

Osenbaugh's multi-sports triumphs offer timeless tale of determination

Written by Sher Jasperse

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Her athletic accomplishments would have been difficult to predict. Amy Osenbaugh was never the best player on her team, she says, and she was “a big girl” who was sometimes teased by kids in the stands.

Yet she set the single-game scoring record at Linn-Mar High School that stood for 21 years until it was broken this past December by Kiah Stokes, arguably the greatest girls basketball player in the school's history.

Part of the first generation of girls who grew up after Title IX created new athletic opportunities for women, Osenbaugh didn't get a college scholarship offer. She lacked quickness and wasn't a great jumper.

Yet somehow, she outplayed scholarship athletes in highly ranked programs to become a collegiate standout in another sport -- volleyball -- smashing her way to a career kills record at Mount Mercy College (now University) in 1993. It still stands today.

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Osenbaugh, whose married name is Amy Brinkmeyer, was inducted into the Mount Mercy Athletic Hall of Fame in 2002. She's still a bit unbelieving about her long-standing records.

"I never expected it to last that long," she says of her Linn-Mar scoring mark of 38 points. "Never. There have been so many players who have been better than me who have come through that program." But few, it seems, had her grit and competitiveness.

Osenbaugh's introduction to sports came during her early years in Kansas, traveling with her family to watch a relative play collegiate basketball. "I was always around it. My dad put up a hoop, and my mom got mad because he wouldn't lower it for me."

After her family moved to Cedar Rapids when she was 9, she played youth league softball and was on a YMCA basketball team, where she had a brief encounter with the six-on-six game. "It seemed strange," she says. The year she entered seventh grade in 1984, the Iowa High School Girls Athletic Union switched to five-on-five play.

Osenbaugh describes her Linn-Mar varsity team as "respectable," upsetting a few higher-ranked opponents. She averaged 16 points a game and had hit 25 or 26 on occasion. "I've never been the best player on a team," she reiterates. "It was just that night – December 16 (1989). I'll never forget it. I could have played backwards over my head with my eyes closed. It was just one of those nights."

With her team already on its way to setting a record for the most points scored in a game, Coach Tammy Slifer had taken all the other starters out of the game, but left Amy in until she reached 38 points on a free throw.

There was no game stoppage to announce her accomplishment, she says, and she didn't expect one. "There was a little blurb in the paper the next day, one of my friends wrote an article in the school newspaper, and my dad told everyone he knew." At the time, you couldn't do better than that.

The will to win

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Osenbaugh also ran sprints and threw the discus in track -- her favorite high school sport, she says, because she felt little pressure there. She always wanted to run the 400, and in her last meet as a senior, her coaches put her in the 4 x 400 relay. She surpassed all expectations and still considers it one of her greatest sports memories. "To this day I'm grateful for that chance."

With a strong arm, she also played third base and shortstop for her junior high softball team. But it was her volleyball play that got her noticed by a soon-to-be college coach. She moved to the Linn-Mar varsity squad during her sophomore year, Osenbaugh remembers, "I was so nervous I was sick to my stomach. Somehow I carved out a spot for myself. I wanted to win."

Doug Van Oort, an assistant volleyball coach at Jefferson, was named Mount Mercy volleyball coach just as Amy was finishing her Linn-Mar career. At the time, Mount Mercy was the only team in its conference that didn't offer athletic scholarships, and the program had struggled, says Van Oort.

"Amy was one of Linn-Mar's better players and the Mississippi Valley was the best conference. I could tell she was a fighter who wouldn't back down, wouldn't be intimidated and would make the most of her talent."

A hand-written letter from Van Oort got the attention of Osenbaugh, who had been considering several small colleges, and she became his first recruit. A true technician, Van Oort moved Osenbaugh from blocker to hitter and began helping her hone her skills.

The first time she played her new position, Osenbaugh says, "I completely messed up. The next practice he put me right back in there. He believed in me, and it was like flipping a switch. My freshman year and that next summer was when I became a volleyball player.

"I became smarter in my hitting and learned to read the defenses. I'm not a great jumper and I'm not real quick, but I was probably the strongest kid on the team because I got myself in real good shape, focusing on my hitting, power and endurance."

Her freshman year, Mount Mercy didn't make the conference playoffs. But the power had been

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turned on, and Osenbaugh and her teammates soon began pummeling the competition, winning the conference the next three years. Van Oort was named Coach of the Year and Osenbaugh Conference MVP all three years.

After Van Oort suggested Osenbaugh change her footwork between her junior and senior years, she became even more dominant, and Mount Mercy was nationally ranked for the first time.

Osenbaugh recalls that when she, setter Lori Riha (Cedar Rapids Jefferson) and middle hitter Roxanne Holsteen (Wapello) were in the front line, "I could look at the other team and see the fear in their eyes. It was great." All three are Hall of Famers now.

"Amy was relentless," says Van Oort. "She set a ton of records during that time, but what she brought to that program was much more powerful than any record. It was the will to win."

Digging deep

Osenbaugh graduated from Mount Mercy in 1994 with a marketing degree. Soon after, knowing she would experience a "grief-like" void in the fall without volleyball, she moved to New York City. "I didn't go away to college and I wanted to prove I could do it."

She worked part-time jobs, eventually crossing off everything on her New York to-do list, and returned home. She was dating a Mount Mercy soccer player, Corey Brinkmeyer, and spent three seasons assisting Van Oort in his new position as Kirkwood volleyball coach. She played recreational volleyball on the side.

In 1999 she married Brinkmeyer, now a Linn-Mar teacher who is the varsity boys soccer coach and announcer at Linn-Mar basketball and volleyball games. They have two sons, Graham and Mitchell, and Osenbaugh works in financial planning at Primerica.

Their lives revolve around sports, she says. They attend as many Linn-Mar events as possible, and for two weeks this summer they planned their activities around the Women's World Cup Soccer Tournament. The Brinkmeyers aren't pushing their boys to play sports, she adds, but it's

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possible to catch 10-year-old Graham watching women's lacrosse on ESPN2 at 2 in the morning. As a mom, she says, "my role is to raise young men who treat women well."

After three shoulder surgeries to counter the effects of hundreds of killer swings, even recreational volleyball is behind her now. But Osenbaugh still carries herself like an athlete, evincing the sturdy resolve that propelled her to outperform her apparent talent level.

"I want our kids to know that greatness is so achievable," she says of her ongoing love of sports. "They have watched the Printys and the Bohannons (at Linn-Mar) and had opportunities to meet them. We're so lucky to have these kinds of people in our boys' lives. They are such a valuable resource to younger kids."

Even so, she says, she didn't fully understand what sports meant to her until she entered the darkest chapter of her life, five years ago, when she miscarried six months into her third pregnancy. "It was a horrible and debilitating experience, and I fell into a depression," she says. Her former coaches were there to encourage her, telling her, "You're a champion. You'll get through it. You've got to go on."

"I had to dig down deep like when I was playing," she says. "I realized that sports had taught me resilience. You've got to be coachable and you've got to take care of yourself. After losing a baby I had to take care of myself. Sports really is my life, and that's how I got through it."

"I love being married to a coach," Osenbaugh continues. "I bleed Linn-Mar. I bleed Mount Mercy. And one thing I've always been proud of is that I don't have the ideal athletic body that you'd expect these records to come out of. But I always had the will to win. I don't even let my kids win at chess," she says with a grin.