

Beloved Mentor Was Trailblazer

By Toby Smith

Journal Staff Writer- www.abqjournal.com

Almost no one called her Elvira, her given first name, and few addressed her as "Miss Vidano." To the many athletes and students at Highland High School, she was always, respectfully, simply "Tiny."

To Tiny, girls and sports had a special relationship, long before anyone thought of officially connecting the dots.

To Tiny, girls had as much right to be jumping in the air or swinging a bat as boys.

To Tiny, girls were allowed, even encouraged, to sweat.

And now Tiny Vidano is gone. Left behind, however, is a giant legacy.

The much-admired teacher, coach and mother hen died of respiratory problems March 20 at Presbyterian Kaseman Hospital.

She was 87.

"Like so many other young women, she was my mentor," said Norma Sims, who was in Vidano's first physical education class, in 1949.

"She taught us everything. Three-on-a-side basketball, speed-a-way, a combination of basketball, football and soccer. She even taught fencing. Back then, girls were considered unable to physically run. Tiny told us otherwise."

With Vidano's urging and support, Sims went on to Texas Women's College, where she starred in field hockey, Vidano's favorite sport.

In 1964, Sims took a job at Manzano High, where she taught phys ed, coached cheerleaders and the drill team, and became athletics director in 1976. She left in 1989.

"My p.e. staff at Manzano once had five Highland High graduates, all former students of Tiny's," said Sims.

"Tiny was my role model," said Donna Ness, a Highland student in the late 1950s. "I wanted to be a phys ed teacher, just like her. And I did."

Before 1972, when Title IX worked to balance opportunities between the genders, school athletics for girls found few supporters. Tiny Vidano was an exception.

"She organized everything," said Al Kaplan, who taught science at Highland for 20 years.

Under Vidano, there were play days for girls, after-school sports programs, intramurals and even recreational leagues at night. All were part of a Vidano-created New Mexico alliance known as the Girls Athletics Association. For years Vidano set up flourishing GAA tournaments, in everything from badminton to dodge ball.

Long before other girls teams in the state traveled out of town, Highland High female athletes, with Tiny leading the way, made road trips. Linda Estes, another ex-Vidano pupil and later the associate athletics director at the University of New Mexico, remembered being among Highland girls in the mid-1950s who journeyed to play basketball in Las Cruces, softball in Los Alamos and volleyball in Belen.

"Tiny provided opportunities for us when there simply weren't any opportunities for girls," said Estes. "No other woman was doing that. Tiny was way ahead of her time."

Estes, who recently was inducted into the Albuquerque/New Mexico Sports Hall of Fame, said, "I've received some accolades, but Tiny was the real pioneer."

Students at Highland didn't have to be involved in sports to be inspired by Vidano.

"I was the least athletic person in the world," said Betty Vivian, who first met Vidano in 1948. "That didn't matter to Tiny. Her office door was always open. You could sit around and talk to her. And she kept track of all her students. She never missed a reunion."

Vidano, who didn't reach 5 feet in height, received her nickname in childhood. Being short in stature didn't cause her to be ignored.

"She was caring, but a strict disciplinarian," said Sims. "You didn't mess with her."

Similarly, said Sims, "If you got into a mess, she did everything she could to help you get out of it."

Vidano grew up in Joliet, Ill., and played field hockey at Illinois State University. After receiving a master's degree from the University of Michigan, she began coaching in Illinois schools in 1942.

She came to New Mexico in 1947, to direct the Albuquerque Girl Scout Camp in the Jemez Mountains. She joined the faculty at Highland High soon after. She retired in 1980.

A Mass will be celebrated today at 10 a.m. at Albuquerque's Queen of Heaven Catholic Church, 5311 Phoenix NE. Interment will be in Romeoville, Ill.

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