

WILLIAMSPORT SUN-GAZETTE

Helen Dieffenbach Lutes: Veteran, teacher, athlete and feminist



PHOTO PROVIDED Helen Dieffenbach Lutes is seen in her WAVES uniform, courtesy of the Lycoming County Historical Society.

Helen Dieffenbach Lutes was an athlete, a teacher and an outstanding supporter of women's rights and gender equality in sports. Born January 10, 1909, in Watsontown, she was the daughter of George and Mary Halfpenny Dieffenbach. Helen had a 43-year career teaching physical education in Williamsport public schools and at Mansfield University, interrupted only by the four years she spent in the WAVES during World War II. She was elected to the sports halls of fame in

Mansfield, Tioga County and Williamsport. In her 90s, she summed up her own life this way: *“I’m a Women’s Libber, and have been as long as I can remember.”*

As a student at Williamsport High School, Helen, nicknamed Jim, was a natural athlete, excelling in basketball, gymnastics, and tennis. Her high school yearbook celebrated her athleticism with a chant:

“Yeah, Team

Yeah, Team

When you hear this cheer



PHOTO PROVIDED Lutes' uniform and trunk are displayed at the Lycoming County Historical Society in a photo by Richard P. Allen.

‘Jim’ must be near.

She loves athletics, one and all,

And is a whiz at basketball.”

After graduation from Williamsport High School, Helen earned her bachelor’s degree in physical education from East Stroudsburg University, where she was on the tennis and basketball teams. She graduated from East Stroudsburg in 1931 and began teaching in Williamsport that same year. By 1940, in addition to teaching, Helen had earned a master’s degree in physical education from Penn State. She later did doctoral work at both Indiana University and New York University.

Fred Dieffenbach (1912-1908), Helen’s younger brother, followed in her footsteps, attending East Stroudsburg. He then taught gymnastics in Williamsport public schools, including Lincoln Elementary, Roosevelt Junior High, and Curtin Junior High, retiring as Supervisor of Physical Education in the district.



PHOTO PROVIDED Lutes is bundled up and seated in her usual chair at a Mansfield women's softball game, from the collection of Edith Gallagher, coach.

World War II

Helen was 33 In 1942, when she enlisted in the United States Navy. Her parents discouraged her and made her promise not to request an overseas assignment. But her younger brother, Fred, had already enlisted in the Navy, and she was determined to contribute to the war effort. She served until 1946. One of her uniforms and her footlocker are on display at the Lycoming County Historical Society.

Helen attended Officer Candidate School at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, from October to December 1943, and graduated as a Lieutenant (j.g.). In December 1943, she was assigned to the Marine Training Center in Quantico, Virginia, where she was the commanding officer of the WAVES Medical Detachment on the post. Although she was in the Navy, she was stationed with men and women from the Marines on a Marine base.

She was well-respected by the 30-50 women she commanded. The post newsletter, *Gizmo Gazette* (5 May 1944), reported: *"All and all, we feel that 'Our' Lt. Dieffenbach is about the Best Ever. We are right behind her and her every wish is our command."*

In an interview in November 2001, Helen told Montoursville High School student Angela Mondell that, while she served in the reserves, she faced discrimination in salaries and promotions and that is why she eventually decided to resign.

Career at Mansfield University

After being discharged in 1946, Helen began her 28-year career teaching physical education at Mansfield State College. Long before there was such an idea as gender equity, Helen worked to give *“her girls”* the same opportunities afforded to male students. Early in her career at Mansfield, she organized a Sports Day for Girls during which young women competed in various sports including badminton, bowling, tennis, table tennis, basketball, and volleyball. The girls traveled by train to compete against Penn State, Bucknell, Lock Haven and Bloomsburg.

Eventually, the field hockey and tennis programs formed from the Sports Days. Helen also laid the foundation for the women’s swimming, volleyball, basketball, and softball programs. In addition, she ran the women’s intramural program, a volunteer position, and advised the color guard, cheerleaders, and class of 1955.

At Mansfield, Helen met and married Ferris Lutes, a 1928 graduate of Mansfield High School and a standout athlete in his own right. He played basketball, baseball, and football for Mansfield State College before graduating with a degree in secondary education in 1933. Ferris was on the 1928-29 undefeated basketball team and was the captain of the 1931 championship team. On the baseball diamond, he played first base and outfield. Helen was 45 when they married.

Helen Dieffenbach Lutes has been honored often and well by Mansfield University. In 1995, the softball field was named in her honor. She and husband, Ferris, are the first husband-wife duo enshrined in the MU Athletic Hall of Fame. In 2001, she was awarded an honorary doctorate of humane letters by Mansfield. In addition, she was honored by her alma mater, East Stroudsburg, and received the Eberly Medal for philanthropy and volunteerism.

One of a Kind

There are so many stories because Helen was one of a kind. Here is one, as told by Edith Gallagher, Mansfield’s longtime softball coach. On the day of one of Mansfield’s girls’ home softball games, Helen was at her doctor’s office and told him she was going to see *“her girls”* play that afternoon. He didn’t think she should go to the game. She looked him right in the eye and said, *“Unless I’m dead by this afternoon, I’m going to see my girls play!”*

Even after her retirement in 1974, she was actively involved in campus and community affairs. In 2001, she was the guest of honor at a softball tournament to raise funds to fight colon cancer, which had claimed Ferris's life several years before. When throwing out the ceremonial first pitch, Helen threw a perfect strike. She never lost her sense of adventure, going parasailing for her 90th birthday and skydiving when she was 93.

Just before she died at the age of 94 in 2003, Helen created a charitable foundation in the names of her husband and father. The foundation supports women's rights organizations and other organizations. She also sponsored two scholarships at Mansfield for women softball and field hockey players.

Helen spent her final years at the Green Home in Wellsboro and is buried with her husband at Green Lawn Cemetery in Montgomery.

Author's note: Thank you to Linda Dieffenbach-Lundy for sharing her aunt's story with me and providing background material.

Sieminski is the former director of the Madigan Library at Penn College. Sieminski is a founder of the Lycoming County Women's History Project (www.lycoming.edu/lcwhp). The column is published monthly.

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