

OFFICIAL, ASSIGNER, MENTOR AND TRAILBLAZER. PAM YOUNG HAS BEEN ALL THAT AND MORE IN A CAREER SPANNING MORE THAN FIVE DECADES.

When the U.S. Department of Education leveled the playing field for males and females in 1972 by ratifying Title IX, the agency did more than open doors and gates for girls and women to make baskets, hit homers and score goals. It also unlocked opportunities for women to establish a higher visibility among the ranks of officials in various sports.

Pam Young has been a fixture in Chicago's amateur sports officiating scene during the five decades since.

Young was a first-year physical education teacher at Carl Schurz High School on Chicago's north side when federal legislators passed Title IX of the Education Amendments. That national law protects the civil rights of students by prohibiting discrimination based on gender in any educational programs or activities that receive federal funding. It was like a software update that prompted a reboot of America's sports culture.

"The significance of Title IX was beyond enormous," said Young, who will embark on her 48th season as an official whenever COVID-19 restrictions loosen and sanctioned sporting events in Illinois resume. "It presented a realm of abundant participation for females in athletics. We women and girls had the same access to funding and resources for athletics as men and boys."

"When girls' sports started in Chicago Public Schools in 1974, I started coaching girls' basketball, volleyball and track," said Young, who competed in those three sports while completing her P.E. degree at DePaul University. "We had all these girls (at Schurz) who wanted to play these sports, but no one else wanted to coach them. Female athletes playing on school teams needed coaches and officials to work their games."

Young did what she could to fill those voids by stepping into the coaching and officiating realms. Being active in athletics from her childhood into her college years, she parlayed those days of competition into



At left, among the sports Pam Young's officiates is track and field. Top, she officiates the Illinois High School Association girl's state basketball quarterfinal on March 5, 1999 at Illinois State University in Normal, Ill. Bottom, Young (center) uses her decades of officiating experience to train, develop and mentor officials. From left, Pam Oliver, Michael Moncrief, Candice Daniel, Young, Ron Carter, Wanda Norris and Kenny Teague at a February tournament in Evanston, Ill.

Forever YOUNG



In 1970, Pam Young became the first Black cheerleader on the DePaul University squad. At right, Young and family. Clockwise around Young starting top left, brothers Victor Young and Stefan Young; her parents; Melvin Young Jr. and Doris Young.



illustrious careers blowing whistles as a teacher, coach and official.

At the recommendation of a teaching colleague, she started officiating basketball in 1973. She added track and field in 1974, then volleyball in 1975. Given her playing days and teaching responsibilities, officiating seemed a natural next step in her athletics evolution, but she ventured into it to as a way of managing her time.

"I worked at Johnson Products (a company that manufactured African-American hair-care goods) when I was in high school and college, so I was used to working until 5 or 6 o'clock," Young said. "When I began teaching, my workday ended at 3 p.m. I had all this time on my hands. John Reed, another P.E. teacher at Schurz, suggested I look into refereeing basketball."

Young followed Reed's advice and secured her license from the Illinois High School Association (IHSA), but her first games were not within the friendly confines of a gymnasium with grade school kids. Instead, she made her officiating debut working a men's summer league on the outdoor asphalt courts of Chicago's Cabrini-Green Housing Project, the capital of a rough-and-tumble neighborhood immediately northwest of downtown.

"In the 1970s, we teachers were not getting any of our salary during the summer, so I needed a job during those months," Young said. "Working those summer league games was brutal, but I learned how to officiate. Several of those teams had gangbangers playing, and the games didn't always start on time, so we had to manage the games with a lot of common sense. There was one way into the court and one way out. I wasn't scared, but the men with whom I worked protected me when they had to."

A native Chicagoan born and raised on the city's south side, Young grew up under the watchful eyes of parents who modeled and instilled discipline and detail. Her mother and father — an educator and police officer, respectively — encouraged her to keep her horizons broad while keeping her focus narrow.

"They stressed integrity and perseverance along with a good work ethic," Young said. "They taught me I could achieve my goals if I put in the necessary work. Nothing was off limits as long as I was willing to stick to it, regardless of the obstacles I faced."

They also encouraged her love for basketball in an unmistakable manner, one that made the Young house a favorite community hangout.

"My father installed a full-length

basketball court in our backyard, so our house became the focal point of the neighborhood," Young said. "My parents didn't mind, and neighborhood parents knew where their kids were. My friends would come over and play past nighttime because we had lights in our yard."

That parental upbringing proved priceless after Young started college. At DePaul, she initiated her list of firsts that she would continue over the next 40 years, starting with being the university's first Black cheerleader. When she joined the faculty at Schurz High School three months after accepting her college degree, she did so as the school's first Black female P.E. teacher. Though she was young at the time, she knew how to hold her own with students and peers.

"DePaul taught me how to be a teacher, and the nuns and my mother prepared me to deal with challenging children who presented problems in the classroom," Young said. "I could not accept any kind of disrespect from students since my parents and teachers did not accept it from me. I wasn't too much older than the seniors I taught, so I could relate to them in some respects, but I always maintained that role of authority."

Young spent nine years at Schurz before transferring to Nicholas Sentinella High School in 1981. For the next 31 years, she taught P.E., health and drivers' education before retiring from teaching in 2012. She estimates she

taught more than 8,000 students in her 40-year career. One of those students was Valerie Spann, a 1989 Senn graduate who played college basketball at Xavier University in Cincinnati.

"When I was in high school, Ms. Young was the only female referee I saw," said Spann, who capped a 15-year stint as a girls' basketball coach last season. "It was good to see her on the basketball court being strong-minded and not allowing male coaches — or anyone else — to disrespect her."

"She inspired a lot of us young ladies to become women who were leaders and filled positions of authority. We saw in her a woman controlling the game without being intimidated or afraid of anything, and that had a big impact on us."

What Spann gleaned from Young is what Young gained from her mentors, Bertha Buchanan and Janet Jackson. Those women officiated Chicago Public League girls' basketball in the 1970s, with Buchanan preceding Young as the first Black female to work Illinois state finals in that sport.

Young's foray into those men's leagues portended future work at Cabrini-Green. When the Midnight Basketball League started its eight-year 1990s run in Chicago, she was one of its most well-known officials, largely because of her gender. By that time, she had the chops, the thick skin and the steely nerves to work that action with unflappable confidence.

"There weren't too many officials who wanted to work those games," Young said. "I wanted to work, and I knew what kind of environment I was working in."

As Young sought to increase her officiating profile, she connected with some great officials. In the mid-1980s, she met Nate Humphrey and Malcolm Hemphill, two pillars of the Metropolitan Officials Association (MOA), a predominantly African-American group based in Chicago. She did not need a second chance to make a positive first impression.

"Pam was speaking at a city-sponsored basketball event, and I was thoroughly impressed by her presentation," said Hemphill, who was on the Big Ten's men's basketball officiating roster at that time. "I learned



Pam Young (second from right) worked the 2002 National Women's Basketball League Championships at the Mohegan Sun Arena in Uncasville, Conn. The league ran from 1997-2007.

she was an official who had run track and played basketball in college.

"Nate Humphrey one day asked me to go with him to watch her work, and she stood out to me. She had tremendous court presence. There were some things she needed to hone, but she was receptive to constructive criticism. I was certain she would be a high-quality official and achieve terrific success."

Young joined the MOA and became one of its most reliable members. Hemphill, a co-founder of the MOA, recalls she was "quick to volunteer for whatever needed to be done. She's always been ready to be a contributor even when she didn't hold a leadership office. She never shied away from helping the association improve."

Young eventually became the first female the MOA voted to serve as its president, and she has filled that role four times. Throughout its history, the MOA has trained and promoted African-American officials for the highest levels of athletics throughout the Midwest and the nation. The group helped provide Young with another novel opportunity to perfect her craft.

"My first college camp was coordinated by Richie Weiler (longtime Big Ten referee who worked five Final Fours) in the 1980s," she said. "Several of the MOA men were attending, and there was no camp nearby for female officials at that time. I wanted to start moving up the ladder and get into collegiate officiating, so I applied for Weiler's camp. I was the only female among all the campers, but I

believed the training there would be a tremendous benefit to my career."

Being on the road working in front of assigners and evaluators added more pressure on her, but she did not buckle under the weight. The pursuit of excellence instilled by her parents found reinforcement in the expectations of the MOA.

"In those camp settings, we MOA members understood we had to be 10 times better," Young said. "We had to be professional at all times; we had to know the rules; and our mechanics had to be sharp."

Young climbed to the top of that aforementioned ladder. She has worked every level of women's basketball, from junior college to Division I. She drew her first D-I assignment for a game at Northeastern Illinois University during its days in the Mid-Continent Conference (now called the Summit League). Her memories of that day center on what occurred after the game.

"Ray Piagentini, another one of my mentors, was my observer, and he had some pointed critiques for me," Young said. "I didn't mind because I wanted to improve, and he helped train me."

When Young left Schurz, she also closed her coaching career. She became the director of athletics at Senn while keeping her normal P.E. teaching schedule. She managed the added administrative duties in stride.

"She was organized with her tasks and brought empathy when working with coaches," said former Senn principal Richard Norman. "She

Forever **YOUNG**



Pam Young has been an Illinois High School Association-certified clinician and rules interpreter in volleyball for more than 30 years. From left, Kim Kull, Antwan Jackson, Young, Julie Colwell and Paul Moseley at a Chicago Public Schools girls' volleyball city championship.

advocated for fair distribution of resources for the school, and she did all this while serving as chair of the P.E. department and teaching a full load.

"Athletics are such an important component of education. Being responsible for eligibility, equipment and record-keeping can get complicated, but Pam handled all those things and made them look easy."

Part of managing an athletics department was ensuring Senn's contests had officials. That paved the way for Young to become Chicago Public Schools (CPS) first assigner for high school girls' basketball.

"Coaches would get officials for their games," Young said. "There was no assigner for girls' basketball. Many of the coaches for high schools on the north side of Chicago wanted me to get officials for their girls' games because they trusted me and I knew the officials. That's how I started assigning girls' games."

Young also became the first CPS assigner for volleyball. As the coordinator of officials for two sports in the nation's third-largest school district, her portfolio comprised more than 75 high schools throughout Chicago. She coordinated all this without the efficiency of today's technology.

"The most important aspect for me was making sure each game had officials who could handle that caliber of competition," Young said of her

primary assigning philosophy. "Nate Humphrey taught me to take care of the officials. He told me, 'They will go to the end of the earth if you pay them, don't cheat them out of anything and be professional toward them.' The officials I've assigned throughout the years know I have their backs."

Finding quality officials to work her games gave Young a deeper vested interest in the quality of women and men she hired. She did her part to raise that quality by training officials.

"Pam's top-notch as a trainer," said Steve Alexander, Young's successor as assigner for CPS girls' basketball and a current assigner for volleyball and girls' hoops in Chicago's south suburbs. "Her ability to break down rules and teach them is among the best I've ever seen."

"One of her most substantial contributions to officiating is her recruitment of younger officials. She's been influential in getting a number of former CPS student-athletes to become officials, then she trains them very well. That's helped the level of officiating overall in the Chicago area."

Training is an expansive aspect of Young's professional persona, for sports officials and beyond. ASEP (now known as the Human Kinetics Coach

Education) further cemented Young's training prowess when she earned its certification in 1999. At the behest of Calvin Davis, former CPS sports administration director, she became an ASEP-certified trainer to teach coaches who had no former academic instruction in education.

She has also been an IHSA-certified clinician and rules interpreter for volleyball and basketball for more than 30 years.

Her longevity in officiating and education has spawned honors, awards and recognition reflective of prolonged prosperity. Young has been inducted into four halls of fame, named official of the year in basketball and volleyball, and named both teacher of the year and athletics director of the year. Despite the merit of those accolades, they rarely are a topic of conversation with her.

"Pam has always had tenacity and a sense of confidence, but she's never been boastful," Hemphill said. "You would have to pry her list of achievements out of her. She's earned all of them because of her commitment but maintains a good sense of humility about them."

Some trailblazers have the luxury of looking behind them to see who is walking in their footsteps. When

Young checks her rearview mirror, she smiles at the crowd of women whom she has trained and are following her.

"The MOA has had more females working state finals games in Illinois than any other association in the state," Young said. "I feel very good knowing I had some meaningful contribution to their training."

Shelia Ashley fits that description. With multiple city championship games and state finals appearances under her belt, she is one of the most accomplished officials in the Chicago area. She credits Young's advancement as the origin of her own.

"Pam's experience working boys' and men's basketball paved the way for more women like me to work that level of basketball," said Ashley, a veteran official of 33 years. "She helped us prepare for what to expect, and that inside knowledge was very helpful. She wanted us to have every advantage that would help us succeed so people would see us as competent officials instead of female referees."

Basketball may be the sport in which Young has compiled the most acclaim, but her work in volleyball need not take a back seat. Her ascents in both sports mirror each other, proven by her becoming the first official to work the Chicago city championships in volleyball and basketball during the same school year twice. While she has a slightly greater affinity for officiating basketball, she gives volleyball the edge in degree of difficulty.

"I enjoy working basketball a little more than volleyball because of the cardio workout," Young said. "The constant transition of running up and down the court gives that extra benefit opposed to standing."

"Volleyball is harder to officiate than basketball because you have to judge every single contact of the ball in a split second. If you're thinking about the last hit, another one happened. Basketball gives you a second or two to process what you see, but volleyball doesn't afford you that time."

Of the three sports for which she has her license, her work in track and field may not shine as bright, but it is no less demanding.

"Each event in track has its unique set of rules, and officials have to know



Pam Young continues to officiate, but she also spends a great deal of time mentoring officials. From left, Candice Daniel, Young, Shawn Mercer-Dixon and Shelia Ashley at a Chicago Public Schools girls' basketball playoff game.

every one of them," Young said. "The rules in track are very explicit. There isn't the amount of subjective judgment regarding a violation as there is in basketball or volleyball."

"Officiating a track meet is more about game management. If you have a major meet like a high-level invitational or sectional qualifier, you may have up to 20 officials. They are responsible for lane inspections, hurdle setups and equipment checks."

After a coaching tenure at Schurz that saw her teams capture city championships and compete for state titles, she carved a niche as one of Illinois' most credible track and field officials, a reputation that crossed beyond the boundaries of Chicago.

"When she traveled to various sites throughout Illinois, she went to work in areas that were dominated by men," said Anthony Rainey, a former state title track and field coach at Luther South High School in Chicago. "People wanted to get at her, but she didn't let that cause her to waver. She maintained her commitment to being an excellent official."

That steadfastness has been Young's defining trait, Rainey says of the woman he met at an MOA meeting in 1976. He noted how the high caliber of character she portrays has trickled to dozens of officials who have emerged after her in all the sports she officiates.

"As a woman and a woman of color, she carried the torch for two segments of the culture," said Rainey,

who also served as the director of athletics and head coach of the football and boys' basketball teams at Luther South. "I'm not sure she realized the full significance of that. She was sort of a crusader who declared women can step into this arena and be successful."

"Since she established herself on the officiating landscape, more Black women are doing track and field as well as men's basketball and boys' basketball. We're seeing more Black women and men doing volleyball, which is a huge shift because for years, most volleyball officials were not of color. Pam laid that groundwork years ago. When you look at where our society is today, Pam is a pioneer far ahead of her time."

Although Young may not have too many more unchecked items on her officiating to-do list, she is not ready to walk away. Half a century of service is well within reach, and she has the health and vigor to attain that milestone. Her career has unfolded far beyond what she imagined at its start.

"If I could go back in time," Young said, "I'd tell my first-year self, 'It gets better! It will get better ... you will get better at doing this.'"

"I started officiating at a good time. I love what I do and am doing what I love. I'm planning to work the next season, and I'm glad people still want me to work."

Marcel Kerr officiates high school and college football, basketball, volleyball and softball. He lives in Chicago.