



NJSIAA TRAILBLAZER

When the federal government passed Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, it had people like Kristen Bowsher squarely in mind.

She was only six years old when Title IX, which guarantees equal educational and athletic opportunities for women, came into law, but she has been able to capitalize on it throughout her extremely impressive academic and athletic career.

Growing up in Maplewood, she was one of the best athletes in town, playing both soccer and baseball against boys for years along with basketball against girls starting in junior high. Her early dream was to be a wide receiver in football, the result of spirited back yard games with her two older brothers and other neighborhood kids at the local park. Academics were also prioritized, especially since her mom was a beloved teacher in town.

“Sports of all kind were my life, but academics were very important as well,” she said. “At that time there were not any pro leagues, etc. for women, so I knew I had to prepare myself academically for a career once I could no longer play. My mom was a well-respected elementary school teacher in Maplewood and my dad had done some teaching as well, so they definitely stressed the importance of academics.”

As Kristen’s freshman year at Columbia High School approached in 1980, she didn’t know if a varsity girls soccer team would be launched by the time she arrived. Otherwise, she was prepared to play with the boys teammates she grew up with on what was then the top program in the state, since Columbia had just won two straight Group 4 state championships. As it turned out, the first Columbia girls team took the field that same year, and to the surprise of no one, Kristen became an immediate star.

“I don’t remember specifically when I found out there would be a team,” she said. “It was definitely on my mind because I was aware as I got older, the boys would have gotten bigger and stronger, making it more difficult for me to compete - but I would have done it.”

Four years, four All-State appearances and 165 goals later, she graduated in 1984 as an honor student who would later be selected as New Jersey Girls Soccer Player of The Century by The Star-Ledger.

Soccer wasn’t her only activity, however, at Columbia. She also lettered four times in basketball, three times in softball and then in lacrosse as a senior.

Her next stop after Columbia was the University of Massachusetts, where she was a two-time First Team All-American and two-time Second-Team All-American midfielder. UMass reached the NCAA Final Four in each of her seasons leading into her 1988 graduation, finishing runner-up to North Carolina as a senior. She was a three-time All-NCAA Tournament selection, and was inducted into the UMass Athletic Hall of Fame in 2000.

“I definitely missed playing the other sports, but still dabbled in them through intramural and pickup games,” she said of her college years. “But soccer was my biggest passion and I had always played it year round. In college, although the season was in the fall, we practiced year round so my time was pretty full.”

She also selected to play twice at the United States Olympic Festival, and dressed three times but did not play for the then-fledgling United States Women’s National Team.

While accomplishing all of that at UMass, she never let up with her studies, having graduated with a degree in Electrical Engineering.





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It may seem hard to comprehend in current times, but women's soccer, from her days in Maplewood to her time at Massachusetts, lagged behind other sports like field hockey, basketball, softball and track in terms of popularity and participation. While a player of her stature could have been a pro soccer player nowadays, those opportunities didn't exist, even as semi-recent as the late '80s. So as her athletic career was winding down, her academic career was getting underway.

"My undergraduate degree from UMass was in electrical engineering," she said. "I worked for close to a year at AT&T after graduation but ended up going to graduate school at the University of Virginia and getting my MS and PhD in Biomedical Engineering. While at UVa, I served as graduate assistant coach for the women's soccer team and played on several rec league teams, but had pretty much stopped playing soccer competitively. If I were a few years younger, who knows whether I would have been able to play in the pro women's league that was just getting started back then."

Chances are she could have. But Kristen also found a greater calling. Upon earning her doctorate in 1994, she landed a government job with the Food and Drug Administration.



"After graduating from UVa, I got a job with the FDA regulating medical devices and I am still working there today," she said. "Basically my job is to ensure that neurological medical devices are shown to be safe and effective before they can be sold to the public. My main specialty is implanted brain stimulation devices. It's an exciting job where I get to see all the newest innovations as they emerge."

It's been a career that has been boosted by the opportunities created by Title IX.

"I believe that it was invaluable in promoting girls and women's sports and providing opportunities to girls growing up at that time," she said. "I went to UMass on a full scholarship due to soccer and was able to graduate debt-free with a highly valuable degree in electrical engineering. I also believe that all of the accomplishments in athletics, particularly soccer, that I was able to put on my resumes made me a more desirable candidate for graduate school and future employment."

Aside from herself, she's also grateful for the opportunities that Title IX has brought to others.

"It's hard to think back when people thought it was unusual for a girl to be playing soccer when you can drive by most playgrounds in the U.S. today and see girls of all ages on the field, you can turn on ESPN and watch women play, the whole world watches the Women's World Cup, etc. It was definitely a much different world back then and I believe Title IX really helped in bringing women's sports to the place they are today."

