



Rose Aguilar McHone: A Pioneer in Girls Athletics at El Cerrito High School

By Jon Bashor

In spring of 1975, El Cerrito High School senior Rose Aguilar was looking forward to receiving her diploma and her athletics letter for competing in interscholastic sports. The diploma wasn't a problem, but when she didn't receive her "Block C" letter for playing varsity softball, tennis and JV basketball over four years, she wanted to know why.

"When I was a senior and getting close to graduating, I realized hey, we haven't gotten our letters," Rose Aguilar McHone recalled recently. "So I went to ask for them, not just for me but for four others too. I assumed I would get one – I didn't know that girls didn't get letters."

She first asked her tennis coach, Connie Wong, and was told that while boys received them, girls didn't. She then approached baseball coach Larry Quirico and got the same answer, but he added that he would look into it. Quirico did tell her that if Principal Frank Granucci said it was ok, he would give the girls their letters.

When she went to the principal's office, the secretary was out to lunch so she went straight into the office.

"When I went to Dr. Granucci's office I had my speech all made out and was even prepared to cry," Rose said. "Then he said 'Ok' and got on the phone to Larry, who then ordered the letters for us."

Quirico, who graduated from El Cerrito High in 1958 and returned



TOP ROW: Kathy Gwinn, Rose Aguilar, Liz Hamala, Ann Miller BOTTOM ROW: Robin Greenberg, Audrey Burns, Marybeth Rozance, Connie Wong

The first ECHS girls tennis team. Rose Aguilar holds her Jimmy Connors model aluminum racquet; she saved up for a year to buy it. Because there was no money for team uniforms that year, the girls could wear what they wanted. Photo EC Historical Society.

in 1969 to coach baseball and later became athletic director, credits Rose with being a leader in launching girls' sports at ECHS.

"She was a good athlete, she was smart and she loved to play sports," said Quirico, who retired in 2001. "Rose and the other girls who pioneered women's athletics and set the table for those who followed. But Rose was the first woman to earn a varsity letter at El Cerrito High."

At the school, Rose played softball and was the team captain

for four years. She also played tennis and won the doubles championship in 1974 with partner Ann Miller. That year they were voted MVPs by their teammates. She also played JV basketball for the school.

"I played sports because I loved it," she said. "I played every sport I could."

When tennis coach Wong handed out the letters, she didn't have the one for Rose, telling her

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“Coach Quirico wants to give you yours personally.”

But getting her letter wasn't the end of her story. The 1975 edition of *El Camino*, the school yearbook, had already been printed, so a special supplement was printed with photos of the girls with their letters. And anyone who wanted a copy had to pay extra for it.

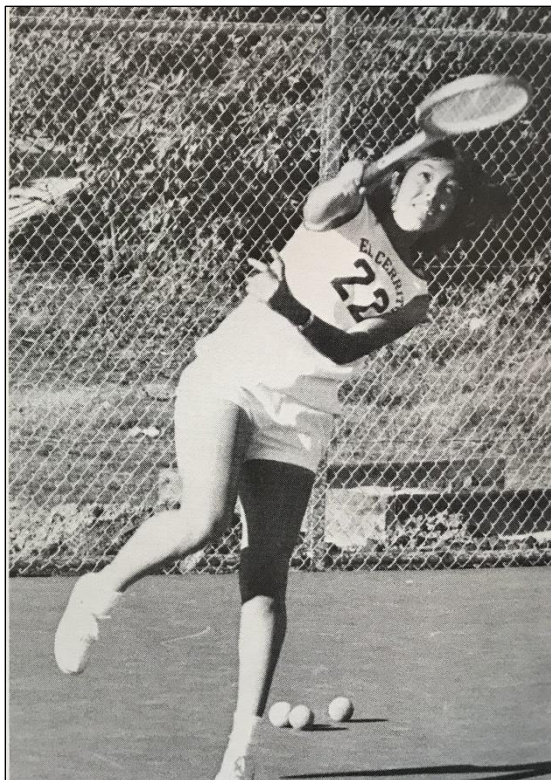
The school yearbooks published during Rose's time at the high school also reflected the dominance of boys' sports. The 1972 edition devoted 34 pages to boys' sports, while girls merited only four. In 1973, the score was 38 pages to six and by 1974 it was 40 to seven.

Same old story

To display her Block C, Rose wanted a letterman's jacket, with a felt vest and leather sleeves. But when she went to the local sporting goods store with her mother to buy one, she heard a familiar refrain. Only boys could get the jackets, girls got sweaters. Undeterred, she had her brother and mother return to the store the next day to buy an XS jacket for him, but the store owner refused. Her mother bought the white sweater, sewed on all of Rose's awards and embroidered it with “Rose.”

The challenges she faced were reflective of the times. Title IX, the landmark federal civil rights law that was enacted as part of the Education Amendments of 1972, prohibited sex-based discrimination in any school or any other education program that receives funding from the federal government. That also applied to scholastic sports.

Although the law mandated equal programs for boys and girls, there was no additional funding to cover the costs, Quirico said. In the



Rose Aguilar returns a shot on the tennis court. Photo El Cerrito Historical Society collection.

then-Richmond Unified School District there were very few women P.E. teachers who were interested in becoming team coaches, he said, adding that as more younger teachers were hired that changed. And as the early girls teams achieved success in interscholastic play, more girls tried out and competed in tennis, volleyball, softball, basketball, gymnastics and track.

“It got more popular as more girls started playing and realized how much fun it was,” Quirico said. “By the 1980s, girls athletics had really taken off.”

In addition to Rose, Quirico cited two other female athletes who excelled; Karan Mason and Janice Knudsen.

Karan Mason played basketball from 1975-77 and was all-league in '76 and '77, setting a team record by scoring 19 points in a game in her senior year. She also played tennis and went on to

play at San Jose State University. She was inducted into San Jose State's hall of fame in 2000.

Janice Knudsen played basketball from 1976-79 and was selected all-league in 1978 and '79, all-East Bay in 1979, all-tournament in '77 and 78, plus named prep of the week two times. She also excelled in volleyball and competed in track. At Cal State Hayward she played basketball for four years, was all-conference for three of those years and was inducted into the university's hall of fame in 1994.

After ECHS, Rose attended San Francisco State University where she majored in physical education and played softball for four years. After graduating, she returned to El Cerrito High to coach softball for two years and also played softball and tennis in city recreation leagues.

But, she said, when the district implemented coed physical education classes, the male teachers got the jobs. She returned to school and became a court reporter in San Francisco for 10 years. Later, her husband's job took him to Singapore and Malaysia. They also have two sons.

In 2014, Rose was inducted into the El Cerrito High School Athletics Hall of Fame, which Quirico helped establish in 2009. For her induction, she wore her hard-earned sweater bearing her athletic achievements.

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Afterward, she decided to donate the sweater to the ECHS Archiving project. “First, I asked my sons if they wanted it and they said, ‘Nope!’,” Rose said. “Then I asked Joann Steck-Bayat of the Archiving Project and she said ‘We would love to have it.’”

The sweater is now prominently displayed in the hall of fame showcase outside the school gym.

“I was very, very honored and pleased to be selected for the hall of fame,” Rose said. “I hope that what I was able to accomplish will inspire other young ladies to play sports and succeed.”

One more challenge

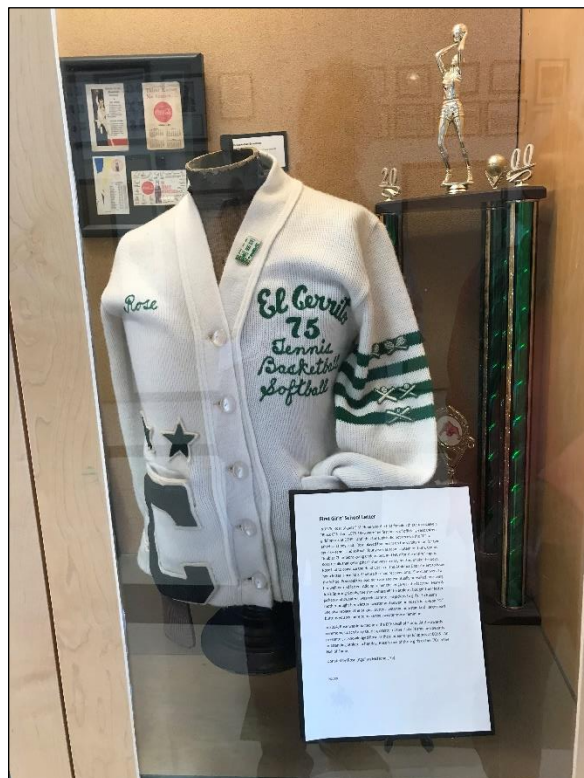
Recently Rose set her sights on one more accomplishment. Her niece, Peyton Aguilar, was a standout softball player at the high school who had earned her letter and proudly wore it on her own letterman’s jacket. After Peyton died unexpectedly on Jan. 1, 2024, Rose became determined to have her niece’s jacket displayed next to Rose’s sweater.

But the hall of fame rules state that a student must have graduated from ECHS in order to be considered. Peyton died six months before she would have graduated. Rose’s request was approved in March 2024 and the jacket will remain on display for the rest of the school year.

Editor’s note: This special issue of the Forge is published to celebrate Women’s History Month.



Wearing her hard-earned Block C sweater, Rose Aguilar McHone was inducted into the ECHS Athletic Hall of Fame in 2014. Photo ECHS Athletic Hall of Fame.



Rose Aguilar's Block C sweater on display at ECHS. Photo by Jon Bashor.