



CHANCELLOR'S PROFESSORS

Joy DeSensi

Chancellor's Professor Joy DeSensi found her passions early in life: music and sports.

She started out to be a classical pianist, and still plays the 1931 piano given to her by her grandfather, who ran an Italian bakery in the working class "Hill" district of Pittsburgh.

She also excelled in a completely different field—competitive rifle shooting—which was one of the few sports available to high school girls in Pittsburgh in those days. Eventually, she won a spot on the Olympic demonstration team. She still holds several national shooting records.

But the experience also taught her that female athletes were not taken seriously.

"We proved that women could compete," says DeSensi, a professor in the UT Knoxville's Exercise, Sport and Leisure Studies Department and Associate Dean of the Graduate School Sport Studies. "But we didn't get to go to Mexico City

like the rest of the Olympians in 1968. We had to mail in our scores."

She also loved basketball, but balked at restrictive rules for women. So she became a student in the philosophy and sociology of sport.

"When basketball for women was first invented, women weren't allowed to move at all," she says. "They were confined to little squares on the court. They couldn't dribble the ball—just roll or toss it."

"Women were farming in the fields, working in homes, raising kids, but they couldn't move in basketball," she says. "Just think of it."

She soon noticed that it wasn't just women who were underestimated.

"I became concerned with social justice issues all around sport—opportunities for movement, regardless of race, gender, age, ability, sexual orientation, religion, economic status, politics," she explains.

During her graduate studies, she found a way to combine her love of sports with the deeper questions she was asking.

"I always regarded sports a bit differently," she acknowledges. "It's essential to see the person on

the other team as a human being. We're each giving something to each other."

While writing her dissertation, she researched attitudes among the Pittsburgh Steelers, the Pittsburgh Penguins and professional women tennis players. Her underlying question of the athletes: "When do you see your opponent as a human?"

The Penguins coach answered the question in his own way. One day he asked DeSensi, "Want to see a fight?"

"I said 'no,' but he made a sign and they all immediately broke out into a fight right there in practice. And they really went at it."

The women tennis players surprised her most. "They viewed their opponents as human beings even less frequently than the football or hockey players."

She loves intercollegiate sports, and gives UT Athletics high marks, but she warns against taking any sport too seriously—"That's where the word 'fan' comes from – from 'fanatic.'"

DeSensi knew as early as elementary school that she wanted to teach.

"Students keep me energized," she says. "Their thirst for knowledge and their 'ah-ha' moments are wonderful."

She loves to challenge conventional thinking.

"People come to my classes thinking sport is just sports, it's entertainment. But when you start dealing with these deeper issues, you start etching away at something that's sacred. It brings up controversy. But I keep the discussion on issues. Nothing does that better than a sports setting."

She's coached volleyball, basketball, field hockey and tennis, and taught swimming skills. As a member of the Science Board of the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sport, she has promoted an inclusive view of sports – and emphasized the humane values it can promote.

"Can I respect my opponent as another struggling human being trying to do his or her best?" she asks. "That's what sport means to me."

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