



The Chris Weller Story for the 62nd Induction Banquet Program

The 62nd induction banquet was held on November 9, 2023. Story written by Chris Zang.

Making peanut butter sandwiches for the players to save money to buy uniforms. Recruiting fans by putting flyers under windshield wipers at Terps football games. These don't sound like the duties of a college women's basketball coach. But to Chris Weller, who built what had been an emerging intramural program at the University of Maryland into an Atlantic Coast Conference and national powerhouse, it was part of the job.

"You did what you had to do," says Weller, 79, who coached the women's Terps from 1975 to 2002. In fact, sleeping four players to a room then was a step up from her own playing experience at Maryland from 1962 to 1966, Weller told *The Baltimore Sun* in 2015. "We played our first tournament in Frostburg — three games in two days. We slept on the gym floor. It was awesome," recalled Weller, who was team captain and leading scorer.

Later she became the Terps coach. Starting salary: \$9,000. Coinciding with the passage of Title IX in June 1972, Weller competed not only on the court but also worked to gain recognition, scholarships, court time, and funding to support the women's program. "I was never in it for money or fame," she told *The Sun*. "We pushed for opportunities in places where no one dreamed women should be involved — and every step forward was a blessing."

Weller achieved many steps forward. Her teams won eight ACC titles (including the first in 1978), made three Final Four appearances, and averaged 19 wins a season. She coached three All-Americans, five Olympians, and 20 All-ACC selections and helped lead four U.S.A. National and Select teams. In nine of her 27 seasons, the Terps achieved national Top 10 rankings, including in 1992, when they were No. 1 much of the year and Weller was named Naismith National Coach of the Year.

But ask Weller about numbers and it isn't her 499-286 record that she cites. It's that all but four students who finished their eligibility graduated. "Absolutely that was important," she says today.

Her being a mentor, not just a coach, was a recurrent theme when former players wrote letters of recommendation before Weller was inducted into the Women's Basketball Hall of Fame in 2010. Olympian Vicky Bullett said, "Her goal was not only to teach us basketball but the game of life. Coach Weller helped us believe in ourselves."

Martha Hastings added, “Her innovative techniques set her apart. However, for myself and other players, it will be the lessons learned not about the game she loved but about life that we will hold dearest. Ideals such as hard work, commitment, teamwork, and fair play.”

Weller, who has less to say these days because of health issues, was clearly touched by the players’ words. “It makes me feel good because they were family,” she says. “I didn’t have children so my players were my family.”

Conditioning was one of Weller’s innovations. At a time when it was thought a lot of running could affect a woman’s childbearing, Weller still got her teams in shape, even running the steps of Cole Field House. It paid off — in her third year she led Maryland to the finals of what is now the NCAA tournament.

Of course, some superstitions also helped, knocking on wood before a game and always sitting in the fourth seat because that is Weller’s favorite number. One of just three women’s basketball coaches in University of Maryland history (with her successor Brenda Frese and Dottie McKnight 1971-75), Weller plays down her importance. “Everybody plays their small part to make a big thing happen,” she says from her home in Silver Spring.

Her sister, Jackie, lends some insight about why win 499 was her last. “Our father had passed away and our mother was ill and had to be moved to 24-hour care. Chris managed that whole process,” Jackie says. “It was an unhappy situation. But Chris was a hero in my mind for doing that.”

Weller still goes to Xfinity Center occasionally to see the women Terps play and enjoys looking up in the rafters and saying “there’s my banner,” an honor bestowed in 2015 alongside those of other celebrated Terps, men and women.

It’s only fitting. Jim Kehoe, the late Maryland athletic director, once said, “As one of the initial leaders in the sport, Chris Weller helped take intercollegiate basketball from its early beginnings in physical education departments to the great sport it is today.”

Indeed after graduating from Maryland in 1966, Weller taught phys ed for seven years and started Montgomery County’s first girls basketball program at John F. Kennedy High School. Working with kids was always in her DNA. As a lifeguard in high school, she provided free swim lessons to small kids. She taught boating as a camp counselor at Saranac Lake, N.Y.

Asked if she was a good basketball player, Weller says “I was great!” with a laugh. “You had to believe you were or you weren’t.”

Weller, who also was on the Terps swim and lacrosse teams, passed on that belief to her players. That leadership didn’t end when she left UM. Take, for instance, when she became active in the owners association at her condo in Ocean City.

Apparently she got a big assessment and realized none of the owners had a say in condo management. She wrote a letter to the other 44 unit owners and they made her president of the new group.

Tonight she joins Gary Williams as the second Coaches Legacy Award winner in the Maryland State Athletic Hall of Fame. “That’s great! He was so helpful to us,” Weller says.