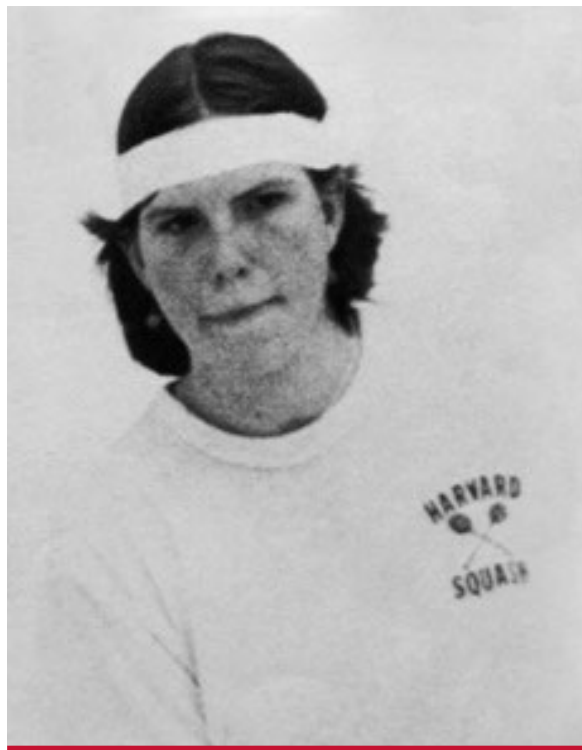


A History of Harvard

# **WOMEN'S SQUASH**

## **THE EARLY YEARS 1971-1986**



*Mary Hulbert, 1985*

# INTRODUCTION

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Unlike the history of men's squash at Harvard University, which has been meticulously charted since the program was inaugurated in 1922 under Harry Lee Cowles, the first of a series of iconic men's team coaches, the inception and early years of the Harvard women's squash team are much harder to accurately trace and reliably document. The early-1970's period during which women's squash at most colleges began was marked by campus-wide ferment and controversy at all of America's major universities, Harvard included, with the Vietnam War and many other issues roiling the atmosphere on campuses throughout the nation. Indeed, two of Harvard's academic years during this time frame ended with the campus closed down, and no exams.

Furthermore, the "blending" that was taking place between Harvard and Radcliffe was an incremental process, both empirically and in the participants' mind-set, that took several years to complete even after the official merger was finalized in 1974, making it a bit unclear exactly when the Radcliffe banner under which Crimson women teams initially competed was replaced by the Harvard banner. Incremental as well was the pace and manner in which Harvard and its Ivy League counterparts responded to the early-1970's passage of Title Nine, the landmark legislation that mandated gender equity, in athletics as well as on every other front, for all schools that received federal funding. Harvard's athletics web site, [gocrimson.com](http://gocrimson.com), fully reflects this ambiguity in its page on women's squash: there was a listed coach (Betty Lincoln, Radcliffe class of '53) and captain (Beth Goddard '74) for the 1973-74 season but no dual-meet results appear until the following 1974-75 year, yet several members of the class of '76 definitively state that they played on teams representing the school during all four of their college years.

But, whoever started Harvard's women's squash program, whenever he/she/they did so and whichever institution was being represented at the time, what can be stated with total certainty is that first Hemenway Gymnasium (through the 1997-98 season) and then the Murr Center (from 1998 to the present) has been the home address of college women's squash's all-time most significant and enduring dynasty. Over the past 40 years the Crimson women have won 15 regular-season national titles, 14 Howe Cups (what is now the postseason tournament emblematic of the national team championship), 20 Ivy League crowns and 15 Intercollegiate Individual tourneys. The Individuals titles were achieved by 12 women, namely Lee Howard in '73, Mary Hulbert in '85, Diana Edge in '88, Jen Holleran in '90, Jordanna Fraiberg in '92 with the hardball and '94 with the softball, Vanya Desai, who won the last Individuals played with the hardball in '93, Libby Eynon in '95, Ivy Pochoda in '98, Lily Lorentzen in '06, Kyla Grigg in '07, Laura Gemmell in 2010 and Amanda Sobhy in 2012, 2013 and 2014.

The team swept through five consecutive wire-to-wire undefeated campaigns from 1993-97, won the Individuals title eight times in one 14-year stretch (including four years in a row from 1992-95), captured the Ivy League title 11 times during the 14-year period from 1990-2003 and at one point won 70 consecutive team matches in a row. All of these totals are unequaled by any other women's college program, in several of these categories by a wide margin.

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## FIRST STIRRINGS

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Though as noted, it is virtually impossible to confidently identify exactly when (or where) this eventual colossus initially came into being, perhaps as good a place-and-time as any, and one that fully exemplifies its humble and low-key beginnings, might be the poorly-lit, infrequently-swept and seldom-utilized squash courts located incongruously and anonymously in the basement of Lowell House, where only intramural and recreational squash was played. It was in this unlikely location that in autumn of 1971 Harvard junior Neil Vosters, a resident of nearby Eliot House and a prominent member of Harvard's powerful men's squash teams that went undefeated throughout his three-year varsity career under their iconic coach Jack Barnaby, talked his girlfriend, Lee Howard, a transfer student from Mt. Vernon (the sister school to George Washington University in Washington DC), into allowing him to introduce her to the game and teach her how to play. Within a few weeks they moved their squash sessions over to Hemenway, where Barnaby himself, stopping by one quiet Saturday afternoon, saw them hitting and was immediately struck by Howard's natural talent and athleticism.

He made a point of telling Howard that she had a chance to win the Intercollegiates if she kept at it and more or less coached her on the sly in concert with Radcliffe women's squash team coordinator Perla Hewes throughout that winter and the next, during which Howard ran on the track above the Divinity School library, drilled under Barnaby's and Hewes's supervision, played in practice games that Barnaby would occasionally arrange with players on the men's junior varsity, and held the No. 1 position on a somewhat informally-assembled Radcliffe squad that had been designated a club team during the 1971-72 year before being classified as a varsity sport in 1972-73. Radcliffe did enter a team that year in the inaugural Howe Cup but fared poorly, even though Howard herself went undefeated throughout that weekend.

In the opening portion of the '73 Intercollegiates final at Wesleyan --- just two weeks after Vosters had contributed a key comeback win at No. 4 from two-love down against Penn all-American Dinesh Nayak in a 5-4 road victory for the Ivy League championship over a Quaker squad that at one point had led four matches to one --- the top-seeded Howard, who had been undefeated in that season's dual meets as well as the Howe Cup, got enmeshed in a slugging contest with the power-hitting Dartmouth freshman Barbara Sands, who took the second and third games to lead at the break. But Hewes, who herself had won this tournament in '71 while playing out of little-known State University of New York at Fredonia (SUNY Fredonia) in upstate New York, echoing Barnaby's advice to Howard to "play to your strength," urged her to use the front of the court more, in response to which Howard imposed her shot-making skills at the outset of the fourth game and dominated the downhill 15-9, 15-4 remainder. She finished Sands off with a classic Barnaby maneuver, setting up as if to drive the ball down the wall before instead nestling a deft forehand drop shot into the front-right nick that left Sands flat-footed in back.

If anything, the backdrop of Hewes's ascent to the '71 Individuals title was even more improbable than Howard's run two years later. SUNY Fredonia didn't even have a squash court, so Hewes was taught the game on a RACQUETBALL court (eight feet longer and 18 inches wider than a regulation squash court, with no tin) by two young professors who had both played squash at Ivy League schools, using a length of plastic near the front wall to simulate the tin. They entered Hewes in the Individuals at Penn and took turns driving her to a private club in Buffalo that had regulation courts during the 10 days preceding the event so that she could get accustomed to a proper-size court. Hewes remembers several times when she failed to account for the difference in dimensions and crashed into the side wall in pursuit of the ball.

She was practicing by herself on an open court at Penn the evening before the event began and one of the Tournament Chairs happened by and offered to play a few games with her. Hewes won easily, so impressing the official that she arranged to have Hewes (who had been completely unknown to the tournament committees and hence slated to play the top-seeded defending champion Beth Anders in the first round) moved instead to the bottom half of the 32-player draw. She and Anders wound up meeting in the final, where Hewes prevailed in four games, a rare case of a player coming out of nowhere to win the national collegiate championship.

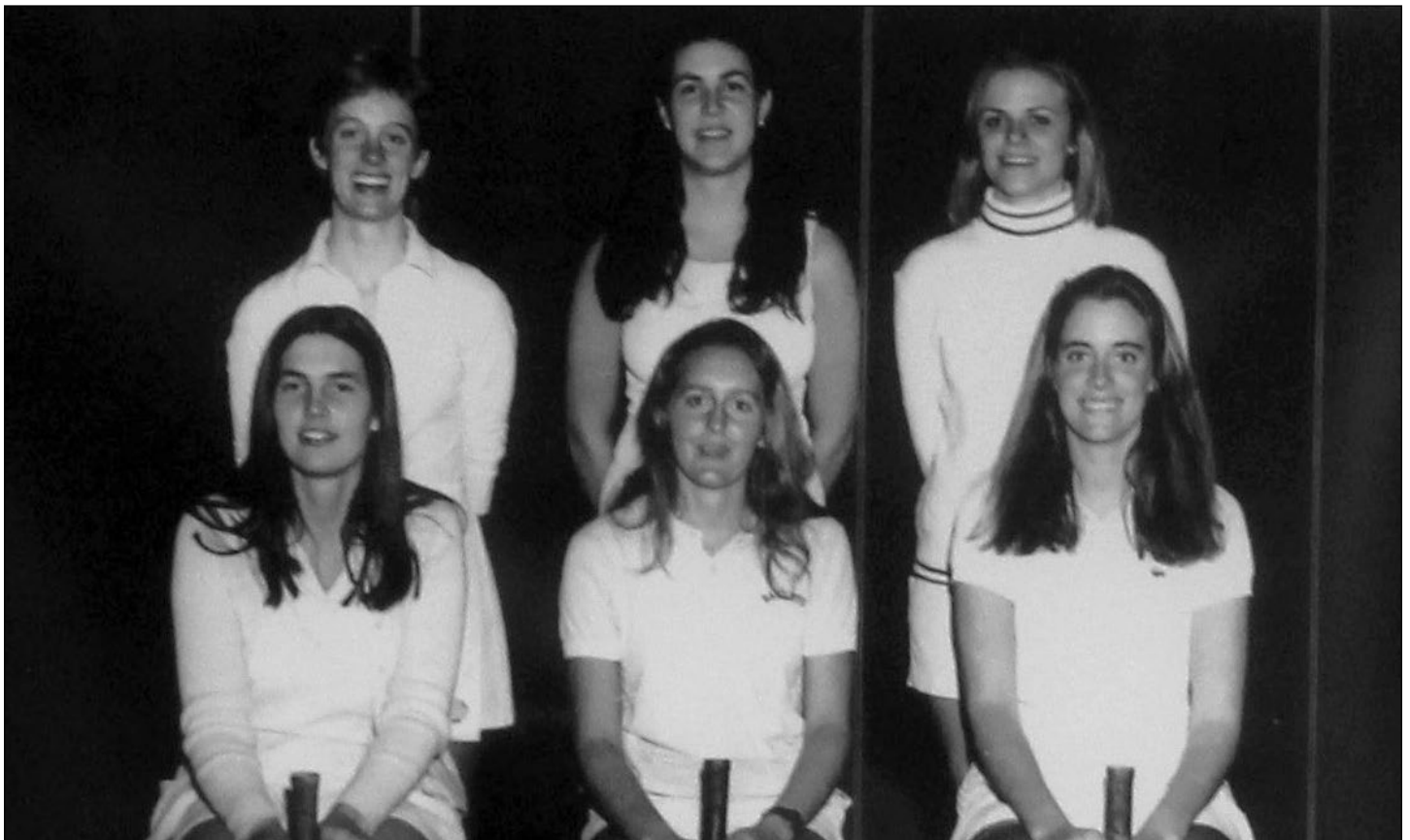
She then entered Harvard's Graduate School Of Education, where in addition to her studies she coached the Radcliffe squash, basketball and tennis teams and formed a bond in the two racquet sports with Barnaby (who in addition to his work with Howard would occasionally visit the Radcliffe team practice when the men's practice session ended and offer coaching tips to the players) that culminated in their collaboration in guiding Howard to her

'73 Individuals crown. Shortly thereafter, Howard and Hewes journeyed to Montreal to play in the Province of Quebec Women's Doubles (after first getting special permission to play a few practice games on the doubles court of a men's-only private club in Boston), which they won as well. After earning her graduate degree later that spring, Hewes departed for a tennis coaching position in Africa and an ensuing lengthy stint in the Foreign Service.

Howard's victorious foray in the women's Individuals was equaled in the men's event by Peter Briggs, who successfully defended his 1972 Individuals title, marking the first time that any school had captured both the women's and men's Individual squash championship in the same year. The Briggs/Howard "double" was very fulfilling for Barnaby, who couldn't be at Wesleyan that weekend, as he was coaching the men's team at the Intercollegiates at Navy (which they dominated, placing all six of their entrants, Vosters among them, in the finals of the three playing divisions), but who had always hoped to someday coach a woman's Intercollegiate winner.

He termed Howard's development from beginner to Intercollegiate champion in just 16 months "phenomenal," adding that, "her determination is what pushed her to the top." In appreciation for her achievement, he did his best to get permission for Howard to attend the men's team's annual postseason celebratory banquet at Locke Ober's, a classy restaurant in downtown Boston, but in vain. Vosters and Howard married during "reading period" in early May just prior to exams, since they knew they would be heading to Australia shortly after their upcoming graduations and they wanted their friends to be able to attend their wedding. She continued to play competitively, attaining a top-50 world ranking during the next several years before the couple moved back to the United States in 1976.

It should be noted, however, that as impressive as Howard's accomplishments were, the Radcliffe team on which she played was virtually invisible, with no coverage in the school newspaper, *The Harvard Crimson*, a sparse schedule in which they only played teams that were located very close to Cambridge, no players who had ever played the game prior to college and mediocre (4-6) results --- even Hewes was designated the team "coordinator" rather than the coach. The following year, i.e. in 1973-74, Betty Lincoln was listed as the official team coach, but, as mentioned, no match results appear on the web site and again the team played a very limited schedule.



*Harvard Women's Squash 1973-1974*

Whereas Hewes had been informal and encouraging in her approach, Lincoln, one of the better players in the women's Boston leagues, was businesslike and serious, someone who in part defined herself by squash and who had a

direct, no-frills dedication to playing and coaching the game. A number of her players cited the way they would hit serve after serve under her supervision, trying to get exactly the best angle, and the way she would drill them in rails, cross-courts and other shots as well. Lincoln stayed on for a second year to coach the 1974-75 team, which included a number of New England prep schools on its schedule, one of which, Phillips Andover, thrashed the Crimson 6-1 in the last match of a season in which Harvard went 6-8 and lost eight of its last nine matches.



*Harvard Women's Squash 1974-1975*

The following year's 1975-76 team (as well as the one after that) was coached by a former (and excellent) Harvard SWIMMER, Eric Cutler, an avid recreational squash player who was moved from his assistant athletic director's position to become the third of four consecutive coaches who held the position for two years. By (quite graphic) contrast to the stability of the men's program, that same year was Barnaby's last season, culminating a career coaching the men's team that had begun FORTY-FOUR years earlier (immediately following his own graduation from Harvard in May 1932), first as Cowles's assistant and later (starting in the winter of 1937) as head coach.

The women's team was definitely getting better (9-4 in both of Cutler's years, with convincing wins over the few prep schools left on the now mostly all-college schedule, and with Howe Cup placements of seventh and fourth respectively) but was still by a wide margin last among the Big Three, with 7-0 shut-out losses to Yale both years. Princeton, which swept through undefeated seasons and Howe Cup titles virtually throughout the 1970's, was so superior that the Tigers weren't even on the Radcliffe schedule, except for in 1973-74, predictably a 7-0 blanking in which every match went three games to love with none of the 21 total games even close. "We were just terrible," was captain Susie Handy's unsparing assessment after the 7-0 loss to Yale in 1976. "They were much better than we were in all the matches."

Handy herself, like a number of her teammates, became a squash player almost by accident --- her father, Ned Handy, had taken her to watch the Boston Open, an annual pro event hosted throughout the 1970's at Hemenway, early in her freshman year, prior to which her only exposure to squash had been when her father had smuggled her through the men's locker room to sit in a freezing gallery and watch him play with his buddies at the University Club Of Providence. As they were watching the matches, Corey Wynn, Barnaby's longtime assistant coach, sat down next to them. Ned Handy, Harvard class of '51, had briefly played for Wynn in 1948, early in the latter's tenure as the coach of freshman squash and tennis, and during the ensuing conversation Wynn invited Susie Handy to try the sport.

Her classmate/teammate Emme Levin roomed with her during their junior year, and they previously persuaded one of their other roommates, Susana de Sola, to take up the game as well one year earlier. This was a time when athletic and motivated women could take up a sport while in college and play on the varsity shortly thereafter; there was no “feeder system” from the New England prep schools (as there had been for decades with college men’s squash teams, especially Harvard’s), since those prep schools themselves had not gone co-ed until the early 1970’s.

In fact, the ’74 and ’75 Crimson rosters were barely deep enough to fill the seven-slot lineup, and by her sophomore year, Handy, though still a relative squash neophyte, had progressed to the No. 2 slot, where she played behind Ruth Stevens, Goddard’s successor as captain. There were very few formal challenge matches, and the team lineup fluctuated from week to week depending on who was available and who seemed to be playing well at any given time. There was not a lot of pressure or expectation --- indeed, very few people seemed to be even paying attention, and mostly only family and friends attended the home matches --- which freed the team members to have fun, do the best they could, and try to carry what they learned in each match over to the next one.

Squash was by no means the only sport during this time in which players became members of women’s teams essentially by happenstance or on the spur of the moment; there were Handy-type stories all over campus, with nascent women’s teams trying different ways to attract players and create respectable-sized rosters of reasonable quality. As one example, the women’s crew coach would roam around the room where the freshman class members were registering for college classes in early September and approach tall, lanky women to invite them to try out for the crew team, whether they had ever rowed before or not.

One of those women who caught the coach’s eye, Julia Moore, took up the sport under exactly this circumstance. She also started playing squash at the same time since she and Goddard, the squash team captain that year, were first cousins and Goddard encouraged Moore to play. Moore’s only prior racquet-games experience while growing up in Atlanta (where she had never even HEARD of squash) had been in tennis, a sport in which her mother, Hope Trumbull Moore, had excelled. But by her senior year in 1977-78, she had become a stand-out in both squash and crew, spending her late-winter afternoons first practicing with the squash team at Hemenway and then running the considerable distance (often through the snow) to crew practice by the Charles River.

Although the women’s squash teams during that mid-1970’s period experienced only moderate success (and even less than that against Princeton and Yale), virtually all of the women from those teams have extremely fond memories of their collegiate squash experience, remembering it partly for the “pioneer” aspect of being involved in the first years of a sport’s evolution at Harvard, but more compellingly for the camaraderie that developed and for the realization that they were part of a sports program that was gradually but inexorably starting to grow and progress. To a person, they seemed to relish the opportunity that being on a team provided for women to bond on this still primarily male-dominated campus (one player proudly characterized her team as “a band of sisters”) in a forum that was outside of the classroom, dormitories or extra-curricular activities.

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