

This author has written several articles about past championship teams from the Bridgewater-Raritan High Schools. But in all these tales of glory I have neglected to tell even one story of any girl's championship team. This month I make amends and write about the first girls' state championship team - the 1976 Bridgewater-Raritan East High School's Girls' Basketball Team.

In the mid 1970s girls' basketball was evolving rapidly. Just a few years before the girls played by rules that would seem insane today. There were 6 players on a team. Only two of these players could cover the entire court. Two players had to stay on the defensive side of the mid-court line and two players had to remain on the offensive side of the mid-court line. Also, a player could only dribble three times before they had to pass or shoot. Starting around 1971 girls' basketball converted to the boy's rules. The girl's teams using the new rules at East High School in the early 1970s were coached by women who had learned from the old rules thus they did not adapt well to the new rules. Athletic director Joe Porcaro saw that the girl's team needed a coach who knew the boy's rules. So for the 1974 season he asked Ray Koperwhats if he would coach the girl's team. Ray was not sure at first. While he had a variety of coaching experience, he had never coached girls. And to top it off he was a self-proclaimed "Male Chauvinist Pig". Was he a fit for this? After some thought, he decided to take on the challenge. At the first practice he coached as he always did – doing a little yelling just to get the troops moving. But halfway through the practice he noticed that half the girls were crying. So he stopped practice and explained that he was just doing as he had always done as coach. He insured them that he meant well. Both sides understood each other better, adapted, and things progressed from there. The first year (1974) they had a winning season. In 1975 they had an excellent year, but were defeated in the state tournament. So in 1976 the returning players were on a mission to avenge last year's playoff loss.

The 1976 team was led by 1<sup>st</sup> team All-State forward (and co-captain) Barbara Withers who averaged 23 points a game. At center (also co-captain) was six foot tall center Nancy Shoolbraid who led the team in rebounding. Forward Nancy Northup scored many points and would make 2<sup>nd</sup>-team All-County. Guard Christine Harding was also on the 2<sup>nd</sup> team All-County. Ginny Kuzio rounded out the starting five at guard. While she did not score many points, she was involved with the scoring as she had many assists.

The girls played well together on the court. That togetherness went beyond the basketball court as many of them were close friends. They were a confident team that played hard. Nancy Shoolbraid today recalls "We were aggressive. We played like boys in an era where that style of play was not acceptable."

The team's confidence could be seen in the fact that for away games the girls would dress up (even wear high heels) in order to make a statement as they entered the opposing team's school.

There was one ironic twist to their aggressive play. Back then some games were refereed by women while others were refereed by men. The team quickly noticed that the women referees hindered their style of play by calling numerous fouls on them while the men referees let them play their aggressive game. At that time in high school basketball a team could request not to have particular referees do their games. So they requested successfully, for the most part, to have men referees.

The team had an excellent regular season accumulating a 19-4 record. This qualified them for the State Tournament.

In the first two games of the state tournament the team cruised to victories over JFK and Middletown. Then came the big test.

Most championship teams have that one thrilling game on the road to the title. For the East girls of 1976 it was the quarter final game against Piscataway. This game started out well as they had a 31-19 lead at halftime. However, Piscataway slowly climbed back and with 21 seconds remaining took a 2 point lead. It appeared that the journey for East might be over. But Barbara Withers, with 13 seconds left, drew a foul when she drove in for a shot. She hit both free throws to tie the game. Piscataway then quickly moved toward the hoop resulting in Nancy Shoolbraid being called for a non-shooting foul. Piscataway, with the game tied, would go to the foul line with 8 seconds left for a one-on-one. But the shot was missed. On the rebound a frustrated Piscataway player fouled Christine Harding. Christine would go to the foul line to shoot a one-on-one. The game was tied with 5 seconds left. The team's continuation in the playoffs was all on her shoulders. Today Christine Harding says that the memory being at the foul line at that moment is still vivid in her mind. As she was handed the ball everyone in the stands began yelling and screaming. She blocked everything out and concentrated on the shot. She made the critical first shot and the next one. East had a two point lead. There were still 5 seconds left. Piscataway had one chance. But the East press prevented any movement up court and Piscataway did not even get off a shot. The game of their lifetime was over – a 54-52 win.

In the semi-final they would beat Cherry Hill 55-43. Nancy Northup led the team with 22. Barbara Withers had 21.

The final game was against Bayonne. Things did not start out well. For the first time in a while they had women referees who quickly called fouls on Nancy Shoolbraid and Barbara Withers. Bayonne took a 6-2 lead. But then the team, as champions do, went into high gear for the big game and would go out to a 52-29 lead before substitutes were put in. The final was 60-51. Bridgewater-Raritan High School East had its first Girl's State Championship. Barbara Withers led the way with 25 points and Nancy Northup had 19.

After their State Championship the team had hoped for the traditional banquet that all other state champions at B/R H.S. teams received. But it did not seem to be coming. When one of the parents inquired to the school they were told that there was no money in budget. So the parents asked would the school do anything for the first girl's state championship team? The answer was "no". It seemed that while they were champions they were still just "girls" playing in a 1970s boys dominated athletic program.

To find photos, articles, box scores, and contact information for the players on the team visit [www.raritan-online.com](http://www.raritan-online.com).