



# NJSIAA TRAILBLAZER

The list of females from New Jersey who have achieved extraordinary levels of success through athletics is both long and impressive.

Cathy Rush, 1964 Oakcrest High School graduate who was later inducted into the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame, is among those women whose story is legendary. But what makes hers especially unique is that it was actually the basis of a movie, "The Mighty Macs," which was about her time coaching the fledgling women's basketball powerhouse at tiny Immaculata College in suburban Philadelphia.

Rush, who was only 23 at the time, was named head coach at Immaculata in 1970, two years before the passage of Title IX. The NCAA was still more than a decade away from governing women's sports, so all women's teams competed in a common division governed by the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women.

Immaculata at the time was an all-women school of 400 students and its gym had recently burned down, forcing all games to be played on the road. Her salary was \$450 and there was practically no budget for any equipment, uniforms, or travel. The team went 10-2, showing promise for the future.

The next year, the 1971-72 season, ended with a storybook run to the AIAW national championship. The team, now known as the Mighty Macs, were seeded 15th out of 16 teams in the AIAW national tournament in Illinois. To travel there, the team did some quick fundraising, and still could only afford to send eight of the 11 players. They flew standby, bunched up in rooms, and spent little on food.

The Mighty Macs didn't stop there, winning the next two AIAW championships. The streak ended with championship defeats in 1975 and 1976, and Immaculata finished fourth in 1977. By then, the emergence of Title IX actually began to hurt Immaculata, since it did not offer scholarships, while much larger schools across the nation began to do so, in addition to having much larger facilities and budgets. Rush retired after that year to devote time to her young family, leaving with an overall Immaculata record of 149-15.

During the those 1970s days in which women's basketball was growing due in major part because of the advances made possible through Title IX, Immaculata played a role in many important "firsts" for the sport. In the summer of 1974, Immaculata went on a month-long tour of Australia, becoming the first American college team to play abroad. On Jan. 27, 1975, the Mighty Macs defeated Maryland in the first-ever nationally-televised women's game. Several weeks later, on Feb. 22, 1975, the Mighty Macs beat rival Queens College in the first women's game at Madison Square Garden, before a crowd of 12,000.

Before all of that, Rush grew up in Egg Harbor Township. She began playing basketball in eighth grade, immediately averaging 30 points a game for her team that still played six-on-six style. She was the Atlantic County scoring champ her freshman year at Oakcrest, but the school dropped the team the following year. She took up gymnastics and became skilled on the trampoline. She then went to West Chester State in Pennsylvania, and played basketball her first two years, but after the departure of the coach, switched back to gymnastics for her last two years. After graduating, she briefly taught before taking the coaching job at Immaculata.

Rush, who was named national Coach of the Year in both 1973 and 1974, was among the second group of inductees to the Women's Basketball Hall of Fame, in 2000. She was enshrined in the Naismith Hall of Fame in 2008 and the NJSIAA Hall of Fame in 2010.

