69. Optics Jocks

Carlos Stroud

Long hours in the laboratory and even longer bouts with Rochester winters do not encourage outdoor activities, but from early in the history of the Institute there were those who were very active in sports. Bob Hopkins was famous for the competitiveness of his downhill skiing and his horseshoe matches. Joe Eberly is still playing noontime basketball after thirty-five years at the University—his height, elbows, and skill are known to hundreds who have played in these games over the years. Problems like a ruptured Achilles tendon have not kept him off the court for long. It would be hard to say which faculty member was the most ruthless competitor, but certainly Dwayne Miller’s cross-checking in the intramural hockey games would put him in the running. At least one faculty member has coached a University team. Ken Teegarden coached the sailing club when he was a young assistant professor. Ian Walmsley is a black belt and taught a class in Tae Kwan Do. At least one former faculty member played on a varsity team as an undergraduate—Professor Michael Lea was a member of the varsity croquet team at Cambridge.

Without doubt the greatest athletic daring was exhibited by New Zealander Peter Gough, who was a postdoc and part-time assistant professor in the 1970s. He took time off from his Rochester duties and led an expedition to climb an unclimbed peak in the Andes, but was thwarted when one of his comrades was killed falling into a crevasse. He had another close scrape when climbing an ice face in the Adirondacks. Another group climbing the same face above Peter’s group fell and got their lines tangled with Peter, who ended up dangling a hundred feet up the cliff face with a compound fracture of his leg. Rescuers had to be called to get the climbers down as Peter’s wife Janet watched from below.

Not all the faculty are so competitive in their athletic endeavors. Both Emil Wolf and Bob Boyd have had notorious pictures taken of their dancing at conference banquets. Bob seldom passes up a conference with a surfing beach nearby, nor a hotel hot tub. Carlos Stroud has a picture of himself waterskiing on his group web page, but rumors are that it is two or three years old.

Graduate student Steve Kreger competing in Orienteering, 1994.
Of course, the real athletes in the department are mostly students. At least one undergraduate optics major won All-American honors at the University, Alex Gaeta in doubles tennis. Anna Hrycin was the star in one of the University’s outstanding women’s basketball teams. Anna went on to get a master’s degree and Alex a Ph.D. at the Institute. When Alex was a graduate student in Bob Boyd’s group he injured his ankle and was unable to compete in the Rochester Open Tennis Tournament. No matter: Mark Kramer, another member of Boyd’s research group, entered and won the tournament. They tried to challenge the graduate students at the Optical Sciences Center in Tucson to a match at the annual meeting of OSA, but someone tipped off the Arizona team, which wisely declined.

One graduate student, Stephen Kreger, competed in a world championship meet in 1994. He competed in the World Championship of Orienteering in Fiesch, Switzerland. The event for college students, sponsored by the International Orienteering Federation (IOF), is held once every two years. The sport of orienteering, more popular in Europe, especially Scandinavia, than in the United States, involves running a course through the countryside using a compass and map to navigate between a series of intermediate points.
Steve began competing in the sport as an undergraduate at Rose Hulman Institute, and continued competing in Rochester as a member of a local club.

There were a number of serious runners, especially in the 1980s and 1990s. Graduate student Alan Evans was one of the dominant forces in the Upstate running scene, winning a number of races and competing in some national marathon events. Perhaps the most remarkable runner, though, was Anne Forbes, wife of Professor Greg Forbes. She was one of the top-rated runners in the Rochester area, and like any successful competitive runner, she was a bit obsessive in her training. Shortly after one of their children was born she was a familiar sight on snowy winter days in southwest Rochester, running along a path pushing the baby in a big wheeled stroller through the snow. Both Alan and Anne continue their serious competition more than a decade later, Alan as a Corning employee, and Anne back in Australia.

Peter Gough was not the only climber. During the 1980s a number of graduate students got to be very serious about rock climbing, well before climbing walls were a familiar sight in every suburban mall and school gymnasium. Campus security had to remain vigilant to keep them from climbing up the outside of Hoyt auditorium without safety ropes, using the decorative bricks protruding a half-inch or so as handholds. Graduate students Chris Saxer, Karl Koch, Dan Gauthier, Maurice Pessot, Steve Chakmakjian, and Mark Beck were the most serious of this bunch. Happily, they never had accidents quite at the level of Gough’s.

Softball has been a perennial favorite. The Incoherents were a softball team that played in a city of Rochester league for a number of years. Their alter ego was Zelda and the Zoneplates, a much less serious group of folks who played intramural softball. Zelda had one of the simplest, yet profound, rallying cries ever used by a sports team: “Don’t screw up!”

Frisbee has been a perennial favorite since the ’60s. Ultimate Frisbee matches are serious business as Optics students Jay Anzelotti and Tom Dunn demonstrate.