

Homeschool Co-ed Volleyball Makes PA Unique

from Howard Richman

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The last decade has seen a steady growth in homeschool sports throughout the country. The organizers of the teams, leagues, and tournaments are invariably homeschooling parents creating activities for their own children. Like other states, Pennsylvania has boys' basketball teams and girls' basketball teams. Unlike other states, however, we also play co-ed homeschool volleyball.

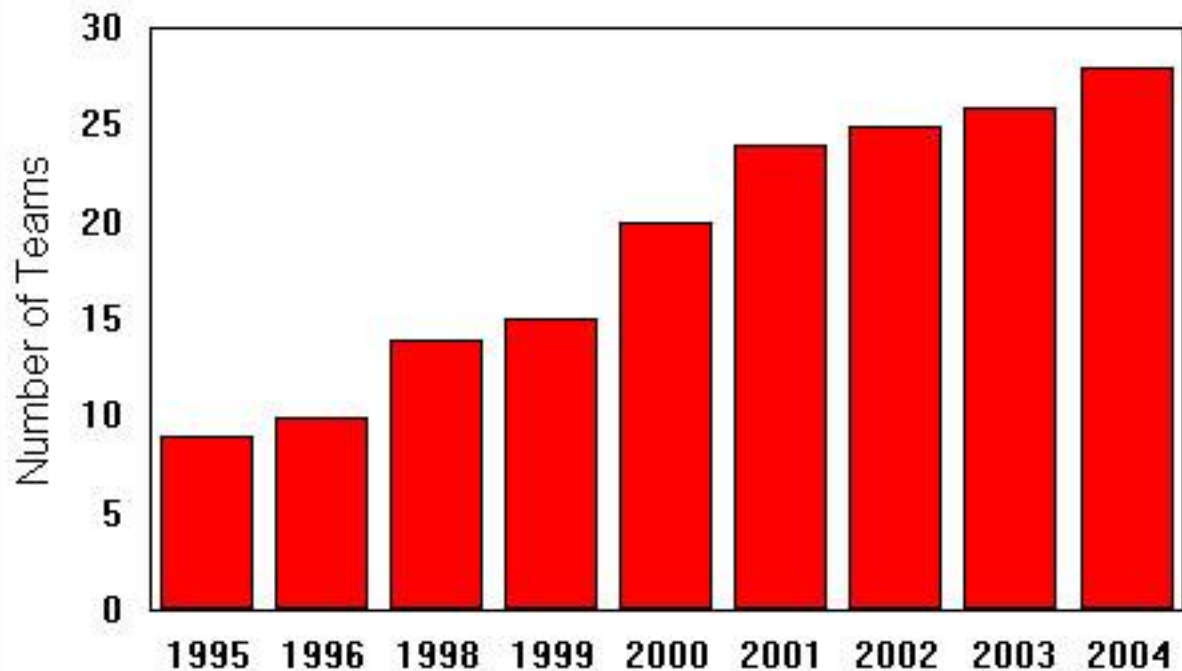
It all started in the fall of 1995 when Cindy McKeown, founder of a Harrisburg-area homeschool co-op called CHES (Creative Home Educators' Support Services), started looking for a competitive sport that her high school age homeschooled kids could play. Cindy's children had played organized baseball and soccer in elementary school and junior high, but those opportunities had disappeared once they reached high school.

At teen-nights, twice each month, Cindy's children had enjoyed playing pick-up games of volleyball, but they wanted something more competitive and Cindy was supportive. As she told me, there are "a lot of life lessons to be learned in competitive sports." Cindy figured that volleyball is a relatively inexpensive sport to organize because "you just need a gym, a net and some balls" and she liked the idea of playing co-ed "because both boys and girls could be involved with it" and you "didn't need a lot of kids to make a team."

The first volleyball tournament, in November 1995 at Grace Chapel in Elizabethtown, was organized as a fund raiser for CHES. Nine volleyball teams attended, including two from Maryland (who were competing, there, against Christian School girls teams). Experienced refs were hired. Although the tournament lost \$500, it was a success in other ways as shown by the steady growth in numbers of teams ever since. After the tournament, one of the people hired to ref, Dave Boronow, volunteered to coach the CHES volleyball teams even though he didn't have children of his own.

Beginning in the spring of 1998, I have been organizing a volleyball tournament, sponsored by PA Homeschoolers each spring in Central Pennsylvania. (The chart below shows the number of teams who have attended each tournament beginning with the fall tournaments sponsored by CHES in 1995 and 1996 and continuing with the spring tournaments sponsored by PA Homeschoolers.)

Volleyball Teams at Tournament



In the fall of 1999 we brought the volleyball teams and tournaments under the AAU (Amateur Athletic Union) insurance umbrella. For a fee of just \$10-\$12 per person per school year, the players were insured against injury and the coaches and gyms were insured against liability. Now there are three volleyball tournaments each year, one in Eastern PA (Downingtown) in early November, one in Central PA (Shippensburg) in early March, and one in Western PA (Pittsburgh) in late April.

I just got home from our March 8, 2004, tournament at Shippensburg University which was attended by 28 teams. Our Mustang teams (from the area north and east of Pittsburgh) convoyed to the tournament in vans filled with kids and parents and stayed together in a motel just a few miles from Shippensburg. The car rides and motel stays are a favorite part of the experience for our team.

We arrived at the tournament at about 8:15 AM to find three of the six volleyball nets already in use by teams warming up. At 9, I opened up the tournament with a prayer from the Jewish liturgy:

Bless our children, O God, and help us so to fashion their souls by precept and example that they may ever love the good and turn away from evil, revere your teaching and bring honor to their people.

Throughout the tournament the coaches and parents were indeed teaching by example and the players were indeed bringing honor to their families. Throughout the entire tournament, I never once heard a parent, coach, or student complain to a ref about a call

or make a nasty statement to a member of an opposing team. At the end of each match, the players came to the net to congratulate the other team.

At the tournament, my wife Susan interviewed some of the parents about what they liked about the volleyball tournaments. One father who had wrestled in high school liked the more relaxed pace of a homeschool season as compared to the intense pace of high school or college sports. Homeschool teams generally get together just once a week to practice, compared to practices 5 days a week for high school and college teams. He had had no time for anything else during wrestling seasons.

Each team at this year's tournament played at least five best 2-out-of-3 game matches. The matches lasted about a half hour each with a break of up to an hour between matches. When not playing, the players would usually eat snacks, while talking with their friends and watching other teams play. They would cheer for their friends or "scout" out their future opposition. They would also serve as linesman to help the refs determine whether a ball fell inside or outside of a line.

The tournament continued all day without any team being eliminated from contention. There were four divisions, an A-level and a B-level division for each age group (Senior: 18 and under; Junior: 14 and under). At about 3:30 pm, the playoff round began. The first place team in each division played the fourth place team and the second place team played the third with the winners to play in the championship. Other teams played consolation matches in the available courts.

After the championship matches at 5, there was an award ceremony where trophies were handed out. After a quick cleanup, the homeschoolers stacked up the chairs and left the court clean, much to the appreciation of the Shippensburg University staff. Then the drive home began. When we stopped for supper, I interviewed one of our coaches and some of our players about what they enjoyed most.

Our primary coach, Gene Larson, who played volleyball in college, began coaching our team six years ago, before his own children were old enough to play, because he appreciated the opportunity to influence young people, and to see their incremental growth in skills and maturity. Before he took over, I was doing a pretty poor job of coaching our team, relying upon the ability of homeschooled kids to learn from books and videos. With Gene's help, our team improved their individual skills and learned about the teamwork of repositioning themselves after the serve, and transitioning to new positions as the game situation changed.

Our Mustang Junior A team went undefeated at the tournament. Three of our two coaches' children, Christian and Micah Larson and Jim McGeary were on that team. I asked them which of their matches they enjoyed most. I expected them to say the playoff match in which they lost the first game but staged a comeback to win 2 out of 3. But they told me that it was the championship match that they especially enjoyed because they were really working well together, playing like a team, and communicating well. They enjoyed being part of something that was larger than just themselves.

I asked some of the players about the co-ed aspect of the team. On a co-ed volleyball team girls and guys tend to have different roles. Girls tend to be the setters and the guys,

usually taller, tend to be the hitters. Ideally, whoever gets the ball passes it to a girl who sets it for a guy to spike. Lisa Gravante, a setter on the Mustangs Senior team, could see disadvantages. If she were on an all-girls volleyball team, she told me, it would open up new roles to her.

However, the players very much enjoyed being around friends of both sexes. Emily Welsh, another member of the Mustangs senior team, told me, "Some of my best friends are guys and it's fun to be able to see them at the tournaments." The kids are not paired off in the van as I drive the players home. They are all talking together, sometimes teasing, lots of humor. They look forward to the tournaments as a chance to socialize with their friends.

There are new homeschool volleyball teams forming in both Reading and Lock Haven that plan to participate in the 2004-2005 school year tournaments. It's not hard to start a team -- you only need six players including at least two girls and two guys.