of a cultural thing - we have good young females, they go to college, meet a guy, have kids, and they stop reffing."

As the overall number of officials nationwide continues to dwindle for many sports, one possible way to alleviate the shortage is actively recruiting more women.

"We are really trying to encourage young women to give it a shot when they get out of high school," Martin said. "Women in officiating have the ability to move up quickly. It's a blessing and a curse. They can move up to the college level in two or three years, but then we lose them. We need more women officials to be role models for our young women."

Doramus-Kinley said she knows what kind of impact being a woman official can have, especially on the football field. In addition to seeing girls in the band or cheering on the sidelines, younger girls might want to emulate a woman in a referee uniform.

"Hopefully, that little girl in the stands says, 'Mommy, Daddy, maybe I can do that too'," Doramus-Kinley said.

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