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HALL OF FAMER KRISSY WENDELL CREDITS MULTI-SPORT UPBRINGING FOR SUCCESS

By Heather Rule, 09/11/20, 10:15AM MDT

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Experiences, including Little League World Series, helped take her to highest levels of hockey

The name Krissy Wendell is usually associated with hockey. She is a 2000 Minnesota Ms. Hockey winner, a national champion with the University of Minnesota Golden Gophers, a two-time Olympian and a 2019 U.S. Hockey Hall of Fame inductee.

But don't be fooled by her extensive hockey resume, Wendell grew up as a multi-sport athlete, including being the first girl to start as a catcher and the fifth girl to play in the Little League World Series as a member of the 1994 Brooklyn Center Little League team.

"The Little League World Series was a product of my parents creating a multi-sport kind of platform," Wendell said. "It came about because I was told, 'You need to play multiple sports. So, find another one.'

"Which sounds kind of funny when you think about it, but it's true."

Indeed, before Wendell won a hockey state championship with Park Center High School and became a three-time All-American and 2005 Patty Kazmaier Award winner, Wendell grew up playing a bunch of sports. She dabbled in everything from tennis to soccer, baseball to basketball, street hockey and "hot box in the backyard." Whatever her older brother Erik did, she was right there tagging long.

She started playing hockey at age 5. By 9 years old, she also played primarily catcher for the local little league team. She said she liked being in the action and part of every play.

When she was 11 years old, Wendell and her teammates, including Pat Neshek, who went on to pitch 13 years in Major League Baseball, made it as far as the regional tournament in Indianapolis.



She got another shot in 1994. With MLB on strike that year, Wendell remembers the Little League World Series got a lot of publicity, and her status as the only female player magnified things. They didn't expect to go past regionals in Indianapolis, but her team reached the LLWS in Williamsport, Pennsylvania. In a close first game, Wendell and her teammates beat the eventual runners-up from California, to the surprise of many, before losing two straight and being eliminated.

The week was a whirlwind for Wendell, not only playing in the LLWS, but also for all the interviews and media attention she garnered. Up until the Series, she had always felt like another member of the team. It wasn't until they reached Williamsport that Wendell started to see her status as the only girl.

"I'm really grateful for the community that I grew up in and the boys I played with," Wendell said. "They were very receptive and very welcoming to have me on the team. I feel really lucky."

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She played baseball until eighth grade when she joined the varsity fastpitch softball team at Park Center High School. She played throughout high school, minus her sophomore year when she sat out the spring season following a thumb injury. That also resulted in her moving from behind the plate to playing shortstop and third base to let her injury heal.

Wendell's first love was always hockey, but her parents had a rule to take her hockey bag away for the summer, giving her a break and time for a new season of playing baseball and softball. She said she's incredibly happy that her parents forced her to find an interest in other things besides hockey.

Wendell said she's the biggest fan of kids playing multiple sports because there are so many wonderful things about it.

"I think I was a better hockey player because I played baseball and other sports, and I think I was a better baseball player because I played hockey," Wendell said.

The benefits are wide-ranging in Wendell's view, from the hand-eye coordination to the mental side of the game to protecting the wear-and-tear on an athlete's body. Using the same muscles to do the same thing over and over again for a single-sport athlete can wear on them, "especially when you're young and developing and growing," Wendell said.

Wendell didn't have many injuries growing up, and she credits a lot of that to using different muscles and not overtraining.

Mentally, there's also an excitement to coming back to a sports season when a player gets the chance to take a break from it, according to Wendell.

"My dad said, 'It's OK to miss it a little bit,'" Wendell said. "That means you still like it and you love it, and you'll appreciate it when you have it.

"But if you have it 12 months of the year, you're not going to love it the same way you would if you missed it for a little bit."

By the time Wendell focused solely on hockey, she was out of high school training with the U.S. national program in New York ahead of the 2002 Olympic Winter Games. She loved hockey, but the daily pressure to perform and focus on one sport wore on her a little bit, losing some of that love for the sport. She said she was glad she didn't have to face that until she was an adult and could better understand her need for a break.

Wendell has seen how sports have changed over the years, and she thinks people are so worried about being the best "that they lose track of what sports are really about." Sports are an extension of the classroom where kids meet friends and take in life lessons, Wendell said. Success is great but shouldn't be the main focus of why kids play sports, she added.

Wendell is bringing some of those same insights into raising her three daughters — ages 12, 10 and 8 — with husband Johnny Pohl, a former Gopher and NHL player. While their daughters all play hockey, the two older girls also took an interest in playing soccer. They've dabbled in lacrosse and golf as well. The youngest has played football, soccer and has shown interest in playing baseball, too.

"Johnny and I hope that we can raise our kids with the same expectations our parents had on us, and that was just to be a good teammate, have fun and appreciate the opportunities given to you and expect nothing back from it," Wendell said.

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