



Dr. Sue Garrison: *The Inspiration Behind Generations of Educators and Leaders*

By Debbie Z. Harwell

Sue Garrison, the University of Houston's first director of women's physical education and women's athletics (1945-1979), was ahead of her time, creating opportunities for women long before Title IX.

Photo courtesy of the TWU Libraries Woman's Collection, Texas Woman's University, Denton, Texas.

“Women like her made women like me.”¹

*—Debbie Sokol, award-winning
volleyball player, coach, and trainer*

Women are frequently labeled as the person behind someone else's success, usually a man's. But women also have a long – often unheralded – history of opening doors for other women, creating opportunities, and showing them a path to build their own success so they can do the same for the next generation. Largely lost in history, Dr. Sue Garrison was one of those women.

In 1934, the University of Houston (UH) became a four-year institution and fielded its first athletic teams: men's ice hockey and women's basketball. The eight-woman basketball team coached by Irene Spiess competed against teams from companies like Southern Pacific Railroad and W. T. Grant store. In reality, early women's sports were more akin to physical education (PE) or intramurals than athletic programs, but the UH sports picture changed dramatically after World War II, when enrollment soared to 10,000 students, many of them clamoring for a traditional university experience.² In 1945, UH hired athletic director Harry H. Fouke who added five coaches for men's sports and the school's first women's PE director, Sue Garrison, who guided UH women's athletics into the modern era.

Breaking New Ground in Physical Education

Susanna “Sue” Garrison was born June 8, 1909, to Miles and Ethel Garrison, in Johnson County, Texas. The family later moved to Palestine, where her father worked as a bookkeeper, and her mother became a rental agent. Sue attended Sam Houston State Teachers College and majored in PE, laying the foundation for her teaching career. The college had responded to an increased demand for PE teachers in Texas schools by offering sports theory courses where the women learned rules, techniques, and teaching methods. Classes covered the history of PE, playground methods, first aid, folk dancing, and Camp Fire. A “correctives” class for freshmen used silhouettes to identify incorrect posture and select exercises to correct it. The 1930 yearbook points out these courses for women “promote Physical Education for the many, rather than Physical straining for the few.” Women engaged in soccer, archery, and track and field events such as low hurdles, dash running, broad jump, high jump, discus, javelin, and shot put.³

Each year, the Sam Houston State chapter of the Women's Athletic Association (WAA) selected a major and minor



At Sam Houston State Teachers College, Sue Garrison belonged to the Life Saving Club, one of many activities offered to PE majors.

Photo courtesy of the Sam Houston State University Archives, Alcalde Collection.

sport (basketball and tennis, for example) for competition and awarded letter sweaters based on the points earned. In 1930, WAA sponsored its first Play Day, hosting Louisiana State Normal School (now Northwestern State University), Stephen F. Austin State University, and Rice University, giving female students an opportunity to meet women from other schools “without the objectionable features that are connected with interscholastic competition.”⁴



The university named Harry Fouke as its first athletic director in 1945, a year before entering the Lone Star Conference.

Photo from *The Houstonian*, 1948, courtesy of Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

In 1936, Garrison became a PE teacher at Stephen F. Austin High School in the Houston Independent School District. This may have put her in contact with Harry Fouke who was an athletic director in the district prior to UH tapping him to lead its fledgling athletic program. Garrison, who had already begun her graduate work when Fouke hired her at UH, completed her Ph.D. at Texas Woman’s University in 1961.⁵

Garrison, left, served as the faculty sponsor of the Lanyard Club that organized activities to give women PE majors a more professional experience. One of the more active campus organizations, it arranged intramural tournaments in volleyball, basketball, soccer, badminton, tennis, archery, softball, swimming, diving, and track and field.

Photo from *The Houstonian*, 1950, courtesy of Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

Considered the “pioneer of UH women’s athletics,” Garrison began her tenure (1945-1979) at UH as director of women’s physical education. Harry Fouke recalled these were lean years for UH athletics. The first paid event was a men’s basketball game played in an old gym without bleachers. When the UH players took out their ball – a “carcass,” Fouke called it – the official asked for a better one, to which Fouke replied it was their *only* ball. Garrison sold the tickets and then came to the gate to tear the stubs as fans entered. She did whatever was needed, cleaning up after games, judging the homecoming queen contest, conducting community workshops, codirecting UH-hosted athletic events, and coordinating the musical tea for the UH Women’s Club.⁶

Garrison and UH PE instructor Martha Hawthorne remembered the women’s first foray into tournament play in 1965 when a group of female students asked to play in a basketball tournament with Temple College, Stephen F. Austin State University, and Blinn Junior College, which hosted the competition. Martha, who had recently joined the staff, was told Sue would not support women playing in tournaments, but, surprisingly, she agreed. Unlike their junior college counterparts who had established teams and uniforms, the Houston team wore pinnies, which were sleeveless vests with numbers on them. Nevertheless, UH won, led by three experienced junior college transfer students to UH, including one who scored 60+ points in the final game.⁷

After that, another group of girls wanted to play in a volleyball tournament at Northwestern State University in Louisiana. This time, Sue not only said yes, she drove the team in her car and had “an absolutely wonderful time,” Martha recalled. Badminton and tennis teams followed, and suddenly, UH had four groups participating in women’s sports with other Texas schools.⁸

Organizing Women’s Sports

While the athletic directors and coaches initially called the women’s games “extramurals,” they soon recognized them for what they were – intercollegiate athletics – and organizations formed to coordinate women’s competitions.





Early on, a pianist accompanied PE classes to assist the girls with their exercises. This might have reflected Garrison's passion for modern dance, which she taught as part of the PE curriculum until the mid-1950s when she brought in dance faculty, who, at times, also assisted the Theater Department with classes.⁹

Photo from *The Houstonian*, 1946, courtesy of Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

Sue Garrison played an active leadership role in organizations emerging at all levels in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Hawthorne, who later became women's sports director at Rice University, said of Garrison, "We could not have asked for a better champion." The Texas Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (TCIAW) formed to improve the organizational structure of four-year and junior college competition. In 1972, Hawthorne served as the commissioner for District V, which included UH and seventeen other schools.¹⁰

That same year, the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (AIAW) became active nationally.



Sue Garrison worked to improve women's athletic opportunities through organizations at the local, regional, and national level.

Photo from *The Houstonian*, 1952, courtesy of Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

Historian Corye Perez Beene described AIAW as "an organization made for women, run by women, and developed for best governance of female athletes." It spawned state groups, like the Texas Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (TAIAW), which emerged from TCIAW. Garrison and Kay Don of Texas A&M University (TAMU) were among the TAIWA cofounders and served on its board.¹¹

AIAW took the position that education was its first priority, and athletics should heighten, not override, that experience – a philosophy TAIWA mirrored. Additionally, the groups advocated for funding to cover multiple sports, travel on licensed carriers, travel expenses, equipment, trained officials and coaches, and equal opportunities for women's participation. Don cited these financial burdens – borne by coaches and students – as one of their biggest challenges.¹²

During Garrison's time as chair of TCIAW and president of TAIWA, outside factors impacted women's sports. Congress passed Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, providing that "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance."¹³ Though its meaning is still debated, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), which regulated men's sports, feared the law could reduce its biggest revenue producers, men's football and basketball.

Garrison encouraged TAIWA members to build good working relationships with the men's organizations to best serve their women athletes, fitting Don's description of her as someone whose "way was to pull people together." Garrison also attempted to preempt any concerns by the Southwest Conference (SWC) that TAIWA wanted to curtail men's sports to secure women's opportunities under Title IX, saying that would "result in mediocrity for both programs, if not the demise of both."¹⁴

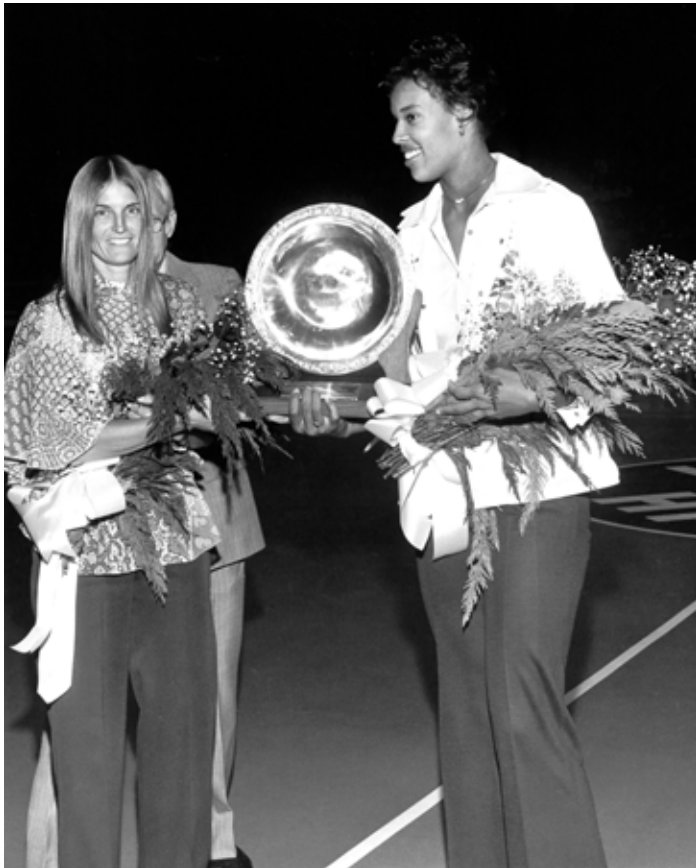
On the downside, AIAW and TAIWA rules limited recruitment to maintain the emphasis on education and avoid the money-driven style of men's sports. Thus, women athletes paid for their own college visits, and athletic departments were barred from paying coaches' travel expenses to watch them play. Garrison called the rules "unrealistic" because, as Don explained, they needed to see the women play before offering scholarships, and coaches should not have to foot the bill.¹⁵

In 1976, the regional Southwest Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (SWAIAW) formed to support education and women's athletics and, Garrison wrote, to unify Texas, Louisiana, Arkansas, and Oklahoma "for regional affairs and for strengthening the regional input for the AIAW."¹⁶ With Garrison as president, SWAIAW also created a structure to move smoothly from state, to regional, and national competitions.

Eventually the NCAA added women's sports, luring schools away from AIAW, which sued the NCAA for anti-trust violations but lost before folding in 1983.

Adapting to Title IX

“Having a sports program adds to your dimension as a college,” contended Martha Hawthorne, and women’s sports are no exception. UH women competed in intercollegiate volleyball, badminton, basketball, and tennis, but their success drew little attention despite Garrison’s advocacy. For example, volleyball coach Ruth Nelson had to call the newspapers with scores and hope they were printed.¹⁷ Even UH’s newspaper, *The Daily Cougar*, rarely covered the women’s teams, and some years, the yearbook left the women athletes out completely, despite contending in the equivalent of the NCAA Final Four in their sports multiple times.



Coach Ruth Nelson (1974-1981) and volleyball star Flo Hyman, who received the first UH women’s athletic scholarship, celebrate Hyman’s selection as a First Team All-American in 1974.

Photo courtesy of University of Houston Athletics.

The year after Title IX passed, Garrison reported UH’s budget for women’s athletics was increasing ten-fold, and scholarships would be offered for the first time in volleyball, tennis, badminton, and basketball. Refusing to give Title IX all the credit, she clarified that UH had offered support prior to the law and that, simultaneously, student interest had increased. Although women’s athletics were not considered “ladylike” before the 1970s, attitudes were changing.¹⁸

UH put \$90,000 into its women’s athletic programs in 1976, including thirty full or partial scholarships. While other women’s collegiate programs were just getting started, Garrison pointed out, “Our program was here already, and we

have expanded it ... We had four well-rounded programs here before Title IX even reared its head.” UH then added swimming and track and field to the schedule. It was a breakout year for UH women with badminton ranked second in the nation, and volleyball ranked third. Vicki Clark set a Texas record for the women’s mile, ranking in the top 20 nationally.¹⁹



UH volleyball players don new hoodies Nelson bought for them for the SWAIAW regional competition in 1978. Back row: Rose Magers (Powell), Darlene Meyer (Evans), Sherryl Moore, and Linda Stadler. Front row: Marcia Horsman (Erickson), Lisa Gustafson, Donna Dusek (Janak), and Debbie Sokol.

Photo courtesy of Debbie Sokol.

For volleyball player Darlene Meyer (now Evans), the most important thing was not their facility, which had a concrete floor and no air conditioning, but the fact that they were competing and winning. In the SWC, they competed against schools they knew from earlier Play Days in contests that were competitive but without animosity, following the example set by their athletic directors.²⁰

Meeting Sue Garrison the Woman

I first learned about Sue Garrison a decade ago when visiting the UH Hall of Honor, now removed. Her trailblazing fight for equality impressed me, but her yearbook photos portrayed a very somber individual. So when I began visiting with women who knew her, I was surprised to discover she was not like that at all.

Colleagues called her witty and amusing – “a hoot.” Kay Don recalled a river rafting trip they took in Colorado, saying, “She knew how to play but she also knew how to be firm enough to get things done.” Martha Hawthorne recalled the coaches and Garrison “would laugh ... [and] she’d laugh at herself.” After Martha’s mother joined the group for lunch, Martha reminisced, “[My mother] felt that I was the luckiest person in the world to have Sue Garrison for my boss.”²¹

The student athletes respected Garrison because she treated them with respect. Darlene, who went on to coach and teach PE, recalled Garrison was “very soft, quiet, [and a] great listener.” She “knew how to take a teenager, a pre-adult, [and help you] to understand why you have to do certain things.” When Garrison accompanied the volleyball team to state,



The UH volleyball players enjoyed having Sue Garrison join them when they traveled to tournaments. Shown left to right, Ruth Nelson, an unidentified woman, and Garrison take advantage of free time to play pool during a regional tournament at UT Arlington.

Photo courtesy of Debbie Sokol.

Darlene saw her as a “safety net.” Debbie Sokol, who coached volleyball at Rice University after graduation, remembered “her being very, very supportive, and very genuine, creating relationships with the players ... talking to them, taking an interest in them ... joking ... that’s just something athletic directors don’t always do.” When the team got third at nationals, Sokol emphasized, “It didn’t even get in *The Daily Cougar*, nothing; it was as if we didn’t exist. So having an athletic director [on the trip] made us feel special.”²²

Garrison’s devotion went beyond the fun times. If someone needed food, she went to the store. Once when the thirteen-woman team received funding for twelve players to travel to a Miami tournament, Garrison insisted no player would be left behind. She organized a fundraiser to sell yard signs, and everyone helped, because it was the right thing to do. This act meant the world to that student, and, Hawthorne said, showed how “really loving that [Sue] could be.”²³

Janice Hilliard, Ph.D., came to play basketball at UH under Coach Dot Woodfin in 1977 and remembered Garrison and Woodfin creating an environment where she felt cared for and safe. The basketball team was in awe of Garrison who came through anytime Coach Woodfin needed something for the team, and Garrison had the gym renamed in her honor in 1980. Significantly, Hilliard, who has spent her career developing athletes, remembered Garrison as the first woman she saw in a position of power in athletics.²⁴

Sue Garrison was also committed to equality, evidenced in her personal and work life. She belonged to St. James Episcopal Church in the Riverside Terrace area that went from almost exclusively white in 1950 to overwhelmingly black by 1970. As the church desegregated and many whites left, Sue stayed as a member of the choir and vestry. At UH, she became one of the region’s first directors to include Black women athletes on their teams.²⁵

Supporting Volleyball

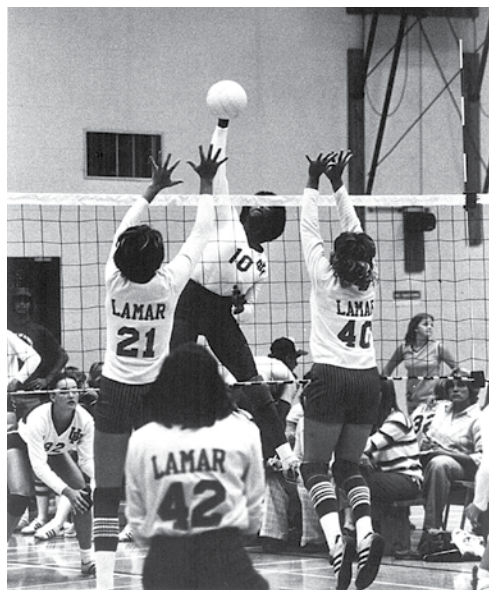
Under Garrison’s direction, women athletes excelled in multiple sports, but nowhere are her successes and relationships more evident than in the volleyball program that grew in the 1970s under the forward-thinking leadership of champion player and coach Ruth Nelson. Sokol recalled, “[Ruth] always brought innovation into practice, into her game plans, into promoting our team, which is where she and Sue Garrison really came together because they both had that vision for women’s athletics.”²⁶

Ruth worked the players long, hard hours that would not be permitted under current rules. They trained outside in the Houston heat and inside the sweltering gym. She had them practice jumping in the pool, strength training that she insisted could add five inches to their vertical leap. “[Ruth] could get you to do something that you never thought you could,” Darlene declared. It was not all work though. When they traveled to tournaments, Ruth made it an experience, especially when they visited places some of them had only dreamed of going.²⁷

Three players from Garrison and Nelson’s tenures at UH went on to win the silver medal in women’s volleyball at the 1984 Olympic Games. Nelson convinced Flo Hyman to attend UH in 1974, offering her the first UH women’s athletic scholarship. At 6’5” she towered above the other players, and her skills led the Cougars to 120 victories and three consecutive Top 5 finishes at AIAW Nationals in her three years at UH. She also played on the U.S. Women’s National Team when it trained in Pasadena, Texas, but left UH when it moved to Colorado Springs.²⁸

A self-described gym rat, Rita Crockett (now Buck-Crockett) came to Houston for personal reasons and joined the UH volleyball team in 1977. Known for her ability to jump, she was selected Rookie of the Year at USVBA Nationals and helped propel the Cougars into second place at the SWAIAW Regional Tournament. The following year she departed to join the U.S. National Team.²⁹

On a trip to USVBA Nationals in El Paso in 1978, Ruth



Rita Crockett, number 10, played at UH one year before being selected to train for the 1980 Olympic team. She had an amazing vertical jump of 42”.

Photo courtesy of Ruth Nelson.



Rose Magers, leaping, was named a USVBA All-American in 1980, her final year at UH before following Ruth to LSU.

Photo courtesy of *The Houstonian*, 1980, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

and the team stopped in at Big Spring, Texas, to visit Rose Magers (now Magers-Powell) and her family on a recruiting mission. Rose was interested in UH because the team had other girls who looked like her. She recalled, “[Ruth] told my parents that she would take care of me, I would get an education, she would make sure I played good volleyball, and she did that.” After three years she followed Ruth to LSU and then joined the U.S. National Team.³⁰

Even though Flo, Rita, and Rose never played together at UH, the women were excited the Olympic coaches paired them for drills. Just as they had done under Nelson, they pushed and celebrated each other for the good of the team. Ruth told Rose if they worked hard, they would enjoy the games, play well, and make memories. Over their two years preparing, China and USA alternated wins; when it came to the Olympic games, USA won in the pool, and China won the final contest. The UH women and their USA teammates proudly stepped onto the platform to receive their silver medals – the nation’s first in the sport.³¹

Rose shared how amazing it was to attend the opening ceremonies and to wear that historic medal. Rita recalled “all the sweat and being away from friends and family and having to live a very controlled life for your country ... It meant a lot ...

wearing USA on my back ... I felt very humbled and honored that I was one of twelve women to represent the United States of America and bring home a medal to our country.”³²

Flo, Rita and Rose all played professionally in Japan, where sadly Flo died during a game in 1986 at age thirty-one of Marfan Syndrome. Rita also played in Europe before she and Rose moved into coaching. Currently, Rita coaches at Florida International University, and Rose coaches at Alabama A&M. All three players and Ruth Nelson have been inducted into multiple sports halls of fame. Flo Hyman and Sue Garrison were the first women inducted into the UH Hall of Honor in 1998; Rita followed in 2008 and Rose in 2012.

Understanding Garrison’s Legacy

A half century passed between the time Sue Garrison began studying physical education until her retirement in 1979, a revolutionary time for women’s athletics. Ruth Nelson contends that “Without knowing and respecting the HISTORY... there is NO future!”³³ That is evident when we see how the legacy of the female pioneers is passed down over time.

Garrison, who passed away in 2001, was on the cutting edge, finding new ways for women to compete, developing structures for inclusion and equality, and building relationships to further women’s opportunities. She instilled a value of service in others. For example, she convinced Nelson to become more involved in AIAW, which led to her chairing two National AIAW Championships. Nelson remains grateful that Garrison foresaw that “to make change you must get more involved in the national organization,” so Nelson has passed down that lesson as well.

Garrison received a Faculty Emeritus award from the UH Board of Regents and, in 1980, became the first woman inducted to the National Association of Collegiate Directors of Athletics Hall of Fame. She was a leader, she taught others to be leaders, and they coached the next generation to do the same, even though “women’s athletics were hidden in the dark corners of the universe,” as Sokol observed. When the students became coaches and athletic educators, they followed Sue and Ruth’s lead as consummate professionals: dressing up for matches, treating officials professionally, shaking hands with coaches and event organizers, treating others respectfully, and serving on committees.³⁴

All of the women discussed here, and other UH women athletes, have been continuously preparing the next generation for success. They have become educators and successful entrepreneurs, with many starting their own training programs. Sokol explains that from the time she arrived at UH at age eighteen, she came to understand the process: “You learn, you share, and you give back. ... Women like Sue and Ruth shaped me, and I shaped thousands of young girls.”³⁵ □

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