



NJSIAA TRAILBLAZER

Tricia Popowski grew up an active, eager and very grateful athlete in the small, tight-knit city of South Amboy.

A 1987 graduate of Hoffman High School in her Middlesex County hometown, she was a three-sport athlete who was awarded 12 varsity letters (four apiece in soccer, basketball and softball).

She was an All-State player in both basketball, playing on some of the winningest teams in state history, and softball, where she put up the greatest hitting numbers in state history, before advancing all the way to compete internationally for the United States National Team in that sport.

She's an ideal example of the opportunities that were granted to female athletes coming up in the 1980s through the impact of Title IX, the federal legislation passed in 1972 which created unprecedented educational and athletic opportunities for women.

By the time athletes like Tricia were starting to play sports as young girls, they weren't just benefiting from the legal opportunities created by the law, but additionally the changes in mindsets which came with it.

"I was very fortunate that there were people before me that opened a lot of doors, including Joyce Compton, who was my college softball coach at the University of South Carolina," she said. "We were very aware of Title IX going on and she was a huge advocate for it. I felt we had many more opportunities than the generation before us and we were grateful for it."

In South Amboy, young girls were encouraged to play, and they did.

"We all started playing together in pre-school," she said. "We would go from kickball to basketball to softball to soccer, anything we could play, we all grew up within one mile of each other and that was our normal daily activity. We all played together and when we got together, it was all about athletics."

Her basketball teams at Hoffman were legendary.

She scored 1,111 career points for teams that went 114-5 during her career. Hoffman was ranked No. 1 in the nation at one point, and also won three Group 1 state championships with Popowski in the lineup.

"Growing up in such a small town, there were 200 kids in my graduating class, we were just so lucky that there were many talented girl basketball players at that time and had a wonderful coach, Reggie Carney," she recalled. "He would take us to different camps and different basketball opportunities and it transformed many of our lives. We came from a small town and a lot of us were able to go to major universities and get our educations and have successful careers because of him and because of Title IX."

In softball, her career numbers included 38 home runs, 39 triples, 37 doubles, 211 hits, 237 runs, 236 RBI and a .603 batting average. She continued to rake throughout her career at South Carolina, where she had 279 hits, including a NCAA record 51 triples, and was inducted into the school's athletic Hall of Fame.

Popowski played for the famed Raybestos Brakettes, who won the the ASA Women's Major Fast Pitch National Championship with her in the lineup, as well as three years with the U.S. National Team.

In the early 1990s, Power Flight, a worldwide bat manufacturer, even marketed two signature Tricia Popowski softball bats.

Among her other honors, she was recently inducted into the NJSIAA Hall of Fame.

"I always remember being a kid and we'd meet up at Sixth Street Basketball Court and we would have some really hard-nosed games with whoever showed up," she said. "We'd have kids from all over the county come to our little town, some All-State players, and we would just play. That was probably the most exciting time because you never knew who was going to show up, who was going to be on whose team, and there were some drag-out games that I wish were broadcast because I'm sure there's be a lot of people who would have been interested in watching them."

Nowadays she's a teacher, coach and mom to two daughters, and sees first hand how opportunities for female athletes continue to expand.

"It's tremendous and so wonderful to have everyone on a level playing field," she said. "Playing sports and getting a good education, it affords you to do so many great things. You can travel the world, you can study any subject you want, anything you desire to be, you can do all through athletics, education and Title IX."

