



Making a Difference Through Sport: Toni St. Pierre's Story

Toni St. Pierre was a quiet fighter. A humble person by nature, she had a keen sense of justice and was highly competitive. And when she believed in something, she didn't let it go.

That's why the namesake of the YWCA Minneapolis Women's Triathlon memorial award didn't feel she had a choice when she was barred from competing on the boys' cross-country running, ski and track teams at Hopkins High School in Minnetonka, Minnesota. It was a time in the early 1970s before Title IX legislation was passed and it was not illegal for high school sports teams to discriminate based on gender. An athletically talented runner, St. Pierre was training with the boys' cross-country team but couldn't officially compete in any meets. Girls' teams and female athletes would not be allowed to compete at a school or state level until the summer of 1972. In the spring of her junior year, the American Civil Liberties Union took on her quest and filed an action with the Minnesota State High School League that would change the landscape for all girls in high school sports, not just for St. Pierre.

In the spring of 1972, Judge Miles Lord ruled that St. Pierre and another female athlete, Peg Brenden, would be allowed to compete on the boys' athletic teams at their respective high schools. After the ruling, St. Pierre went on to not only compete but excel in her athletic activities. She joined the boys' cross-country running, ski and track teams her senior year of high school. That year she would win the state championship in the mile and set a national record time of 2:18.30 in the half-mile, winning that race as well. St. Pierre would continue to compete in college, joining the St. John's College men's cross-country running and ski teams while attending the College of St. Benedict.

The decision by Judge Lord, which was met with plenty of opposition, made an instrumental change for girls all over the state of Minnesota who wanted to become involved in high school sports. The impact of the ruling didn't stop at the state level; it gained national attention and helped make a stronger argument for greater equality in athletic opportunities for girls and young women. On June 23, 1972, the landmark Title IX legislation was passed on a federal level with the ruling that no person in the United States could be excluded from educational programs based on their sex.

St. Pierre met all of the challenges in her life with the same enthusiasm she had for athletics. Larry Stowes, a close friend who met and trained with St. Pierre at YWCA Minneapolis Midtown, says, "Toni was passionate about everything she did. She had her own personal challenges, and I think she worked even harder because of them."

Stowes remembers St. Pierre's training intensity and that sometimes it took up most of her free time. In fact, he had just recently met her when she suddenly became unavailable for anything for about two months. When he asked her about it later, she was surprised. "I told you I had to be intensive about my training!" she explained. Later, Stowes would join St. Pierre in her training in Buffalo, Minnesota, where they would ride bikes and swim in Buffalo Lake. "I couldn't keep up with her," Stowes says.

Her dedication and sense of commitment are the same qualifications participants must meet to win the Toni St. Pierre Award for Most Improved Athlete each year. "The idea was to honor women that are committed to a long-term view of their health and embrace the challenge of investing in their own strength – not just for one year, but as a lifestyle," says Paul Johnson, the assistant race director of the Women's Triathlon. And St. Pierre, starting with her commitment to high school athletics up until her last triathlon, was in it for the long haul.

Her humble nature and desire to do right by others transferred from athletics to other aspects of her life. St. Pierre worked as a hospital nurse who served women undergoing difficult births and often came to



the hospital from poor neighborhoods. "She had some very salty words for anyone who looked down on those women in any way," says Stowes. Nicole Cueno, race director and friend of St. Pierre, agrees: "She was full of love and kindness for people who needed it."

She was very involved with the lives of her children, both in athletics and other endeavors. She supported them through their own extracurricular activities. She attended almost every meet, always an enthusiastic spectator. "We always knew when we ran past where she was," says her son, Tim Heisel.

Aside from being a strong supporter of her children, she was also an inspiration to them. "From the time she was in high school, she became an advocate for people and learned how to stand up for what she believed in," says her daughter, Alicia Jack. Speaking of their mother's role in the pre-Title IX case, her children feel an overwhelming sense of pride. "I can't imagine being told you can't do that, or you can only cheer for the boys," Jack says. "I'm grateful that somebody stood up and that 'someone' was our mom." St. Pierre's other daughter, Jessica Heisel, competed with St. Pierre in the YWCA Women's Triathlon. Jack competed in the race for the first time in 2013, after her mother had passed and in her honor.

St. Pierre continued to push herself, especially when faced with adversity. The same spirit that fueled her to fight to compete with the boys in high school would follow her throughout her life. Later in her athletic career, she still faced discrimination from men who tried to make her feel like she was less of an athlete. Stowes says, "She'd hear 'You're pretty good – for a girl.'" St. Pierre would prove them wrong, showing them with actions instead of words that she was a contender. "She'd be on the track on a 12-mile run and let the guys running behind her get close and ready to pass. Then she'd just take off, not looking back," says Stowes.

When running alone became too hard on her body, she got involved with triathlons where two-thirds of the event includes lower impact activities – swimming and biking. Soon, she would start winning in her age group at the YWCA Women's Triathlon. Assistant Race Director Johnson met St. Pierre in a triathlon training class at YWCA Minneapolis and was unaware of her athletic prowess until seeing her compete:

"One day she was simply an eager student in a triathlon class with bright eyes and a warm smile. The next thing we knew, she was winning her age group and going to nationals."

St. Pierre competed in YWCA's inaugural triathlon at Baker Park in 2008, coming in 23rd overall and 2nd in her age group with a time of 1:29.12. She dominated in the 2009 and 2010 triathlons winning both in her age group. Her time for the 2009 event was 1:31.03. The triathlon moved to its current location and course at Lake Nokomis in 2010. Her race in 2010 came in at 1:23.23.

Her humble nature was something that Johnson and many others came to admire about St. Pierre. She was always generous in sharing what she had learned. She was often there at YWCA's free clinics to provide others her tips for training or succeeding. Being competitive never kept her from being a positive force in the community and offering support to other women who were new to the sport. "She really liked that the Women's Triathlon was open to all women and girls, and just had such a good spirit," says Cueno. "She had so much to give."

Toni St. Pierre passed away on February 2, 2013, leaving behind a legacy in which she quietly dominated every athletic opportunity that came her way and changed the landscape for high school athletics in Minnesota. By honoring St. Pierre with the memorial award, YWCA Minneapolis hopes to inspire generations of athletes to discover their own strength like she did.