

WONDER WOMAN

World-class athlete, doctor and researcher powers through glass ceiling with grace

By ANDREA KENNEDY

To anyone who claims you can't do it all, meet Jo Hannafin.

"I think you can do it all," she says, "just not at the same time."

In Hannafin's case, you can be a world-class athlete, you can practice sports medicine at the nation's No. 1 orthopedics hospital, you can be voted repeatedly one of the best doctors in America, you can conduct award-winning research, you can be a pioneer for women in your field and you can be a mother of three.

It's a dizzying archive of achievements, especially when each one can consume an entire lifetime.

"It's all wrapped around sports and around health," Hannafin says, "so it's easy to do these different things, because they all kind of feed back on each other."

What she calls "easy" looks a lot more like years of tireless effort, often in the face of adversity – not that she ever paid attention to that. When facing the option of sink or swim, Hannafin didn't only swim, she propelled herself through the water with the same grace and power that won her three golds at the U.S. National Rowing Championships.

"I never really thought of myself as a pioneer, but now that I look back over the last 30 years . . .," she trails off. "I just pursued the things that I pursued, because I had a passion for it."

For decades, she's been the first woman to hold multiple positions in the veritable boy's club of orthopedics. At Manhattan's Hospital for Special Surgery (HSS) – the top ranked orthopedics hospital in the nation – Hannafin was the first clinician-scientist (female or male), first female sports medicine fellow and first female sports medicine attending. Most recently, she burst the glass ceiling in July as the first female president of the American Orthopaedic Society for Sports Medicine (AOSSM).

"I was thrilled to be the first female president of AOSSM, because I wasn't sure that was going to happen. They're a traditional group, so I joke that maybe they forgot that Jo was a woman, not a man," she laughs.

The notion isn't too far-flung considering her history of breaking into male-

dominated arenas – and dominating.

Hannafin was a freshman at Brown when Title IX passed and was plucked from the JV swim team to join the university's first female rowing team. After rowing through college and moving to New York for medical school (hers was the third class to admit women at Albert Einstein), she fine-tuned her skills rowing with the guys at the New York Athletic Club's boathouse in Pelham. Hannafin shared a coach with one gent in particular, John Brisson from Pleasantville, whom she would later marry and settle with in Greenwich.

"When I began rowing at the New York Athletic Club, there was myself and one other woman rowing there," she says. "We didn't really think about (being the only women), because it was what we wanted to do and as long as they let us train there, we were happy to do it."

As if training and competing on a national and global scale weren't enough, her peak rowing years also coincided with earning her medical degree and doctorate. By the time she began residency, she had an MD, PhD, three gold medals from the U.S. National Rowing Championships and a silver in the 1984 World Rowing Championships.

"Our life outside of school and job was to be at the boathouse," she says. "Those were our friends and that was our community, so to continue to train through those years was not hard at all. That was just what we did."

Leave it to Hannafin's heart, attitude and drive to make it sound easy – especially in light of a blown-out knee she sustained while training. The silver lining manifested as an introduction to her mentor, orthopedist Martin Levy, who helped her heal in time to qualify for the world championships in 1984 and also turned her on to the world of sports medicine.

"That was the first time where the athlete in me and the intellectual, scientific, physician side of me got to work in the same place at the same time – the first time that those two parts of my brain were

working simultaneously," she says. "It was fantastic."

Since her aha moment, Hannafin has kept her surgical and clinical practice and award-winning tendon and ligament research dedicated to world-class athletes and the sport so close to her heart. She traveled to Athens for the 2004 Olympic Games as a U.S. Olympic Committee physician and is head team physician for the WNBA New York Liberty and team physician for the U.S. Rowing Team. The latter, she explains, may have given her the most stressful case of her career when she helped treat a vital member of the team who dislocated his shoulder the night before it was favored to win world gold.

"I was never more relieved when that boat crossed the finish line having won the world championships," she says. "That was probably the longest five-and-a-half minutes of my life."

Beyond her work with pro teams and Olympians – which she hopes is "boring" considering the alternative spells bad news for the athlete – she's also occupied with healing sports-minded patients from high school kids to folks in their golden years who still train multiple times a week. In addition to her practice at HSS, Hannafin also keeps an office in Greenwich.

Through her work with AOSSM,

she's particularly fervent about the Sports Trauma and Overuse Protection (STOP) program to prevent young athletes from debilitating injury. It's just one of her philanthropic endeavors, including launching a \$250,000 grant through AOSSM to strengthen sports medicine research and fundraising for the national rowing team as vice president of the board of trustees of the National Rowing Foundation.

"It's really about giving back in the way that people supported us 10, 20, 30, even 40 years ago as rowers," she says. "Once you've gotten to this point and you have success in your life then your goal is to support the next generation of athletes and hope that you keep passing it forward."

And like the mentors who recognized her talent regardless of gender, Hannafin also supports the next generation of female sports medicine doctors through mentorship by imparting her wisdom as a forerunner in the field.

"Maybe part of what got me through this is I'm just sort of blind to (gender bias) intentionally," she says. "Maybe there were times of my life where I worked even harder to prove that I was as good as the guys I trained with, but I don't think that stood in my way. If I'm good at what I do, I'm going to work really hard. That's the message I want to send." ■



Dr. Jo Hannafin, inset and above, teaching in the OR.



Jo Hannafin, far left, took silver at the 1984 World Rowing Championships.

The region's burn center.



Westchester Medical Center

The only Burn Center in eastern New York between New York City and the Canadian border. Home to a one-of-a-kind, highly specialized burn team and an advanced Wound Therapy and Hyperbarics Center. Only Westchester Medical Center.

(877) WMC DOCS | westchestermedicalcenter.com

