

A Competitor

The Life of Colette Shelton Pawol

by Jennifer L.W. Formo

When I sat down to interview Colette Shelton Pawol, she had a very polite, modest, unassuming air about her. She was amiable and more than willing to answer all my questions and give me whatever I needed to write this profile on her. She seemed almost passive. This first impression was very misleading because under that airy exterior is a fierce and passionate competitor and protector. Colette Shelton Pawol is a fighter who throughout her life consistently overcame challenges that threatened to label her. Colette has never been satisfied with mediocrity and goes after what she wants in all areas of her life, whether it is through competition in athletics or creating a protective and nurturing home for her family. Colette's legacy shines



Mr's Spirit



through her ever-present personal philosophy to always try your very best at everything you do.

Growing Up

Colette was born in Omaha, Nebraska in 1958. Her mother grew up in Omaha and went to Omaha Benson. Her father grew up in Chicago, Illinois but moved to Omaha where he lived in his aunt's backyard in a clay house that had a cot. Due to the Depression, he graduated at sixteen and began working with his dad as a carpenter and eventually in architecture. Her father served in two wars, World War II and Korea. There were two lessons Colette remembers learning most from her parents. The first was that they used everything. Having been raised during the Great Depression and living in poverty, her parents allowed nothing to go to waste. Everything had a use or a purpose. The second lesson her parents taught her was to work very hard. There was no sense of entitlement in the Shelton household. Colette carried these lessons forward in her life, taking nothing she had for granted.

Colette is the youngest of six children. Colette's siblings include her oldest sister, Carol; her only brother, Craig, who died in Vietnam; Kathleen, who died of pancreatic cancer; Maureen, the third of five girls, and Colleen, Colette's fraternal twin. Colette grew up at 67th and Blondo. Her father built their house in the country, but eventually the city of Omaha grew around them. A couple of Colette's fondest memories growing up include playing on the ice rink that her father built in their backyard and going camping. In the winter the neighborhood kids would get together and ice skate or play hockey. In the summer, Colette's mom would pack up tons of homemade goodies like rice krispie treats and chocolate chip cookies. They would take their *tent-ma-boat* out on the lake...their what??? Colette's dad made a camper that

floated on water that the family called a tent-ma-boat. The tent-ma-boat created a lot of attention, and Colette speaks of those memories camping and fishing out on the tent-ma-boat with pride and affection. Colette remembers crying the day her dad sold it.

When looking back on her days growing up, Colette remembers her brother's death in Vietnam as one of the greatest challenges she had to overcome. He had been the only boy. Colette reflects, "After my brother died, it was hard having all girls and taking on that boy role. I took on the role of taking care of my family" (Interview). She described an instance

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when a tornado rolled through in 1975 and her dad was not at home. She made sure to get everyone down in one spot in the house, and she made sure she was the one on top. When I asked her why as the youngest she felt the responsibility of taking on that role after her brother died, she said, "I took on the role of the son because I was strong and helped my dad do all the heavy stuff around the house" (Interview). Colette carried that strong, competitive nature into her next phase of life, the world of athletics.

Colette attended St. Pius X/St. Leo Elementary school and then went on to Marian High School. Her passion growing up was playing outside and just being active. She didn't play organized sports until her dad coached softball for them in the summer when she was in fourth, fifth, and sixth grade. There weren't any opportunities for girls to play sports in school until her sixth grade year. In sixth grade she was able to run track and then in seventh grade she also played volleyball. It was Colette's abilities in volleyball that led her from Marian High School to the University of Nebraska at Omaha. Connie Claussen, the athletic director at UNO, came to Colette's house and offered her a scholarship to play there.

The College Years

When Colette came to UNO in the fall of 1977, she majored in secondary education with a specialization in Physical Education, and she minored in Mathematics. She also earned her coaching endorsement. Most of Colette's time was spent either studying or going to practices for volleyball or track & field, depending on the season. In volleyball Colette

specialized as a middle hitter. A hitter in volleyball is usually a front row player whose job is to spike the volleyball to the other side of the net in open spaces where the defense cannot return it. The middle hitter is traditionally a very powerful, tall person with a big presence to hit around opposing players as well as blocking hits that come back across the net. She was exceptionally great at blocking on defense but also very aggressive on offense. Colette also held the team high percentage in serving accuracy at 97.3% as a freshman. Each season Colette's team traveled extensively to games, sometimes playing two games in a week and then traveling to tournaments on the weekends. Colette's eyes light up when she speaks of going to Regionals (a huge accomplishment in its own right) in Grand Forks, ND in a blizzard and being down 14-0 in the first game against third-seeded Minnesota, a dominant team at the time, and then rallying back and winning 16-14. Colette's competitive spirit came through her face as she spoke of shutting down their 6'3" middle hitter (Colette is only 5'8"), "Shutting her down, she couldn't get around (my blocks) and it was just hard for her (opponent) to believe." As a middle hitter, Colette was expected not only to dominate on offense but to stop any attacks that come across the net as a blocker, a skill Colette worked very hard to continuously improve. Even on the volleyball team, Colette's role as competitor and protector came through.

As a track & field athlete, Colette specialized in the long jump, 400 meter run (or yards, depending on the track), and the mile relay. Colette was always willing to try anything in order to compete. She was asked to try the 400 meter hurdles. In her first attempt ever, she placed second with a time of 1:04.71, missing the nationally qualifying time by only two seconds. She would subsequently break meet records and set a state record of 1:01.8 in that event along the way. Her coach, Hal Howser said of her, "You don't expect a freshman to do this well in a completely new event, especially in the 400 meter hurdles, which is probably the most grueling race on the schedule. Colette has a tremendous competitive attitude" (qtd. in Fey).



Fig. 3. Colette hitting the ball over the net as a middle hitter at UNO.



Fig. 4. Colette handing the baton off to Mary Dineen in the 4x400 meter relay (1979).

In doing the research on Colette's track career, every news article on the track team at that time commented on the success of the mile relay team. When remarking on the 4x400 meter relay team, Colette said, "All of us were together for four years and we ran for each other and everybody would be out there for us, especially the year where we beat Lincoln. That was really something!" (Interview).

Colette was referring to the race where UNO's mile relay team beat UNL's mile relay team at what was called "State" back then. UNL was Division I and UNO was Division II. UNL had top runner, Merlene Ottey from Jamaica, who later became a seven-time Olympian. Colette's team broke the meet record, which still holds today because they never held the State meet again after that year. Colette commented, "It was a lot of fun, and we were friends with the Lincoln girls, too. We had a lot of fun together. I mean you know the pain in track....it doesn't matter if you're rivals or not. That pain always keeps you together." Once again, Colette's sense of protectiveness towards her fellow teammates and athletes shined through as she spoke of the camaraderie between her teammates and their rivals.

Colette went on to become a hall-of-fame athlete at UNO with her many accomplishments in both volleyball and track. She had to go a fifth year for school and since her volleyball eligibility had run out, she decided to run cross-country that season since she loved competing so much. During school a doctor had done some VO_2 max testing on her (to measure her maximum oxygen level intake while running at a difficult pace). The results from the doctor concluded that Colette would never be able to run a six-minute mile. A six minute mile has always been an unwritten bench mark of potentially successful milers in track, and the doctor didn't feel she had the aerobic capacity to run that fast. Colette's enthusiastic response was, "Well, he said that and I was going to break that!" Colette ended up qualifying for Nationals that year in cross-country, her first attempt at the sport. She ended up running a negative split (meaning that she ran each successive mile of the

3.1 mile race faster than the previous mile), which doesn't usually happen, and she ran in the top 25 in the nation even though she wasn't supposed to be a cross-country runner. Colette said matter-of-factly and without pretension, "But I was determined then."

The Effects of Title IX

Colette attended UNO at a time of considerable transition for women's athletics due to newly enforced regulations from the Title IX legislation passed in 1972. This legislation resulted in making it illegal to discriminate between men's versus women's funding of athletic programs. When I asked Colette about her experiences with Title IX and the stigma tied to women in athletics, Colette did have some input. She remarked, "If you were a girl in sports, you weren't a girl. You were a jock, and so you had that label." Colette's experiences were not uncommon as many women at that time felt and experienced the negative stereotype that being an athlete meant being unfeminine. She continued to tell the story of football players who would stick their feet out onto the track to try to trip the girls during practice. They would make fun of the "girls running around the track," as they would snicker mockingly. Certain male reactions to female athletes could have been a reaction to the stereotypes of the time or their own feelings of being threatened or out-competed by women. Colette also commented on the lack of funds for women's sports at the time, saying that there was one little locker room that rotated between girls teams from year to year. Connie Claussen, the UNO athletic director at that time, commented in an interview in 2000 that the women's training room was in the men's locker room and for a long time they only had one set of red uniforms for all three women's sports. The women's athletic department offices were located in Quonset huts until 1980 when the HYPER Building was finally erected. These Quonset huts, according to Colette, were freezing in the winter. While being a female athlete at that time was tough, Colette only expressed her happiness: "Just being able to play and compete, I was very lucky to have that opportunity." However, after getting to know Colette and her competitive spirit to beat the odds, I suspect that she enjoyed overcoming those obstacles and even thrived at proving herself despite the less than favorable conditions that women had to play under at that time.

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Life After College

Colette graduated from UNO in the fall of 1982. She began teaching mathematics and coaching volleyball and track, first at Milliard North High School and then at Roncalli High School. Colette said that another of her most difficult challenges to overcome was related to teaching. She said it was very difficult to understand children, or people for that matter, who didn't care about school or learning or who didn't value their right to get an education. She has had to work hard to come to peace with that. Being taught at an early age to appreciate education and to work hard, Colette found it difficult to relate to those students who didn't work so hard. That is why she stresses that it is so important to look at each individual and try to understand the circumstances from which they come. They



Fig. 5. Colette and fiancé, Tom, at graduation on May 2, 1982.

could be dealing with abuse, poverty, hunger, or bullying; a myriad of different dynamics could be at play. As a teacher, Colette's ability to show her students the value of education was at times very challenging because it depended on each individual and their situation. Being an athlete, Colette understands first-hand the rewards of working hard to earn positive results. This philosophy

can easily be applied to the classroom as well, which Colette tried to do each day with her students. She ended her teaching and coaching career at her alma mater, Marian High School, in order to stay home with her growing brood of three children, soon to become five. It was this phase of life, child-rearing and motherhood, where Colette would find her calling and true joy.

Colette met her husband, Tom Pawol, while on the track at UNO. She wiped out hard on a hurdle, and Tom was the only other person out on the track. She would later run into him at a bar, ironically, as she didn't drink. They were married a year after college and stayed

in the Omaha area. Colette reflected that those years were trying at times because her husband traveled during the week for his job as a salesman, which left her with five kids at home by herself. She had five kids in eight years. In 1993 the family bought land out in the country near Blair for their new home, which she and her dad virtually designed and built themselves. They had to move in early before the house was finished in order to send her kids to the Blair schools. So she packed up her kids and moved into an unfinished house with a cooler of food, baskets of clothes, and air mattresses. She takes pride in knowing that the kids were able to help out with the house, building the back deck and the chicken coup themselves. When speaking of her kids, Colette comments, "I love being a mom. I've learned how much they are sponges." She said they didn't have television other than the three main channels so they mostly played outside, did art projects, or built things with Legos. She remembers having the dining room table covered with Lego Land. One thing Colette has learned about being a mom is just how precious her kids are.



Fig. 6. Fig. 6. Colette and husband, Tom, on their wedding day in 1983. Colette and husband, Tom, on their wedding day in 1983.

On Motherhood

As a wife raising five children, Colette has learned to work together with her husband and to help each other out, first with her teaching and coaching responsibilities and needing Tom's help in raising the kids, and then being a stay-at-home mom with her husband traveling five days out of every week. She reminisces that her kids would be running around her all the time while she was cooking or cleaning or getting things done around the house, a constant picture of activity, noise and chaos. She remembers people questioning how she handled being a mom to five children. Her response... "I have great kids," giving all the credit to them. On her days off, Colette said the most important thing to her was getting her workout in. As a lot of moms can attest to, Colette

always felt a sense of guilt in leaving her children for even a half hour to get in a run for the day. But she also recognizes that if she doesn't have a healthy mind and body, she



Fig. 7. Colette's children: Jake, Katie, Audrey, Natalie, daughter-in-law Annie, grandson Danny, and Ryan.

can't be the super mom she strives to be every day. Some days she would take the double stroller, put the older kids on their bikes, and find a path where they could all run together. Other times, she would run steps in her house or up and down her long driveway in the country while the kids were napping

in order to remain active. Colette's children are older now, and Colette has an obvious sense of pride when speaking about them. She still has two children living at home: Katie, her third oldest daughter, is graduating from college in December and leaving for Florida to work at a marine aquarium that does animal rescue and research. Audrey, the youngest, is a junior in high school. Her other three children include Ryan, the oldest, who is married and works for Union Pacific railroad. He lives in Blair and has a three year old son, Colette's first grandson. Jake is the second oldest and lives in Phoenix, Arizona. He is applying to Physical Therapy schools and hopes to begin his graduate work soon. Natalie, number four, graduated in May from Cosmetology school. When speaking of her children and their life choices, Colette says, "The greatest gifts you can give your children are roots and wings. Roots are that (they) will always have a home here, and wings are to go be who (they) are, who (they) want to be. I hope I've taught my kids to try their hardest every time no matter what the outcome. I just hope they're down to earth, work really hard, and want to earn what they have."

Reflections In Time

As Colette enters a more seasoned phase of her life as a grandma with no kids at home, she talks about her future aspirations which, of course, include being an involved grandmother as well as just continuing to be there for her own kids. She alluded to wanting to travel to visit her children and will continue working as long as she is able. She likes to stay active and has contemplated running some races. However, she also feels she has nothing to prove. When her twin sister, Colleen, developed breast cancer, Colette inspired her sister to take up biking as a way of being active and doing something for herself. Colette continues to be involved with cancer walks as well as different causes through her current job at Children's Hospital as a receptionist. When I asked her what her passion is, Colette replied, "My passion is my kids and just living each day. My sister had breast cancer. You don't sweat the small stuff. I learned that working at Children's Hospital (as well). You learn what's really important."

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When asked if Colette has any regrets, she replied rather quickly, "I sometimes wish I'd moved away. Everybody stayed in Omaha." As we discussed opportunities for women in Colette's era, another regret surfaced, not that

it was a regret so much as a path not taken and wonder at what could have been with its fruition. We were discussing a time when Colette felt unable to use her voice, a time where she felt silenced. She said a lot of girls growing up in her day didn't go to college. The idea that girls could be whatever they wanted to be wasn't really there. Colette asserted her own voice through athletics. She said people didn't always completely accept it, especially some of the men as alluded to earlier. But athletics was one way for Colette to express who she was and accomplish great things. Colette did other things that were considered out of the ordinary at the



Fig. 8. Colette with her grandson, Danny.



Fig. 9. Colette and her family at daughter, Katie's, high school graduation in May, 2007. From left to right, First row: Audrey, Second row: Jake, Katie, Natalie, Third row: Ryan, Colette, Tom.

time. She recalls doing a marathon when nobody in her family had done that. She also traveled by herself with her camper and her kids, something a “normal” mother with five kids wouldn’t do. Colette did find a voice in her own way, but she hesitated and said, “The only thing I wish is that for college there was more stepping out beyond that...if I wanted to be an architect or a veterinarian.” When pushed on that idea further, Colette said she really learned to love the sciences in college and had a love for animals, so being a veterinarian was a dream of hers. As a child she created floor plans in detail on her Etch-a-Sketch, and if you remember that toy as a child, that takes talent! Ultimately, she does wish she would’ve pursued an advanced graduate degree in a different field. After years of competing and pushing herself to achieve the best she can do, Colette has slowed down in recent years. For a long time after college, Colette still competed in competitive volleyball leagues and against herself in running, beating the clock as often as she could in order to push herself. She entered races that she began to win, and then she tried triathlons, winning some of those as well. She tells the story of her women’s adult volleyball team winning a tournament with a majority of the team in their third trimesters of pregnancy. She laughs at the comment that they did more rolling than “digging” of the volleyball, but

she has that twinkle in her eye that tells me she is still very proud of that win. In recent years Colette has learned to slow things down a bit and to take her time, but she still has that fierce protectiveness for her family. Through family illness and working at Children's hospital where Colette sees death and illness often among children, she has expressed a wiser perspective on the meaning of life and what is important. What Colette knows for sure is that she loves her kids and family, and she knows not to sweat the small stuff and appreciate life for what it brings. "I really encourage my kids to go out and experience new things and just try...to do what they want to do." Colette's last words of the interview, lessons she's learn from a life of love in family, are to "smell the roses and take your time." But Colette will always have a fire and passion that, I have no doubt, will be channeled into new pursuits as a grandmother and soon-to-be empty nester.

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