

By Kay Dannels

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Melinda Rhoads is one of Slippery Rock's best-kept secrets.

Rhoads is a former Olympian, having competed in the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games in team handball.

As a result of her former Olympian competitor status, Rhoads was invited by the Olympic Committee to apply to carry the Olympic torch a portion of its 15,000-mile voyage throughout the United States on its way to Atlanta, Ga.

"I filled out the application and listed my top three choices of cities through which the torch would go _ Erie, Philadelphia and Detroit," Rhoads said.

She applied in October and was notified in late January that she had been selected to carry the torch in Erie.

At 8 a.m. on June 11 Rhoads began her segment of the torch carry _ about half a mile _ which started at North Harbor Baptist Church and proceeded east on U.S. 20.

"It was incredible," she said after the run. "When I started out, I asked the motorcade guy if I could grab my daughter, Jence, and run with her, and he said OK. She held my hand and ran about 3/4 of the way." Rhoads said it was very exciting with her family and friends there to cheer her on. "The whole thing about being a part of Olympic history was just great," she continued. "And then I passed my flame to wrestler Bruce Baumgartner, who has qualified to compete in his 4th Olympic Games. And, I met the man from American Meter who lent me a torch to show to school children, and his daughter passed the flame to me. It was so-o-o-o cool," Rhoads added.

The Olympic torches, assembled by American Meter in Erie, are 32 inches tall and weigh 3 pounds. A canister inside holds a propane gas fuel cylinder. American Meter loaned a torch to Rhoads to use while speaking about the Olympics and the carrying of the torch before school groups. She has purchased the torch she carried for \$275.

"I am absolutely thrilled to be reminded of my own Olympic experience and having a chance to share it with my friends and family," Rhoads said.

She said her family will be at the Olympic Games for about a week. "We'll look for the couple of bricks we bought in the park, and we have two tickets to team handball, on July 30 and August 1," Rhoads said. She added that they will stay with her teammates who are training in the Olympic Village.

Rhoads said she tried out for but did not make the 1976 Olympic team for team handball, and then she did not have a chance to compete in the 1980 boycotted Olympic Games. ``As the host country in 1984, we (the national handball team) automatically qualified," Rhoads said.

Her most vivid memory of the 1984 Olympic Games was walking into the Los Angeles Coliseum during opening ceremonies.

``It was just incredible. We walked through a tunnel as the last team, and the fans just erupted (with cheers). There is just no way to describe the feeling, competing in the Olympic Games. And we finished just one goal short of a medal," Rhoads added.

Rhoads became an Olympic competitor by being at the right place at the right time, she says. As a student at Slippery Rock State College in 1975, the former Melinda Hale was recruited by then professor of physical education Dr. Helen Knierim, who asked her to represent SRU at the U.S. Team Handball Federation tryouts for the national team, being held that year at SRU.

About 40 women attended the tryout and she was one of 16 picked for the national team. Rhoads said they practiced two more times as a team, and two months later traveled to Russia to compete in the team handball world championships.

``I tried out as a favor to Dr. Knierim," Rhoads said. ``I didn't understand the game very well at first, but I got to travel around the world, five to seven times a year. I liked the people I played with and we were getting better and better. We were learning with people who didn't know how to play. The travel and friendships kept me playing," she added.

For the next nine years she played on the national team and competed in several world championships. She was named Most Valuable Player in 1978 and 1981, ``but the biggest thrill, by far, was being named MVP this year at the national tournament," Rhoads said.

After retiring from the team handball competition and travel circuit in 1984, Rhoads got married and began raising a family in Slippery Rock.

She is married to former Mercer High basketball great Robert ``Posey" Rhoads, assistant coordinator of student standards at SRU and head basketball coach at Slippery Rock High School. They now have three daughters, including Jence, 7, and 4-year-old twins Karly and Kourtney.

About six years ago, Rhoads started a club team in Slippery Rock. This year they competed at a tournament in West Point, N.Y., where they finished second, and then went to nationals in Oklahoma City, Okla., where they won the championship and she was MVP.