



NJSIAA TRAILBLAZER

Jill Cosse is a true product of the Title IX generation.

After growing up as a player at Wall Township High School, where she graduated in 1989, and becoming a coach at West Essex in 1997, with collegiate years at The College of New Jersey mixed in, she was influenced by legendary coaches as a competitor before becoming one herself.

Her path has been extraordinarily successful, including a 517-44-12 record with 13 NJSIAA state field hockey titles at West Essex. One of her biggest honors came in January, when she was named winner of the 2021 National Coach Award from USA Field Hockey. It's an honor that recognizes just one coach encompassing every single level of the sport.

"I am deeply honored by USA Field Hockey for naming me as the recipient of this 2021 National Coach of the Year Award, because an award like this doesn't just represent me - it acknowledges the work that my players, parents, administration and my own family have sacrificed to earn this," she said. "I am thankful that my sister and I grew up with parents that appreciated and encouraged playing sports, and who pushed us both to fight and learn the value of hard work. I find myself dazzled by the enormity of this award and all that it means."

When Title IX was passed in 1972, field hockey was one of the biggest sports for girls to play, especially in the fall. Soccer didn't really come on the scene as an interscholastic option for girls until late in the decade, so the importance of the sport was substantial.

That meant many of the early influential figures for girls were field hockey coaches, and Cosse crossed paths with plenty of them. At Wall, she learned under Nancy Gross and Cathy Beradini. At TCNJ, her coach was Sharon Goldbrenner-Pflugger, who herself was influenced by important coaches in North Jersey. Cosse also grew up admiring Shore Regional coach Nancy Williams, and then had the difficult task of replacing one of New Jersey's all-time coaching legends, Linda Alimi, as the leader at West Essex.

"Title IX was, and still is one of the most important laws written that gave women the chance at equality in sport," Cosse said. "I was born in 1971, so I was a kid who had the opportunities I did because women fought and broke barriers before me. Let's be honest - those first barriers were the hardest to break down, and those women who were the first pioneers in all sports had to change attitudes, fight prejudice, and envision a future where girls and women could be equal. Parents had to raise strong little girls that didn't fear the challenges ahead of them, or back down when things didn't work out. I feel very lucky that my parents never let me quit anything I started, and when I lost or wasn't as strong in something, they told me to work harder or find another way to beat an opponent."

It's an approach she feels needs to be taken more nowadays.

"We need young people to do more of that these days," she said. "So - here I stand 50 years later still fighting for and celebrating women and our achievements so that our daughters will have the chance to rise even further. I don't think women and girls should ever stop fighting to find equality, but I also don't think my philosophy for women is any different than simply setting a goal and going about achieving it. For women, breaking ceilings is just part of the fun of Title IX. Who wouldn't want to break a couple windows on the way to that next ceiling in hopes that it brings recognition to strong women? Young women need to know everyday that working hard and earning a reputation for being good is a great thing, and there is much honor in that."

Much of that attitude comes from those early influences.





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"I've been very fortunate in my playing and coaching career, because I played field hockey and softball at Wall High School where I had strong female field hockey coaches in Nancy Gross and Cathy Beradini who challenged me to be better and to break records for both myself and my team," she said. "I then I had a male softball coach in Tony Vodola who was an inspiration in the way he created team dynamic and self confidence in his athletes. I am a better person for having had those coaches in my developmental years, because both sports in their own ways taught me how to fight.

"In college I was coached by Sharon Goldbrenner-Pfluger, and I had no idea of the magnitude with which she and TCNJ would forever change my life. At TCNJ they took athletics - all athletic programs - male and female, and held them as equals. The athletic department coaches and administrators celebrated greatness in both effort and achievement and they honored their student athletes for the devotion and sacrifice they gave in service to the school. Sharon is one of the greatest coaches in the game today for both field hockey and lacrosse, and her lessons of teamwork, love, and devotion are ones that we, as her former players, carry on to everything we do. I was blessed to have her as my coach and mentor.

"Truly, I would be remiss in a conversation of Title IX not to include two of the strongest female leaders I know in both Linda Alimi and Nancy Williams. Linda is one of the most formidable, proud and amazing women I have ever met. She gave her life to the girls at West Essex and paved a road that only a few could rival from 1967 - 1996. She helped put NJ field hockey on the map for the state, and Linda even stayed on teaching for three years after retiring from the thing she loved the most - coaching - because she wanted to make sure I earned my tenure position so that no one could take away what she wanted for her field hockey program here. It remains one of the most unselfish acts I have ever been witness to, and it is a direct reflection of how deep her concern over equity and women in sport still was. That was in 1997, only 25 years ago, that she still had those concerns. Nancy Williams was the field hockey and softball coach at Shore Regional who was an opposing coach and adversary of us in the Shore Conference. My father was an administrator at Shore, so I knew of Nancy's legacy before I ever had to play against her on the actual field. I always admired, but truly hated playing against her teams. We clashed in both field hockey and softball. There was never a day you could not respect the power and greatness she commanded. I feel lucky to call them both my friends."

All of those stops have included an extraordinary amount of winning. In addition to her time as a player at Wall and as a field hockey coach at West Essex, her years at TCNJ featured a combined eight seasons of playing field hockey and lacrosse. Those teams went 114-7-2, with seven appearances in NCAA Div. 3 national championship games. She was 5-2 in those finals, winning twice in field hockey and three times in lacrosse. She was inducted into the TCNJ Hall of Fame in 2011. She was also inducted into the Wall Hall of Fame in 2001. And if all that isn't enough, she formerly coached lacrosse at West Essex, and won more than 300 games in just over 20 years.

"I have taken the road all of these women, and so many more, traveled to the best of my abilities," she said. "I'll continue to empower young women and teach them how to fight until there is no more breath in my body. And my wish is that someday little girls will just read the history of Title IX, and wonder why we even needed it to be written."

