

By John Enrietto

Butler Eagle

Title IX helped open doors for Melinda Rhoads — and she proudly walked through.

The law, signed in 1972, prohibited sex discrimination in any federally funded education program, including athletics.

Rhoads — then Melinda Hale — graduated from Oil City High School in 1973 and went on to Slippery Rock State College, where she became the budding women's basketball program's first four-year starter as a guard as The Rock went 53-20.

“They didn't keep much records or statistics back then,” Rhoads said. “But I like to think I scored a lot and was a good defender.

“As a kid growing up, I played a lot of football, baseball. ... Whether it was in the backyard or on the front street, whatever sport was going on, I was out there.

She added: “Title IX changed a lot of things. A lot of sports opened up for women, and I tried them all.”

Besides basketball, Rhoads played tennis, lacrosse, softball and ran track at Slippery Rock.

Through a national tryout held on campus, she wound up on the United States handball team, turning that into a brilliant career that has landed her in the Butler County Sports Hall of Fame.

Rhoads will join Kelly Coffield, Brad Mueller, Jence Rhoads, Jeff Schnur, Mike Seybert and William “Bee” Thoma at an induction ceremony at Butler County Community College's Founder's Hall. The ceremony will take place at 6:30 p.m. April 25. Individual tickets (\$35) or for tables of eight are available at [butlersportshall.com](http://butlersportshall.com).

Rhoads played on the U.S. handball team from 1975-84, was named team MVP at three national championship events and was player of the year in 1980.

She went on to help coach the team after her playing days ended. Rhoads came back to Slippery Rock University in 1990 to finish her physical education degree.

“I was a few credits short of graduation when the handball thing started,” she said. “The sport didn't exist much in the states, so we did a lot of traveling across the Atlantic, back and forth, to play.”

One of Rhoads' advisors at Slippery Rock set up the national tryout and asked Rhoads and Bev Miller, a good friend of hers on the basketball team, to try out.

“She wanted Slippery Rock to be represented at the tryouts, so we did it as a favor to her,” Rhoads said. “We didn't know what we were getting ourselves into.

She said 50 women from across the country tried out, with three practices a day morning, afternoon and night for eight days.

“Each day, if your name was posted on the board, you came back. They wound up calling 16 names to comprise the team, and Bev and I were two of them. Our lives changed that day,” Rhodes added.

She described handball as being more physical than basketball. It was a fast-paced game lasting 30 minutes with no stoppage.

“You had to be able to run, throw and catch with a lot of physical contact,” Rhoads said. “It's a great game, but we were going up against countries where they were learning handball as toddlers. We just found out about the game at age 21. That's a lot of catching up to do.”

Rhoads believed the catch-up was complete when the U.S. upset China and finished fourth in the 1984 Olympics.

“Monumental accomplishment,” she said. “I stepped down from the team as a player after that.”

Along with coaching, Rhoads became vice president of the U.S. Team Handball Association. She also coached Slippery Rock Middle School basketball — boys and girls — for 30 years. She remains active coaching the girls team.

Rhoads was also one of the Olympic torch bearers leading into the 1996 Summer Games in Atlanta.

She carried the torch for a half-mile in Erie before handing it off to Edinboro wrestler Bruce Baumgartner, who went on to medal at the 1996 Games.

Her eldest daughter, Jence, held her hand and ran with her as she carried the torch. Jence Rhoads is also a BCSHOF inductee this year.

“Jence and I have shared a lot of moments together,” Rhoads said. “This one will be pretty special.”

Rhoads’ late husband was standout Slippery Rock High School boys basketball coach Robert “Posey” Rhoads. Daughters Jence and twins Kourtney and Karly were stellar high school and collegiate basketball players.