



Dr. Ruth H. Alexander

April 17, 1938 - April 20, 2021

Dr Ruth H Alexander, the founder of the women's intercollegiate athletic program at the University of Florida in 1972, has died aged 83 in Gainesville, Florida. Under her leadership, competitive sports for women at the University of Florida advanced from the intramural and club sports level to varsity status, later to achieve great recognition and prominence along with men's programs. As UF sports historian Norm Carlson observed, 'she never made it a "men's sports vs. women's sports" issue, but she also never backed down when it came time to help women students have an opportunity to compete in intercollegiate athletics.'

When she arrived at the University of Florida in 1968, after being appointed Chairwoman of the Department of Physical Education for Women, women constituted over 40 percent of the UF student body, but they were not entitled to participate in varsity or intercollegiate sports. In a 1992 interview, she said, "women had the traditional activities available to them", "like sorority life (and) musical opportunities" and "extra-mural clubs", "but there were no intercollegiate athletics". At UF and most other US universities, women had demonstrated a high level of skills and enthusiasm to participate in organized collegiate sports, but were not given the opportunity to do so. In 1972, Dr. Alexander and a few faculty colleagues, including Mimi Ryan and Paula Welch, approached the University's Committee on Inter-collegiate Athletics that was chaired by then UF President Stephen C O'Connell. Dr Alexander had written to him about the need for women to have an intercollegiate athletic program in sports, stating that women leaders on campus wanted funding and greater support from the university to develop such a program. President O'Connell responded positively by telling the group: "We will do it. We will take a stand, and we will do it." President O'Connell then presented their proposal to the university athletic board, which approved it unanimously. Later, Dr Alexander described the experience: "I always think about President O'Connell, 'it was just very questionable for us to make such a proposal for women's athletics. We never had it. The possibility of being turned down was there. We never had it; why should they do it now? You walk over there (to Tigert Hall) and you are nervous and scared, but you want it. You kind of keep your fingers crossed. He just listened and said, 'We will have it' – kind of like it was God talking." With university support, Alexander drew up a budget and was allocated \$16,000 in 1972

to start the women's program with five teams: golf, swimming, track, tennis and gymnastics. Later in 1972, Congress enacted Title IX of the Civil Rights Act that mandated comparable funding for women's programs in educational institutions. By 1974, the budget for the UF women's inter-collegiate sports program grew to \$65,000, later rising to over \$5 million annually in the 1990s. Dr. Alexander's patience, determination and vision resulted in the Lady Gator sports program (as it became known) becoming one of the premier women's athletic programs in the country. Dr. Alexander led the program from 1972 until 1981. She took the title women's athletic 'coordinator', refusing to be called 'director'. But in essence she was in charge, while continuing to teach, research and raise four sons. When she retired as women's athletic coordinator in 1981, the program had grown to eight sports, and the swimming team had won the national championship. She and her cohorts had laid the foundation for a flourishing women's inter-collegiate program that continues to this day to excel and exceed all expectations.

Wanda Ruth Hammack Alexander was born on a farm in Madison County, Kentucky on April 17, 1938, the youngest of four children of Elizabeth (nee Hensley) and Burl King Hammack. At the age of two, she and her family, including her three siblings - Dennis (Denny), Larry and Jacqueline (Jackie) - moved to Radford, Virginia, a small town in the mountains of southwestern Virginia. Her father, Burl King Hammack, became a barber and later sold insurance as well. She was very close to her father and mother. On some days, she recalled how much she enjoyed sitting in her father's barber shop and just watching him work and meeting many of his customers. As an elementary school student, she loved school so much that she would tell people that she wanted to grow up and be a teacher. In the second and third grade, she often played school at home and pretended to teach children in a class where she would administer tests and draw pictures and post them on a bulletin board. She knew from an early age that she loved the classroom.

As a young girl, she was very close to her two brothers and sister. She learned sports by attending ball games with her brothers, who involved her in other recreational activities, including bicycle riding and swimming in the public pool. At ten she learned to play basketball with a tennis ball in the basement of the family home, using a paint can as a rim and attaching it to a piece of plywood while using a 'hairnet' as a net. Later in life, she recalled 'learning to dribble and shoot with the tennis ball'. Despite these modest arrangements, she had a rich and fulfilling childhood.

Ruth's mother died however when she was twelve in an accident. This changed her life dramatically, as she became the woman of the house. She later recalled that she became the 'housekeeper', and that, in her new role, she did all the laundry, the ironing, and the cooking from the time she was twelve until she graduated from high school. But her new responsibilities as a young homemaker did not temper her enthusiasm for education and

athletics.

During her first year of high school, she made the women's varsity basketball team. However, in her sophomore year, the school discontinued the women's teams because of funding cuts, and she reverted to playing intramural basketball and volleyball. She later remarked that in those days there were no protests by parents or students against the school for eliminating the women's basketball program, as they just had 'to adjust' to the new situation. She also was an outstanding student in high school, graduating eighth in her class, and she won an academic scholarship to Milligan College in Johnson City Tennessee. At Milligan, she excelled in literature and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts. However, she experienced first-hand the limited opportunities that women faced at most colleges during these times as there were no organized sports teams for women. This led her to play basketball for a local team called the 'Pepsi Cola Girls', which won gold medals and other prizes in tournaments around the state. She graduated at the top of her class in 1960 and was homecoming queen. She moved to Danville Kentucky to begin teaching English and physical education at the high school and began work on a Master's Degree in English at the University of Kentucky. At Danville, she met her future husband, and they married Thanksgiving weekend 1961, but the marriage was dissolved in May 1988. The couple had four sons, Samuel Maxwell Kern III, Fieldon King, Klinton West and Wesley Kane.

She moved to Bowling Green, Kentucky, in 1962 to join her husband. In Bowling Green, she taught English at the State Street Methodist School and gave birth to her first son. Wherever Ruth then moved with her growing family, she applied successfully for academic positions at various universities, including Indiana University (where she completed her doctorate in educational psychology and taught health education), and the University of Kentucky (where she taught health education and was a counsellor). In 1967, she followed her husband to Washington DC, where they lived with two pre-school boys in Beltsville, Maryland. Despite her responsibilities as a mother and wife, she was hired as an assistant professor in the research division at the University of Maryland College of Education and as an assistant professor in health education at the Walter Reed Hospital. During this time, she also coordinated teacher training programs for the State of Maryland. In 1969, she left her position at the University of Maryland to join her husband who had moved to Gainesville. Arriving in Gainesville with no job and pregnant with her third child, she applied for teaching positions and was hired by UF Dean Dennis 'Dutch' Stanley in February 1969 to be Chairwoman of what was then called the Department of Physical Education for Women. In 1972, after Dr. Alexander persuaded UF leaders to establish a woman's athletic program, Congress adopted Title IX of the Civil Rights Act with final regulatory guidelines agreed in 1975. Colleges and universities were given until 1978 to become fully compliant, but under her leadership UF was ahead of the curve especially in comparison to other schools in Florida and across the Southeastern conference. Dr.

Alexander and eight other women's athletic directors from Florida universities later met in 1976 to develop plans to show how their universities could make their men's and women's athletic programs comparable in terms of funding, as required by the National Collegiate Athletic Association's (NCAA) regulations adopted under Title IX.

Dr Alexander was later promoted in 1976 to Full Professor in UF's newly consolidated (for men and women) Department of Physical Education. Under her leadership, the Lady Gator Sports program grew and achieved national prominence. She relinquished her position as women's athletic coordinator in 1981 in order to devote herself full-time to teaching and research. Later, UF honored her with the prestigious appointment of Distinguished Service Professor in the Department of Exercise and Sports Science. From the 1980s until early 2000s, she was an active member of the UF Faculty Senate and set-up joint degree programs between her College and the College of Law and the Business School respectively. She was highly regarded by her colleagues and popular with students.

Other important honors include her appointment in 1974 by President Richard Nixon to the President's Council on Physical Fitness, to which she was reappointed by Presidents Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, and Ronald Reagan. In 1982 then Governor Bob Graham appointed her to the Governor's Council on Physical Fitness. She was inducted into the University of Florida Sports Hall of Fame in 1990 and later inducted into the State of Florida Women's Hall of Fame in 2013. She was a member of many national commissions and bodies that address physical fitness and sports science issues.

Her life and career embodied the challenges and obstacles that women faced across American society, but also demonstrated how one's aspirations and talents can be fulfilled through commitment to principles, perseverance, and devotion to family, colleagues and students. During her retirement she was a Board Member of the Girls and Boys Club of Alachua County, attended many academic and sporting events at UF, and was a member of the First United Methodist Church in Gainesville. She lived the last few years of her life at the Plaza Health and Rehabilitation facility in Gainesville. She is survived by her four sons – Kern III (Cambridge, England), King, Klint (Laramie WY), and Kane (Saint Augustine Beach, FL) and seven grandchildren, Samuel Maxwell Kern Alexander IV, Samuel Johnson Alexander, John Maxwell Alexander, William Chase Alexander, Savannah Rose Alexander, and Madison Elizabeth Alexander.

Dr Ruth H Alexander, born April 17, 1938. She died April 20, 2021, aged 83. A celebration of life will be held June 22, 2021 at 1:00 p.m. at First United Church of Gainesville, 419 NE 1st Street, with pastor Beth Snarr. Due to continued COVID-19 precautions we would ask that if you plan to attend the service in person to let the family know in advance by registering at (<http://www.ruth-alexander.com>).

Masks are optional for those who are vaccinated, but required for those who are not. Thank you for your consideration and cooperation. The service will also be live-streamed so as many people as possible can join in this special celebration of life (<http://www.ruth-alexander.com>).

Gifts in lieu of flowers in memory of Dr. Ruth Alexander may be mailed to the University of Florida Foundation, PO Box 14425, Gainesville, FL 32604, and made payable to the UF Foundation. Gifts in her memory can also be made through the posted website in her honor. <https://www.uff.ufl.edu/giving-opportunities/025747-dr-ruth-alexander-memorial-fund/>. For more specific gift-giving information, please contact Christy Popwell at cpopwell@ufl.edu.

The following link is to the article published in the Gainesville Sun on Wednesday, April 21, 2021. <https://www.gainesville.com/story/sports/2021/04/21/dr-ruth-alexander-founder-womens-sports-uf-passes-away/7319718002/>

Events

JUN **Service** 01:00PM

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First United Methodist Church
419 NE 1st St, Gainesville, FL, US, 32601