

## Heartland Coach

*In an age when opportunities for women in sports were limited but growing, Lorene Ramsey, a member of the Women's Basketball Hall of Fame, was post commander and advance scout to generations of young women with hoop dreams and other hopes.*

By Mark T. Harris

Driving into the Peoria area I am struck by how large the Illinois River is at this juncture. The river has the look of a lake. The pleasure boat, and casinos, and forested hills that greet you as you drive west after exiting the interstate give the impression that you're entering a resort town rather than a gritty blue-collar metropolis. Across the river downtown Peoria looms, a cluster of offices and modest high rises that from a distance make the approaching city look more bustling than it is.

Peoria is the town whose stock Midwestern values long ago became a cliché for hard-nosed American sensibility. If it played in Peoria, it played in the nation, or so advertising executives and politicians believed. Today, the Peoria area's struggling blue-collar economy may suggest a community more played out than anything else. But this central Illinois community is a region with a long, industrious history. Folks survive here. In fact, the first European settlement in the middle of the American continent was established in the area in the 17th century. French traders joined long-established native peoples who had been working the lands for thousands of years. Later, the Peoria area became an important river port for the liquor trade, as well as the center of a

burgeoning commercial and manufacturing economy. What played here were corn, whiskey, and Caterpillar Earthmovers.

And basketball.

Indeed, this *is* basketball country. Hard-core. In his book, "Big Game, Small World," *Sports Illustrated* writer Alexander Wolff devotes an entire chapter to Peoria basketball. It's clear from Wolff's book that the Peoria area takes its basketball seriously. In fact, Peoria High School, Illinois' oldest surviving high school, won the state's first championship tournament in 1908. But the Peoria story Wolff tells is all about boys and men. It's a noteworthy story, but nowhere is it mentioned that one of the sport's greatest coaches was just across the river, quietly building a legacy as a pioneer of the women's game.

That coach was Lorene M. Ramsey. In 1969, she turned the eight girls who showed up for Illinois Central College's (ICC) new intramural program into the school's first women's basketball team. With too few players for intramural teams, the girls instead played a truncated schedule against a few local colleges, and mostly got beaten badly. During those early games the coach sometimes relied on 3' x 5' note cards with scribbled advice passed to her from the sidelines by a colleague who

had once coached a basketball team. Ramsey was herself already an athlete, a fast-pitch softball pitcher of notable talent. But coaching basketball in 1969 was for her something of a novelty, as was girls basketball generally in those days. For Ramsey, it was also fun. She thought she might like to try it again the next year.

This is where the history begins. Fast forward 33 years to 2003 and Ramsey is announcing her retirement, shortly after leading ICC's Lady Cougars to their fifth National Junior College Athletic Association (NCJAA) basketball title. The local press notes that she has been the only women's program coach the college has ever had. But another extraordinary fact about her career is also being duly noted: At the time of her retirement, no women's college basketball coach at any level had ever won more games than Ramsey. With 887 career victories (and only 197 losses), only Tennessee legend Pat Summit and Lin Laursen of Arizona's Scottsdale Community College have since come to know what it's like to win a basketball game as often as this coach from the Illinois heartland.

On a sunny Saturday morning in May 2004 a slice of women's basketball history gathers just outside the ICC gymnasium, represented in dozens of former players and colleagues of Coach Ramsey who have come to East Peoria for the dedication of ICC's sports facility in her honor. It is a festive, mostly female crowd of a couple hundred people spanning several generations. There are players from a quarter century back and young women from the coach's more recent squads, including Ramsey's last, the 2003 national champions. The crowd includes several now prominent

protégés of the coach, including University of Missouri coach Cindy Stein and Bradley University's Paula Buscher.

I am an outsider at Ramsey's tribute. But perhaps I am an outsider among a group of outsiders. For despite its growing popularity women's basketball still occupies a sort of interloper status in the American sports culture. Indeed, since basketball was invented in the last decade of the 19th century, the game as played by boys and men has followed a more or less linear path to popularity. For girls and women, the history is far more fitful.

Actually, the challenge at times for females has been just to be allowed to play the game. It's a history that's not well known. In the early 1900s, the rapidly growing new sport of basketball had caught fire among Illinois girls, with some 300 girls high school teams springing up in just a few short years. The Illinois girls played by the same rules as the boys and organized wildly popular interscholastic meets attended by enthusiastic, mixed crowds. But these young female athletes also evoked the consternation of proper school administrators of the day. They could only see dire consequences in the alleged "masculinization" of female athletes. By 1907, the Illinois High School Association (IHSA) took the extraordinary step of banning all interscholastic sports for females. The next year the IHSA sponsored the first state tournament for boys.

Such is the conflicted history of women's basketball, played out over the last 100 years as a kind of rolling tug-of-war between the game's advocates and those physical education theorists and school administrators who, from one region to another, have, at one time or another, opposed

competitive sports for girls. Indeed, if you travel back to 1920s South Carolina you will find women's basketball tournaments drawing hundreds or even thousands to games. There were eventually enough teams nationwide for the Amateur Athletic Union to sponsor national women's tournaments in the 1930s. But by 1954 the South Carolina state legislature, under pressure from conservative forces in the state's expanding educational bureaucracy, nixed the long-standing girls regional and state tournaments. Yet during the 1950s the six-player version of the game played by Iowa high schools was becoming more popular than ever.

### **Hoop Dreams and More**

In her remarks at the dedication of the ICC gymnasium in her honor, Ramsey recalls ancient dramas from her life and career as if they happened yesterday. She gives play by play descriptions of games played thirty years ago. She talks about how much the culture of the game has changed. She recalls from the program's first days the student who showed up at the coach's office, asking if she could try out for the team. The coach told her she didn't have to try out, if she wanted to play she was on the team. "But you don't even know if I can play," the girl had protested. Ramsey said it didn't matter, she was obviously breathing and had apparently managed to walk to the office on her own. As far as she was concerned, that was all she needed to know.

Those were days when not only good players, but that component of the sporting world known as fans were also a rare commodity. Nor had the culture of the women's sport acquired anywhere near its current competitive

edge. There was no booing in the early days. It was also customary after the game for the opposing teams to meet for cookies and punch. But from such genteel beginnings over the course of three decades Ramsey raised ICC women's basketball to national heights.

Indeed, under her reign ICC basketball evolved into an important outpost on the expanding frontiers of women's athletics, a junior college settlement whose impact would come to radiate far beyond the stretch of hills and farms that make up the larger Peoria area. ICC became well-known as a recruiting ground for Division One transfers and former players who would go on to careers in high school and college coaching.

One of those young women was Cindy Stein, now head coach of the women's basketball team at the University of Missouri. A 1979 high school graduate, Stein spent two years playing for the ICC Lady Cougars, where she set single-season and career records for assists before moving on to play for the University of Illinois. Stein played at a time when scholarships for females were rare and recruiting was what you might call low-key. "No one from any college ever actually spoke to me except for Coach Ramsey," Stein remembers. "In those days, being recruited often just meant a letter in the mail." Today, as a successful Big 12 conference coach, Stein says Ramsey's influence is in her blood.

"The coach was a master at finding your weakest point as a player," says Mary Williams, a woman with a wild shock of black hair and a confident, friendly air who played for ICC from 1984 to 1986, before going on to Michigan State. "By the end of your time together, Coach Ramsey would have turned that weakness into your

strongest point. Her emphasis was always on the fundamentals, teaching you the little things to get to the big things."

Ramsey epitomized the qualities of the selfless teacher, adds North Carolina State coach Kay Yow, keynote speaker at the tribute dinner held later that evening attended by nearly 400 former players and their families at the Peoria Civic Center. Yow tells the crowd about working with Ramsey at the 1981 World University Games in Bucharest where the ICC coach was her assistant. She's described by this member of the Naismith Basketball Hall of Fame as a coach with an instinct for creating a positive team environment, as honest in her assessments as she was sensitive to the psyche of young athletes. When the banquet ends, Ramsey hangs around for more than two hours to greet many dozens of former players. Later, one of the event organizers reports the coach was upset because there were one or two faces she didn't immediately recognize from her 33-year career.

"A lot of coaches will tell you that the game is their favorite thing," Ramsey says days later when we meet at the ICC gymnasium. "But I loved practice. That was my favorite thing to do." From the glamour of the Civic Center banquet, we find ourselves sitting in a rather forlorn looking room off the back of the main gymnasium. Ramsey says it's a classroom, but at the moment it looks more like a cluttered storeroom of boxes, extra chairs, and desks. She seems relaxed and eager to talk, despite what has to have been a personally tumultuous few days. The day after the dedication and dinner, she gave the commencement address to ICC's graduating class.

Much of the coach's enthusiasm for

the game was undoubtedly the product of a career geared to high expectations. Ramsey basketball was notorious for being a relentless, defensively oriented game, one designed to increase the likelihood of an opponent's mistakes. The coach was particularly known for her now widely copied diamond and one press, which put one player on the ball, two others on the wing, a point guard at center court, and a fifth player all the way back as safety. The result was usually a very up-tempo game, one that forced opponents to play at a faster pace. Think of a game where one team is consistently forced to make plays and take shots as time runs off the shot clock. Now, think of a team skillfully executing this press hundreds of times, year after year, to victory. That was ICC basketball.

Ramsey was known as an aggressive recruiter of stand-out players, even a quarter century ago when college recruiting in the women's game was minimal. Yet she was also known for democratic tryouts in which every player had two weeks to make the team. Notably, her generous tryout philosophy was rooted in her own childhood experience. As an adolescent, Ramsey had enjoyed playing pickup fast-pitch softball in her hometown of Washington, Missouri. When she was 14 her father wanted to take her to St. Louis to try out for the 17-and older adult league. The local high school coach advised him not to get his hopes up for his daughter, who he thought was too young. But the adult league was the only league that played evenings when her father could drive her. So off to St. Louis they went.

Reluctantly, the St. Louis coach gave Ramsey a tryout, then agreed to let her pitch pre-game batting practice, warning her not to complain about not

playing or she would throw her off the team. But then fate intervened. Early in the season one starting pitcher quit the team. Another insisted on playing a different position. The youngster who was not expected to play soon found herself on the mound, pitching a six-inning shut-out in her first outing. Ramsey then won 19 games in a row, ending the season as the league's Most Valuable Player.

Ramsey tells the story of her first season in sports not strictly for nostalgia's sake, but to make a point. "Now, do you think I learned a lesson from that experience about giving up on kids before they ever had a chance?" she asks. "At first, they didn't even want me on the team! It's very tragic when people throw blockades on a young person's path. As a coach, you can see why I always gave players a longer than normal time to make the team."

Ramsey appears capable of recalling an endless series of stories on the theme of young people and their potential. She talks about the player who came from a poor background, without much family support and struggling academically, only to eventually find her way to the University of Southern California where she played with one of the top names of women's basketball, superstar Lisa Leslie. Later, this USC graduate would work as a counselor for a California youth program.

She tells of another young woman from years ago who when she first showed up couldn't guard "worth a shake of salt." At 5 '5", Ramsey's assistant coach saw little future for her in basketball. But something told the coach the girl was capable of more so she made the team. By late season the girl who couldn't guard was first off the bench, playing the outside position. In

one close tournament game, she scored 21 points, spearheading a crucial victory.

Later, Ramsey learned the player's high school team had been coached by a series of mostly reluctant art teachers assigned by the administration. During the player's senior year her coach had even petitioned the school to drop girls basketball. Apparently, the art of defense had not been part of the curriculum. Ramsey saw herself in many such young women. "I was the kid who nobody thought would be able to do anything," she notes. "I think it's easy for coaches to give up on kids too soon. We tried not to do that around here."

### **A Season to Remember**

Listening to her reminisce, you can't avoid the sense that this is an individual blessed with a calling in life. Endless names, games, and stats all seem to flow effortlessly from her memory. Decades of details and dramas, names and seasons all shine with equal brightness in a still unquenched passion for sports. But one season in particular is worth remembering for its sense of drama and triumph and the realization of untapped potential. It's the story of the 1992 Lady Cougars.

It was a season that began on a minor key. On the first day of practice, the team's best player, an all-stater named Jenny Smith, informed Ramsey that she had just been diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis. The stress of playing will drive her into early surgery, the doctor had told her. Ramsey was floored by the news and immediately contacted the number one specialist in Peoria for a second opinion. "I even drove the girl to the appointment. We were upbeat, joking around on the way, I was so confident

the doctor was going to pronounce the other doctor crazy." But Smith was in the exam room a long time. Finally, the specialist emerged to report the bad news. "This girl will never play," he declared. He showed Ramsey the X-rays.

The calamities only multiplied. The Lady Cougars were six games into the season when a starting point guard tore her Achilles tendon, the only torn Achilles tendon Ramsey would see in 33 years of coaching. Then one of the post players fell victim to a thyroid condition and had to quit school. The team was playing poorly, winning as much as they were losing. The season's nadir came as they entered mid-season. With six losses already under their belt, the Lady Cougars suffered a blow-out loss to Kirkwood College, losing by 33 points. Ramsey was furious, but in the game's aftermath said nothing, invoking one of her fundamental rules of good coaching: Don't Let It All Hang Out Right After a Bad Game. But on the four-hour bus ride home she had the team watch the game video over and over. It was a tired and chagrined group of players that pulled into the ICC parking lot in the early morning hours. This had not been the night of a thousand compliments.

The next day at practice Ramsey spoke to the team, reminding them of ICC's impressive won-loss record over the years. In light of this record, she asked, did they think that perhaps their coaches had suddenly turned stupid? "We were doing the same things we'd always done, with even a few improvements," says Ramsey. "We were doing the things that had allowed us to win. So why weren't we winning? Why didn't we win last night? This is what I asked them." Ramsey admits she castigated the team as quitters, said

they were failing to give 100 percent at practice, and even more didn't even like each other. As she finished her speech, she told them it was now up to them to figure out what kind of team they were going to be. And then she turned around and walked out of the gym.

As Ramsey returned to her office, one of the assistant coaches asked her how long she thought the meeting would last. "With the way this team communicates," she recalls saying, "they'll be back in ten minutes." But the ten minutes turned into one hour, then two. Behind closed doors a cascade of simmering grievances, resentments, and frustrations suddenly flooded to the surface. Finally, the team's co-captain, Tammy Wilkinson, emerged from the meeting to knock on the coach's door. "She just looked at me and said, 'We're ready to practice now, coach,'" Ramsey recalls. "I told her I hoped she was not kidding. I'll never forget the way Tammy just looked at me, repeating herself, 'We're ready to practice now, coach.'" Ramsey's pride becomes palpable now as she recalls the story more than a decade later.

Megan Lanham, now an assistant coach at Indiana State, was a member of that '92 squad. When I later asked her about Ramsey's speech following the Kirkwood loss, she corrected the coach's version only slightly. "Actually, she told us we were the single worst team she had ever coached." The words had stung, says Lanham, a guard reserve that season. "Basically, we just decided we didn't want to be remembered as that team. We knew we were capable of performing better. We knew we needed to become better focused."

Something had snapped. With no coaches present, the players had hashed it all out, until there was nothing more

to say, nothing more to hold onto, until all the fermenting, discordant energy of their so-far troubled season had been emptied of its power. "Before the loss to Kirkwood, very few players used to stay after practice to shoot on their own," recalls Lanham. "But after that meeting, it quickly became the norm that almost everyone stayed to do some extra shooting. We also started talking out loud about winning, even winning the national NCJAA championship." And, she says, playing became fun again.

It showed. The Cougars began to win even as the plague of injuries continued (another player was lost for the season after a car door slammed on her hand), reducing the roster to 10 players as the NCJAA tournament began. "If we get any injuries, we're just done, but whoever beats us is going to think they just went through World War III. They are going to have to beat 10 kids who are totally united," ICC's current athletic director, Sue Sinclair, recalls Ramsey telling her before the tournament.

Years later, Ramsey can still provide a play-by-play of the Lady Cougars march through the NCJAA Division Two tournament. The two flu-stricken players who led the team to a last-minute victory. The outside defensive player moved to post defense in the final minutes of a game, even though she had never played that position, who twice stole the ball, assuring ICC of a narrow two-point victory. Canceling practice for three days just before the tournament because of a spreading flu. And, defeating Kirkwood by 13 points, the team they had earlier lost to by a humbling 33 points.

The season reached its apex at the Bismarck State College Armory in North Dakota, site of the national title

game. There Ramsey's Cougars sailed to a 89-72 victory over Lansing (Mich.) Community College. At age 56, after 23 years of coaching, Ramsey had led the Lady Cougars to their first national championship. In a season that had played like a female version of the classic basketball film, *Hoosiers*, the Lady Cougars had transformed the early season ashes of illness and dissension and defeat into an unbeatable, conquering basketball machine. In the 11 years remaining in her career before her retirement, Ramsey would guide four more ICC teams to national titles. Remarkably, in 1998 she also won an NCJAA national championship for ICC in softball, her second national title in the sport.

### **Pioneer of Opportunity**

As we stand up to leave our cluttered meeting place, I mention the speakers at the tribute banquet who had joked about her apparently notorious absent-mindedness. How in her years of coaching and teaching, she was rumored to have lost her keys or her briefcase hundreds of times, not to mention received at least three speeding tickets while no doubt daydreaming about the game she was either on her way to or coming from. It struck me as a bit ironic, as she obviously has an almost photographic memory when it comes to the faces, dramas, and details of ICC sports history.

Ramsey smiles at mention of a topic for which she has endured years of good-natured kidding. In her defense she remarks that she guesses she knew she could always replace her car keys or briefcase. Not so other valuables. "How do you replace the memories of all the games I had the good fortune to coach," she asks. "How do you replace

the memories of the young people I got to know?"

To meet this junior college coach, a member of the second class of inductees into the Women's Basketball Hall of Fame in Knoxville, has unintentionally reinforced my sense of how distant today's professional sports culture seems from the unfiltered passion that so often defines the first sports experience for most young athletes. Think pro sports now and along with athletic excellence comes a more unfortunate litany of images. Steroid scandals. On-court brawls. Celebrity players in trouble with the law or whose stratospheric salaries leave them out of touch with fans, or any semblance of humility. Sports writers whose attitude in trade is the jaded journalism of those who think they've seen it all. Then there are the franchise owners whose business dealings show no loyalty to the cities they claim to represent, and whose tax dollars finance their stadiums.

Ramsey's story offers something different. It's the legacy of a coach whose commitment to athletic excellence and equal opportunity was driven less by the ambition of ego, fame, or money than the desire to do the right thing by the young women who came into her life for a time.

"For years girls were not allowed to play basketball," Ramsey remarked to the crowd at the ICC tribute. "We were told we're 'too emotional.' Or it would 'harm our reproductive organs.' But those were not the reasons we were not allowed to play. The reason was the athletic directors and male coaches did not want to give up gym time to women and young girls. They were trying to protect their turf. Finally, in 1972, Title IX ended that."

Not only Title IX. The growth of

women's basketball is the result of countless, often unsung, women and men whose enthusiasm and persistence as coaches, players, administrators, and parents pushed the issue of equal opportunity in sports. Ramsey's story belongs to this larger story.

As a young woman in her 20s, newly relocated to the Peoria area from her native Missouri, Lorene Ramsey did work for a time at the local Caterpillar plant. But the earthmoving skills this coach from the heartland would come to acquire were not of the heavy machinery kind. The earth moved at ICC was dug a shovel full at a time, over the course of decades, falling to the simple pick and spade of one woman's life-long love of sports.

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