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The Face Of

Lauren Herrington Is Part Of A New Breed Of Female Players Riding Hockey's Wave Of Popularity

BY SANDY SMITH

Photos By Elaine Skylar

The new face of women's hockey stares back at Lauren Herrington in the mirror as she wipes away the sweat of a hard workout. It also looks at her across the breakfast table each morning.

You can count Herrington among the new wave of female hockey players who've grown up unfazed by lacing up the skates and mixing it up in the corners with their classmates, both male and female. And Herrington, with a quick look to her hockey-

win a gold medal for it. It brought more popularity to the sport."

Herrington began playing at about the same time that women's hockey was given Olympic status. But she looks at her two younger hockey-playing sisters and can't help but feel a twinge of envy.

"I started playing kind of late," said Herrington, who first took the ice at about age 7. "My little sister started when she was 4. I'm so jealous."

In her formidable years, Herrington played almost exclusively with boys. But unlike Olympians such as Karyn Bye, who had to go by nicknames to avoid having her gender discovered, Herrington first skated with Concord Youth Hockey in New Hampshire, the same league which helped develop two-time Olympic defenseman Tara Mounsey. Long hair bobbing out from under a helmet was closer to the norm than an oddity in Concord.

"I remember coming to watch Tara play for Concord [High School's boys' team], and just thinking 'If she can do it, I can do it,'" Herrington said. "Seeing her play for Concord set a goal for me. My goal was to play boys high school hockey."

It was the first in a progression of goals, which now include playing Division I college hockey and someday, just maybe, playing in the Olympics as well.

"Hockey's extremely important to me. It's one of the main things in my life, my No. 1 priority," Herrington said.

"Division I hockey is a closer goal, and hopefully the Olympics, but I know I have a lot more to work on. That won't be for a while."

For now, Herrington lives out her first dream of playing boys' high school hockey. Minnesota was the first state to sanction girls' ice hockey as a high school sport, and in the aftermath of the 1998 Olympics,

many states — including Massachusetts — formed girls' high school hockey leagues. Several New Hampshire schools put teams on the ice, but sanctioned leagues may still be a few years off.

So as a sophomore, Herrington is one of the top defensemen for the Bishop Brady High School varsity team. She's an equal opportunity player, as well. In between games and practices for Brady, she makes the hour or so drive to Massachusetts to hold down the blue line for the Assabet Midget I girls' team.

Herrington didn't start playing on all-girls teams until she was 12, and it was certainly an adjustment.

"At first I really didn't like it that much. It was so different," said Herrington. "I was always with girls a lot older than me, and the locker room was much different."

Then, two years ago, she joined Assabet, one of the most storied and successful girls' programs in the country, and found her niche. As an 8th-grader, she won the Peeewe National Championship with Assabet. The team repeated last year, with Herrington coming away as the top scoring female defenseman at the National Championships.

The girls' team is a chance for Herrington to step into the offense more and take more chances. With the boys, she has to pick and choose her spots.

"Playing with the boys, you really have to keep your head up, make quicker decisions and be ready at all times to be hit. You learn to do everything quicker and harder," Herrington said.

"If I had played with girls all the way through, I wouldn't be anywhere near as good as I am now. But the girls' team is a good place to really develop your skills.

"Both teams are close and fun to be around. The only difference [off the ice] is



playing little sister, knows the climate on the ice continues to warm toward female players.

—In the last 10 years, the number of girls and women registered with USA Hockey has quadrupled to its current mark of 42,000, and nearly half of those players suit up with boys' or men's teams.

The oldest of six children, the 16-year-old Herrington and her two sisters are riding the women's hockey wave of popularity in the wake of the last two Olympics. The groundswell from that exposure has advanced opportunities for players of all ages and abilities.

It's also given little girls a realistic dream to chase.

"I remember watching and rooting for the U.S.," said Herrington, who counts Cammi Granato and Angela Ruggiero as two of her role models. "I thought it was cool that women could play hockey and

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what we talk about, quite obviously."

In the next two years, she'll have her hands full with narrowing down her college selections. Just a decade ago, the only real option to play at a high level in college was the ECAC. Now, the sport's boom has left aftershocks such as the WCHA, CHA and Hockey East to go along with the ECAC in Division I, as well as ever-expanding leagues in Division III.

"I'm doing everything that's possible [to realize my dream]," said Herrington, who also has the added luxury of ice time since her father owns the Ice Den in Hooksett, N.H.

"I'm playing with the guys and girls, I'm working out, lifting, practicing in the basement . . ."

With all the advances and opportunities available to girls and women to play hockey, Herrington and this next wave of female players are only scratching the surface of possibilities.

"Each year at Nationals [with Assabet] it's getting tougher," said Herrington, who is gearing up for this year's Girls'/Women's National Championships in Aston, Pa., from April 2-6.

"You keep seeing more skilled players coming up."

They're all part of the ever-changing face of hockey. ★

Sandy Smith is the sports editor of the Concord (N.H.) Monitor.



The Face of the Future

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1. Why is Lauren Herrington considered a part of a new breed?
2. What event has given girls a realistic dream and advanced opportunities for players?
3. Why is Herrington jealous of her little sister?
4. What was the first goal that Herrington set for herself?
5. What is the name of the Girls Hockey team that Herrington travels to play on?
6. At what age did Herrington start playing on an all girls team?
7. What honor did Herrington receive at the National Championships?
8. What does Herrington find different about scoring on a boys team compared to the girls team?
9. What opportunity does Herrington have when she plays on the girls team?
10. What added luxury does Herrington receive over other players?