



NJSIAA TRAILBLAZER

Michele Smith made New Jersey high school sports history on July 1, 2021, when she was inducted into the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) National High School Hall of Fame during the organization's summer meeting in Orlando, Florida.

Smith, who graduated from Voorhees High School in 1985, became 12th person from New Jersey to receive the honor. However, she was just the third woman from the state to be recognized, and most importantly, the first female from the Garden State to be selected based on her accomplishments as an athlete.

The NFHS award was the latest accomplishment for Smith, who began playing softball at age 5, and started pitching as a teenager. Her career is emblematic of the opportunities that were gradually afforded to New Jersey female athletes through the passage of Title IX, the landmark federal legislation which is 50 years old this month.



"Title IX was life-changing for many, many women, especially those in team sports," said Smith in an interview with the NFHS in conjunction with her induction. "When President Nixon signed that bill into law in 1972, it truly impacted the ability for girls – especially for girls in high school sports – to have funding to be able to play team sports. For the sports that are more individualized, I think there was always a way for girls to be able to compete, but to be able to bring together a group of girls – a basketball team of 10, a field hockey team of 20, a softball team of 20 to 25 – and be able to fund it and have those opportunities for those girls to play organized team sports was a game changer for everybody."

Smith was a softball star at Voorhees, where she pitched the Vikings to a NJSIAA state championship and rewrote the school record book. Her numbers included a 51-6 pitching record with 11 no-hitters. She also was an All-Conference player in field hockey and in basketball, where she totaled 1,114 points.



TITLE IX⁵⁰
Celebrating and Growing Opportunities



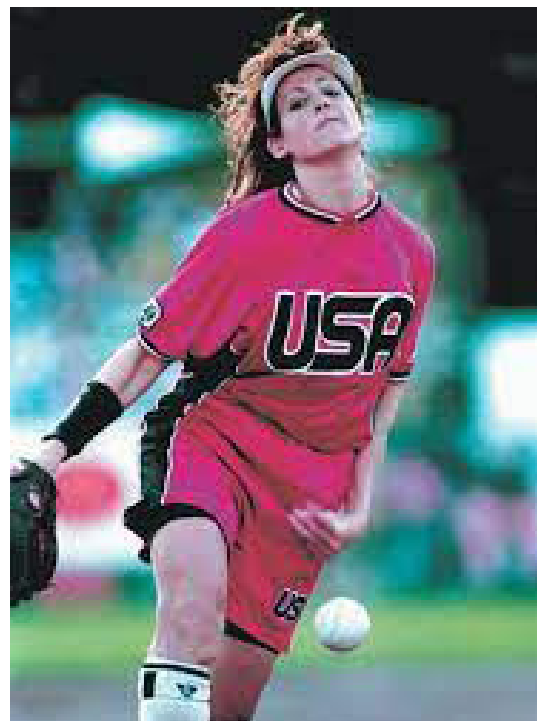
Her career continued to progress at Oklahoma State, where the left-hander had overall numbers that featured an 82-20 pitching record, as well as a .343 batting average. She was a three-time All-Big Eight Conference selection, as well as a two-time All-American. She graduated in 1989 as the school's all-time leader in wins, strikeouts, shutouts, innings pitched, no-hitters, perfect games, RBI, home runs and triples.

With her professional opportunities limited, she began to think of a career beyond softball, which included medical school. She was beginning to work toward becoming a doctor, but was offered a new opportunity - the chance to compete as a pro in Japan. She wound up playing there for 16 years, and became a major celebrity.

Concurrent to her time there, she also earned a spot on the United States National Team, and was part of squads that won three world championships and Olympic gold medals in 1996 and 2000. That

first gold medal, which came at the summer games in Atlanta, was especially notable since it was the first time softball was offered as a medal sport.

“One of the reasons why the 1996 Olympics was such a big deal for all the women’s team sports that won gold medals, was because it’s that generation – my generation of the youth through the ‘80s and early ‘90s – that had the opportunity to play team sports at the youth level, at the high school level, and to then go on and become elite athletes,” she said. “And so, without Title IX, the world of sports for women looks completely different. I’m super blessed to have been able to be impacted by that, and unfortunately, women just a generation earlier than me didn’t have the opportunities that my generation had. And today’s generation is even better, and it should be; it should get better every year, every decade for young boys and girls to have opportunities just to compete and to share and to learn. But Title IX was super impactful. I’m super grateful for it.”





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During the 1990s, she also started working as a broadcaster. She joined ESPN as a softball analyst in 1995, and has been its lead color analyst since 1998. She also made history in 2012, when she became the first woman to serve as a commentator for a nationally-televised Major League Baseball game.

Her many accomplishments are especially remarkable considering what happened during the summer of 1986, between her freshman and sophomore years at Oklahoma State, when she fell out of a moving vehicle and suffered severe and potentially career-ending injuries to her left arm. Instead, she made a remarkable recovery.

“For me, the ‘96 Olympics were super impactful because, in between my freshman and sophomore years in college, I was in a pretty severe accident where I fell out of a truck moving 35 to 40 miles an hour,” she said. “I worked really hard, and I sacrificed a lot of things, and I still can’t straighten my arm all the way or bend it all the way. But I got it to work well enough for me to be able to pitch and I lived with it and took care of it. And ironically enough, after I made the ‘96 Olympic team and we started looking at the schedule for opening ceremonies, we saw the first-ever Olympic softball game was July 21, 1996. It was 10 years to the day of that awful accident that I was lucky to survive, and (afterward) was told that there was a good chance I may never pitch again. So, to come back and be able to walk into that Olympic venue to play in the first-ever Olympic softball game, I realized at that moment why I went through everything that I did.”



Her career has included many other honors, including her induction into the NJSIAA Hall of Fame in 1998. She’s also been into the Amateur Softball Association Hall of Fame, the Oklahoma Sports Hall of Fame and Oklahoma State Hall of Honor.

And all began as a young girl growing up playing sports in Hunterdon County.

“I think about that all the time that I was very fortunate that I had a great experience, because it laid the foundation for me to continue to want to play a sport that I just loved,” she said.



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