

## Celebrating 50 Years of Women's Basketball

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# CELEBRATING 50 YEARS OF WOMEN'S BASKETBALL

Women's college athletics is vastly different now than it was in the 1970's.

The Dordt University women's basketball program spent the 2023-24 season celebrating that progress, 50 years after the first officially recognized team took the court. In a season in which the Defenders won the program's first-ever NAIA National Championship after being one of the favorites in the Sioux City tournament, the women's basketball program has taken time to reflect on humble beginnings and celebrate growing success.

When coaches and players converged on Dordt's campus in January for a 50-year celebration, women on those first teams shared stories about how they had to schedule their own games and arrange transportation for road games – things now handled by university officials without a second thought.

"They told us how they had to buy their own uniforms and meals after games, things we don't have to think about. That was really crazy to hear," says Macy Sievers, a sophomore who plays on the current team. "Those things I took for granted. We don't have to worry about those things as athletes; we can just go out and play."

JAMIN VER VELDE ('99)



**The Defenders, who spent 11 weeks of the season ranked first in the NAIA Coaches' poll, finished the season with a nine-game win streak and ended with a program-best 35-2 record.**

In the early years, female athletes just wanted a chance to play.

"For us, it was an opportunity to continue with what you did in high school. If you wanted to play ball, you could play ball," says Kim Wiescamp ('81), who was a team manager, an on-campus job that was part of her student aid package.

There was one coach and no assistants, trainers, or other support staff. Wiescamp and the other manager did laundry, kept statistics during games, and even taped players' ankles.

"You think of women's sports 50 years ago, and the back seat it took to men's sports was real," says Bill Harmsen, current coach of the women's basketball team.

By the time Wiescamp enrolled at Dordt, the women's basketball team had been an official program at the school for

just a couple years. Dordt fielded club-level teams as early as the late 1960s, says Sports Information Director Mike Byker ('92). Administrators determined the 1974-75 team was the first official team because it was the first year of membership in the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women, an early collegiate sports governing body.

Len Rhoda arrived in the program's sixth season in 1979 to serve as its third head coach. He recalls recruiting girls who played six-on-six basketball, which was still the norm in Iowa high schools, and teaching them how to play the five-player game in college. Because of that difference, some good athletes decided not to play college basketball. There also were no athletic-related scholarships for players.

"When we went out to recruit, it was a challenge," he says.

The skill level of the players he coached

JAMIN VER VELDE ('99)



**During his tenure as head coach from 1979-2001, Len Rhoda won 258 games.**



# CAMPUS KUDOS

pales in comparison to today's players, who now begin playing organized basketball in elementary school. But Rhoda says they all have one thing in common.

"The women that I coached earlier had the same strong work ethic and desire as they do today."

Once Dordt joined the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA), they were competitive with plenty of schools. Dordt became competitive on a national level with Harmsen's arrival for the 2018-19 season, the first in which the Defenders qualified for the NAIA tournament. They were runners up in 2022, before securing a place in the history books as NAIA national champions in March 2024.

The success has led to increased fan support; the DeWitt Gymnasium is filled with students, alumni, and community members on a regular basis. Byker said the number of fans who watch livestream broadcasts of the women's and men's games is nearly the same.

"The amount of support our women get is unbelievable," he adds.

Nearly 70 former players from all eras returned for the 50th anniversary celebration, sharing stories and getting an up-close look at how things have changed. Wiescamp said she was awed by sitting in a gymnasium full of fans to watch the women.

"It's a whole new experience. The community and students are following those ladies now," she says, recalling crowds of just a couple dozen people during her time at Dordt.

The current team isn't taking that for granted. They're working to ensure the strides the program has made continue into the next 50 years.

"We definitely talk about how we want to keep reaching new limits," Sievers says. "We hope we can leave this program better than we came into it."

Perhaps 50 years from now, she'll return and marvel at how things have again changed for the better.

NICK HYTREK, SIOUX CITY JOURNAL



JAMIN VER VELDE (99)

The celebration schedule included an informal reception and a chance to practice with the current women's basketball team.

The class of 2023 achieved remarkable career success, with **99.4 percent of graduates either employed or pursuing further education within six months of graduation.**

This summer, Dordt's mathematics and statistics department hosted the **Association of Christians in the Mathematical Sciences 2024 Conference** on campus. With 120 attendees, the conference featured talks on history, pedagogy, faith integration, and current research on computer science, mathematics, and statistics.



The **WORLD Journalism Institute College Course**, a training intensive conducted by WORLD News Group offering Christians "ways to explore their calling in the fast-growing field of multimedia journalism," took place on Dordt's campus in late May.

According to recent findings, **66.1 percent of Dordt freshmen are originally from out of state**—a much higher percentage than most other comparable colleges and universities. To learn more, go to [dordt.edu/outpaces-states](http://dordt.edu/outpaces-states).

**Dordt athletics secured the runner-up position in the GPAC All-Sports Trophy standings**, with four conference championships, 12 top-four finishes in the final GPAC standings, and notable national success in women's basketball.

Vincent Keane, a theology major from Staten Island, New York, received a one-year \$15,000 scholarship as part of the **Lambertus Verberg Prize for Excellence in Kuyperian Scholarship**. Trygve Bulthuis, an economics and philosophy major from Rock Valley, Iowa, received a one-year \$10,000 scholarship.



During National Student Employment Appreciation Week, two outstanding student workers were recognized for their exceptional dedication and performance on campus. Caroline Brown and Jessica Walczak, both of Sioux Center, Iowa, were given the title of **Student Employees of the Year**.

**Dordt was recently recognized among Iowa's top private colleges by Stacker**, based on 2024 data from Niche, earning an A- alongside three other institutions in Nebraska, Iowa, and South Dakota.