When asked what led to the tremendous strides made in SU women's sports over the past 25 years, most female athletes will answer with two words: Doris Soladay.

When a tall, slim, soft-spoken young woman named Doris Soladay came to Syracuse University in 1960 to teach physical education, no one paid much attention to her. But when, at 64 years old, this same woman retired from her job as associate athletic director in the spring of 1995, the University took notice. The next academic year would mark the 25th anniversary of women's sports at SU. And, as everyone associated with the Orangewomen knows, much of the excellence of those 25 years is owed to Soladay.

Doris Soladay grew up in New Mexico, where she learned to swim when she was practically knee-high to a grasshopper. And as soon as she was able, she was playing mean games of sandlot football and baseball with her four older brothers and sisters. Soladay was a born athlete. But there was never any thought of her moving beyond the level of childish games to those of state, regional, or national competitions. Women just didn’t compete at those levels. As a coed at the University of Denver from 1948 to 1952, Soladay joined sports clubs. The highlight of the year was Sports Day, a day when college sports clubs from neighboring states played against one another. Sports ranged from swimming to skiing but no scores were kept, no winners anointed. “You played the best you could,” Soladay remembers, “and at the end of the day you socialized over punch and cookies.”
Soladay, who became Syracuse University's first and only director of women's athletics, began working for change when she taught physical education, first at the University of Colorado, then at SU. The year Soladay came to Syracuse, she became advisor to SU’s student-run Women’s Athletics Association (WAA), a position she held until 1975. One of the WAA’s first tasks was to elevate the competitive level of sports days.

Soladay also joined the American Association for Health, Physical Education, and Recreation. Through this group, she helped form the Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics for Women, which launched national championships for women, starting with basketball in 1965. In 1971 Soladay and other committed female physical education teachers formed the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (IAAW) as a counterpart to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). The next year New York State and Eastern AIAWs were formed to promote state and regional competition, leading to national championships run by IAAW.

At Soladay’s urging, SU became a charter AIAW member. The AIAW folded in 1981 after the NCAA began offering women’s national championships. In 1983 Soladay helped expand the Big East Conference to include women’s sports. And from 1989 through 1995, she was an active member of the NCAA Council, the governing and legislative arm of the NCAA.

If you talk to Soladay about her career, you’ll discover that this genteel, dignified woman is much too modest to take credit for being a pioneer of any kind nationally or at Syracuse. But she doesn’t have to take credit—it’s given freely. “If there ever was a pioneer in women’s sports,” says Kathleen Parker, SU’s field hockey coach, “it’s Doris Soladay. And you certainly can’t talk the history of women’s athletics at Syracuse without telling her story.”

In 1971 members of Syracuse’s five club sports for women—tennis, volleyball, basketball, swimming, and fencing (replaced in 1972 by field hockey)—decided they wanted to compete at the varsity level. At the urging of Soladay and Lucille Verhulst, director of physical education for women, Chancellor Melvin A. Eggers agreed. The budget was $1,000. With SU being a charter member of AIAW, the first Orangewomen could now compete at state, regional, and national intercollegiate levels. Soladay, Verhulst, and other physical education faculty members launched daily training programs for the new Orangewomen, who had previously practiced a mere three times a week.

In 1972 Soladay’s dreams were backed by a federal mandate. That year, Title IX of the Education Amendments required institutions receiving federal aid to offer equal sports opportunities and financial support to women athletes.

In 1975 Soladay became the director of SU’s newly-established Department of Intercollegiate Athletics for Women. That academic year Soladay had a budget of $50,000 and six scholarships to dole out among the five teams. She added women’s rowing to her varsity sports in 1977 and women’s cross country and indoor and outdoor track in 1981. In 1982 the men’s and women’s athletic departments merged. Soladay became associate director of athletics, second in command to athletic director Jake Crouthamel. Her budget climbed to $400,000.

In 1994 Soladay introduced plans to establish women’s soc-
cer and lacrosse teams at Syracuse. The soccer team played and
won its first game in the fall of 1996 in a new, 1,500-seat soccer
stadium behind Manley Field House. Next fall SU's women's
lacrosse team will play its first game at the recently refurbished
Coyne Field. Opening season celebrations may be marred by the
shadow of a civil suit, however. After Soladay announced her
long-term plans for lacrosse, eight students filed a class-action suit
under Title IX, demanding that SU introduce lacrosse immediately.
Because the case is pending, Soladay cannot speak about it. But
those close to the situation say she was right to take the time to build
a strong program, rather than launch a poorly developed one too
soon.

When Soladay retired, she left knowing that SU's women's varsity
sports program was comparable to any in the country. Although some
universities may offer as many as 25 women's varsity sports, such large
programs are rarely well supported or highly competitive across the
board. Syracuse, on the other hand, offers 10 solidly backed, highly com-
petitive women's varsity sports programs. Orangewomen regularly com-
pete in Big East Conference basketball, cross country, field hockey, swim-
mimg and diving, tennis, indoor/outdoor track and field, and volleyball.
This year, 87 female student-athletes at SU are receiving nearly $1.5 million
in athletic scholarships.

Women's field hockey took Big East championship tournaments in 1993
and 1995, and won three regular season championships in 1993, 1994, and
1995.

Women's tennis won the Big East Championship Tournament in 1982, 1984,
and 1985. And women's basketball won the Big East tournament in 1984-85.
Two years later they won the Big East regular season title and were runners-up
in the Big East tournament. In 1995-96 they were co-champions in the
Big East Seven.

In track and field and cross-country, Orangewomen have
consistently captured Big
East championships in all the
events, as have Orangewomen
swimmers. The women's vol-
leyball team has played in Big
East tournaments since 1982,
finishing second in 1991. Players
Dani Loch, Sherry Cowling, and
and Terri Hibner made the All
Tournament teams in 1985 and
1988, and Loch was the Big East
Conference Northern Division
Player of the Year in 1985.

In addition, Orangewomen have
won individual All-America honors
in field hockey, tennis, and track and
field. Two have taken the coveted First
Team National Academic All Americas,
which recognize academic and athletic
performance, and one, rower Tracy
Rude, has competed in the Olympics. If
all goes well, one day all Orangewomen
programs may rank among the top 20 and
consistently compete in the Big East.

Field hockey coach Kathleen Parker,
who began coaching part time in 1978, will
never forget the early years. "It's been a light
all the way,” she says. “My first year here, I had maybe 20 hockey balls to last the whole season. I didn’t have any cones to set down at practice for my kids to work around, so I used to collect milk jugs. I’d get the empty plastic milk containers and fill ‘em with sand for my cones. But they’re not really easy to carry around. I used to drag them around on a rope.” Her girls had to buy their own sticks and cleats.

While coaching part time, Parker held onto a full-time tenured position at a good salary and a job with lousy pay and no security. Soladay gave Parker three months to decide. Finally, Parker signed on.

One of Parker’s early recruits was Eileen Donnellan DiBartolomeo, who joined the team in 1978. Raring to go on the first day of classes, DiBartolomeo went to the Women’s Building looking for her team and a practice schedule. She found Parker and two other players. “It was really depressing,” DiBartolomeo recalls. “We just hung out and talked. I went back to my dorm room and cried.”

The first two years, the football team would run through field hockey practices behind Coyne Field, scattering the players. “They couldn’t care less if we were there at all,” DiBartolomeo recalls. “I don’t think anyone else did, either.” Fans were few and far between.

But as Parker recruited better players, including goalie Eileen Lewis Habelow, DiBartolomeo saw their status rise. In four years they went from playing junior colleges to competing in the Division II national tournament in the fall of 1981, DiBartolomeo’s senior year. Seeded last out of eight teams, Syracuse came in second. And DiBartolomeo and Habelow both held spots on the AIAW Division II Championship Tournament Team.

The improvement continued steadily. In 1993 team member Julie Williamson became Syracuse’s first field hockey player to be selected for the U.S. National Team. In 1994 she became Big East Player of the Year.

Today, the Orangewomen are in their seventh season of being listed among the top 20 field hockey programs. Parker, who earned her 200th career victory last fall, has all the equipment she needs, the use of the newly renovated Coyne Field—without interference from the football players—and some 500 people cheering at each game.

The history of SU field hockey echoes the stories of all the early Orangewomen sports. Swimmers passed damp warm-ups on to other teams. Volleyball players provided their own shorts and T-shirts. Women’s basketball bought their own shoes and socks. When the team received its first new basketball shoes and socks from an anonymous donor in 1976, it celebrated by having a photograph taken of the players from the knees down.

Volleyball used worn-out practice balls. Women’s basketball players practiced in Gym A in the Women’s Building, but often got bumped to the hot, too-small Gym B. In 1979 they moved to Manley Field House, where they now enjoy a renovated stadium. Tennis moved from the courts in front of the Women’s Building to the newer Skytop courts in 1979 as well.

The swim team may have benefited most from physical improvements. From 1971 until 1978 the Orangewomen practiced at Sibley Pool in the Women’s Building, which was not designed for competition and lacked lap lanes.

In the fall of 1978 Soladay put the women’s and men’s teams under one head coach, Lou Walker. Both teams worked out at the competitively designed Webster Pool, situated behind Archbold Stadium. According to Liz Vilbert Franklin, who practiced at Sibley her first year on the team, moving to Webster made a huge difference.

“We saw a tremendous improvement in our team because the women wanted to pit themselves against the men,” she says. Her sophomore year, Franklin’s team rose from a mediocre standing in New York State to 17th in the nation.
“There was a lot of talent on that team,” she recalls, “and we started working really hard and it came together.” Franklin graduated in 1981 as a four-time All American in butterfly, backstroke, and individual medley relays. The first four-year All American in SU swimming history, she is one of only two SU athletes to earn that honor.

Improvements like this resulted from Soladay’s instinct for hiring top coaches. In addition to Parker and Walker, she hired Jesse Dwire to coach women’s tennis and Barbara Jacobs to coach basketball. Under Dwire, Orangewomen have regularly placed first or second in the Big East Championships. Jacobs led the Orangewomen to the Big East Conference Championship in 1985 and guided them to the tournament finals in 1988. All four coaches have been named Big East Coach of the Year at least once.

Jacobs left in 1993 to coordinate women’s basketball officiating for the Big East Conference. Soladay replaced her with Marianna Freeman. Her second season, Freeman directed the Orangewomen in regular season sweeps of two Big East Conference teams, something no SU team had done since 1989-90. Soladay also boosted women’s varsity rowing by hiring Kris Sanford, the daughter of men’s rowing coach Bill Sanford, as novice coach two years ago. Now head coach, Sanford has just seen her team achieve NCAA status. She’s also overseeing an ongoing equipment upgrade that will put her team on par with its competitors.

The most recent improvements came in 1994 when SU spent $4.8 million on a new stadium for the women’s soccer team and a new wing at Manley Field House, which houses seven Orangewomen coaches and four men’s coaches.

When Soladay stepped down in 1995, her position was filled by Janet Kittell, former athletic director of California State University at Chico. Given all that Soladay’s done, you’d think Kittell would have no dragons left to slay. And you’d be wrong. Speaking last fall at a luncheon honoring SU’s women’s varsity programs and Soladay, Kittell described her vision for the future: She sees a time when women athletes are asked for autographs as frequently as male athletes; a time when the best all-around athlete at Syracuse is a female tennis player; a time when a woman wearing a Syracuse football jersey is not a cheerleader, but SU’s place-kicker.

If you think Kittell’s crazy, just remember—some people thought Doris Soladay was too.