

Unlikely basketball star recalls her glory days

By Linda Fine Conaboy

Maybe some of you know South Lake Tahoe resident Maureen Stuhlman who is employed as the city's vacation home investigator. Maybe not.

Perhaps a few readers know about Immaculata University in Malvern, Pa., just outside of Philly.

There is even a chance that some have seen the movie "The Mighty Mac," released in 2011.

Stuhlman is the linchpin holding this unlikely triumvirate together.

As it turns out, both Stuhlman and Immaculata have stories to tell. Stuhlman's, starting in the early 1970s when Immaculata was not more than 60-years-old, and she, a mere fun-loving lass in her teens living in Havertown, Pa., taking advantage of a special pre-college scholarship program offered by nearby Immaculata, a private Roman Catholic university founded in 1920 by the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary as an all-girls school. (In 2005 it became co-educational.)

The athletic teams at Immaculata University are known as the Mighty Macs.

When Stuhlman and her friends entered the college as freshmen, on a lark, they decided to join the basketball team. As she told *Lake Tahoe News*, it looked like a fun thing to do, although their knowledge of the game was limited. "Anyone who wanted to play just showed up," she said. "And it was a pleasant way to spend an afternoon."



Maureen Stuhlman has passed the basketball bug onto her niece.
Photo/Provided

Nevertheless, lark or not, lack of skill on the part of her team didn't deter Cathy Rush, the new girls' basketball coach. She had a job to do. She was hired in the late 1960s at a salary of \$450 a month with the mandate to mold a basketball team ... and while she was at it, to build a gym since the old fieldhouse had burned down.

Stuhlman mused that in the early 1970s there were no sports scholarships for girls and there most definitely was no Title IX protection for women in sports. Title IX requires that all college students receive the same opportunity to play college sports under any education program or activity receiving federal financial assistance.

This was soon to become a significant factor to the fledgling team, who unbelievably began to win games. Not only did they win games, they also won tournaments, only to discover they would have to raise their own funds to attend the tournaments that were the spoils of their winning streak.

Stuhlman, who played forward, said her parents were troopers, ferrying she and as many teammates as they could fit into to the family station wagon to the games.

“We didn’t know there were such things as tournaments. To us, basketball was totally a social thing,” Stuhlman said.

But win tournaments they did; these Mighty Macs, garbed in their wool tunics draped over the pleated skirts that served as their uniforms. These same Mighty Macs soon found themselves going door-to-door or accosting their friends and loved ones in an attempt to sell toothbrushes to fund their airfare to get to the national tournament at the University of Illinois in Normal.

“We did happen to win all of our games in one season,” she said. “We went to the regionals where they brought out their second string and we trounced them. When we returned to the regionals, they played their first string, and they trounced us.”

Feeling dejected by their defeat, upon their return to school the girls prepared to beat a hasty and silent retreat to their rooms. But their classmates as well as their teachers had other ideas. “The entire school gathered in the rotunda to greet us—we were all in tears.”

Although they came in second, they were invited to play in the National Championships. Surprisingly, they hammered the team that had just slaughtered them, although, according to Stuhlman, only one of the team members was a naturally good athlete.



The flight to Illinois was probably the first flight that many of the girls had taken. “It was such a lark for us. We had two hotel rooms, four to a room. We played four games in three days,” she said.

Stuhlman recalls the wins as much more than just wins. “We grew a lot and we learned we could do what we set our minds to do. We had confidence in each other; it was a team effort. At the time, it was new for women to train; [basketball] was considered a pastime. But these were formative years, they taught us what it meant to be a part of a team—we had formative experiences that still serve me today.”

As Stuhlman reminisced about the Mighty Macs, she recounted the achievements of her team: Of the starting five players, one, Theresa Shank Grentz, went on to become the first women’s basketball coach at Rutgers as well as a coach for the women’s Olympic basketball team.

Cathy Rush, the Macs coach from 1972 to 1977, led the school to three consecutive AIAW national titles from 1972-74 and was inducted into the Basketball Hall of Fame in 2008. She had also been inducted to the Women’s Basketball Hall of Fame in

2000 and the Philadelphia Sports Hall of Fame in 2005.

Another Maureen (there were three on the team), coached women's basketball at Pennsylvania State University and was an Olympic coach. Her married name is Rene Courtland; she is now retired.

"And then our entire team was inducted into the Basketball Hall of Fame in 2014—this was such an honor," Stuhlman said. At the ceremony, Stuhlman recalled, the team had the opportunity to rub elbows with the likes of basketball greats Larry Johnson and Meadowlark Lemon.

To their amazement, 40 years later, "The Mighty Macs", a movie about the season leading to the winning of the first women's national basketball championship in 1972, was released. And just to prove that camaraderie is not fleeting, the entire team attended the movie's premier en masse, which was at the Kimmel Center in Philadelphia.

According to the movie trailer, the film is about Cathy Rush, a woman ahead of her time who takes a job as the coach of the women's basketball team at Immaculata College, as it was known in the 1970s. She and her team face huge challenges competing against perennial powerhouses—and the rest, as we know is history.

"The general theme of the movie is true," Stuhlman said. "The coach who was married to an NBA referee, that was Cathy. But a lot of the details didn't really happen."

She laughed, describing a good bit of the movie as artistic license. But to those of us who were not part of the Mighty Macs, the movie does not seem to be merely artistic license. It's the tale of a cohesive team of females, led by a tough but respectful coach, who were united to strive for a single goal—winning, while maintaining their youthful eagerness and their sense of loyalty to each other.

Now, Maureen Stuhlman is a happy resident of South Lake Tahoe, where she moved several years ago after visiting a friend and falling love with the place. Prior to her Tahoe gig, she lived in Venice Beach for 30 years working in the travel business. She said she also for a time worked in Dubai.

Not surprisingly, her niece is now a basketball player in Philadelphia. Stuhlman says although she's not in the shape she was in her playing days, she loves snowshoeing out the back door of her Lake Tahoe home.