TEACHER & STUDENT

Doc Losh

A pioneer woman astronomer reigned for decades as Michigan’s superfan.
On Football Saturdays for many years, a woman presided at the toss of the coin. She was no cheerleader, no drum majorette. She was a short woman of a certain age and generous girth, with graying hair and flowing skirts of the kind seen most often on beloved maiden aunts—though few such aunts wore a Michigan letter sweater. She was a tenured professor of astronomy, the first woman ever to hold that position at Michigan. She was the owner of a sideline pass to Michigan Stadium and the pins or lavaliers of ten Michigan fraternities—possibly more; she lost track of the exact number. She was the published author of scientific papers and a radio personality who instructed audiences on the mysteries of the night sky.

She was—officially—Michigan’s only Homecoming Queen for Life. She may have been the most popular teacher in the University’s history. In a career that stretched from the presidency of Calvin Coolidge to the election of Richard Nixon, the total number of her students apparently exceeded 50,000. She was known to all—from timid freshmen in the back row of her classroom to long-retired All-Americans at gala dinners on the eve of Rose Bowls—by a stubby name of seven letters: Doc Losh.

Hazel Marie Losh was born in the summer of the Spanish-American War—the summer of 1898—in the village of Blanchester, Ohio. As a girl she loved the stars, and after her graduation from Ohio Wesleyan University, she came to Ann Arbor to seek a master’s degree in astronomy. She taught briefly at Smith College, then spent two years at the prestigious Wilson Observatory in California—the first woman with a Ph.D. on that staff.

In 1927 she returned to Ann Arbor, becoming the first female member of the Department of Astronomy. (For a time she was also Hussey’s secretary.) That fall she saw the first football game played in Michigan Stadium—a 33-0 victory against her alma mater, Ohio Wesleyan. It was the start of a love affair.
In the classroom she became popular for clear, straightforward explanations of the mysteries of the cosmos.

“In guess I’m simple-minded,” she once said, “for I’ve often been accused of being able to make things plain and understandable. But I think if someone, even a so-called ‘expert,’ can’t explain something to you, can’t reduce it to a clear and basic level, then perhaps it is they who have a problem, not you.”

She was not much interested in the rise of astrophysics, which, in her era in the classroom, was transforming the study of astronomy as she had learned it as a girl.

She said: “There’s a great tendency toward some of this highbrow astronomy, space and all, rather than in what I call the old fundamental astronomy, about the phases of the moon and just ordinary facts. You know, it’s surprising how many people don’t want to teach anything like that…

“Many people think astronomy began only in the last few years with the ventures into space. I try to show my students that all that has happened in space travel wouldn’t have been possible without the discoveries of scientists like Newton and Kepler.”

She published esoteric research in her field, but it was her ability in the classroom that built her renown. Her simple eloquence about the heavens can be glimpsed in the manuscript of an undated lecture she gave—before the Apollo space flights—on “The Moon and Eclipses:

Let us go out into the moonlight. It is a summer night and the Moon is full with its round golden disk hanging low in the southeast.... The Moon is so familiar to all of us, and we know so much about it, yet almost half of its surface has never been seen by man, and will ever remain a mystery. The reason that it keeps the same face toward the Earth is because it turns on its axis in exactly the same period that it takes to revolve around the Sun…

What lies on the other side? Is it like the familiar face, or the 'Man in the Moon,' that we see over and over again, or does it conceal surprises such as man has never witnessed? But the Moon will never turn around, and therefore her unseen face will always remain an unsolved riddle to man, the moonstruck and otherwise.

During World War II she corresponded with former students all over the planet. One of them was a young Army sergeant stationed in the South Pacific, R. David Matthews.

He had a problem, Matthews wrote “Miss Losh” in April 1945, two years after taking her course.

“The skies look a lot different from down here than they did in Ann Arbor,” he said, and a certain bright star—or was it the planet Venus?—was defying his effort to identify it with a star chart. Could she help?

“I might add that watching the stars has given me many hours of pleasure since I came overseas and many times guard duty at night was made more enjoyable.”

Another student, a Coast Guard ensign stationed in the North Atlantic, was thinking of Losh as he wrote to a friend back in Ann Arbor in 1943.

“I took some astronomy in Michigan, never dreaming I would ever have any use for it,” wrote Philip F. Wicklund, “but the little I can remember of it now comes in handy… Do you know Dr. Losh of the Astronomy Dept.? If so, please tell her that the astronomy I learned at Michigan has been of the greatest help to me in the study of celestial navigation.”

Her teaching, however old-school, stuck with a great many students, including some who went on to distinguished careers in her field.

“Doc Losh,” said Kenneth Yoss, an astronomer at the University of Illinois, “was the best teacher I ever had teach me anything.”
CHAPTER 5

A For Athletes

Since the 1930s, her introductory course in astronomy had been attracting—among many other students—large numbers of Michigan athletes. She liked them and they liked her, and it came to be said that she graded on the following curve: A for athletes, B for boys, and C for co-eds.

Whenever she heard this repeated, she would say: “And D for the dummies who believed it.”

Nonetheless, the lists of Michigan stars in her gradebooks grew longer by the year—then by the decade.

She taught Bennie Oosterbaan. She taught Tom Harmon—“a good student and a great athlete.” Ron Kramer cleaned telescopes for her. She taught Bill Freehan. Cazzie Russell took her class in the first term of his freshman year.

“He was a great talker, you know,” she said later. “He said his mother called him about his grades, she was so worried. And I thought, ‘Have you got a mother?’ I just couldn’t imagine big Cazzie Russell having a mother.”

She accounted for her long friendship with Michigan athletics like many another fan: There was just “something magical,” she said, about Football Saturdays.

“I guess my interest in sports developed gradually,” she told a reporter later in her career. “I attended some games when I was undergraduate...but it wasn’t until I began to teach a lot of athletes in my classes that I became an all-out sports fan.”

She became identified most closely with the football program, but she followed the Wolverines’ fortunes in many sports, and she wore a safety-pinned charm bracelet bearing a miniature tennis racquet, track shoe, football and basketball—and a telescope.

“Athletics has been a great avocation, I guess you’d say, a hobby or something,” she said late in her career. “It’s so different from astronomy.

“Of course, astronomy is the reason I’m here. And it was my first reason for being here and the thing I’ve liked from the time I was a child. But still, you can’t just have astronomy all the time.”

She certainly didn’t.

CHAPTER 6

Superfan

Records are hazy on precisely when Doc Losh began to play her large public role in the Michigan football program. But the tradition was so revered by the 1970s that when a mix-up prevented her from crossing the field as usual before the game—and Michigan wound up in a tie—the disaster was widely blamed on whoever had failed to get Doc Losh to her appointed post.

By then she had become some combination of superfan and supermascot, a totemic touchstone rather like the Brown Jug and the Mud Bowl—symbols of Michigan’s Michigan-ness that could never be replaced by standard-issue Super Bowl theatrics. In the postwar era, as mores changed and students abandoned old traditions, Doc Losh’s presence at a game or a pep rally offered a living link to a time when those traditions had mattered deeply. Thanks to her, they somehow mattered still.

At pep rallies she would deliver prophecies and sheer hoke, like this talk on the eve of the Purdue game in 1965, half schoolgirl poetry, half incantation to the pigskin gods:

We must play this game tomorrow in the true Michigan spirit.
We must win this game in the true Michigan tradition.
Tradition—oh, that precious voice, that speaks down through the years
And whispers to its stalwart sons, when doubt of Victory nears
It lives in hearts of Michigan men—yes, and it always will
Our boys believe in Michigan, up there on Stadium Hill.”
CHAPTER 6

Last Chapter

She never married. “You can call me an old maid if you want to, I don’t care,” she said late in life. “You know, there’s a time when you’re younger when being called that kind of bothers you, but at my age, I couldn’t care less.”

She was a pioneer on behalf of her sex but never thought about it much. “I’m not a suffragette,” she said during the feminist surge of the 1970s. “I’m not a women’s libber. I never had any difficulties. I most certainly haven’t any complaint. But they make more of a fuss about it, certainly, now.”

Even so, among her papers she kept this fragment of an old poem, copied on her manual typewriter on an index card:

They talk about a woman’s sphere
As though it had a limit
There’s not a place in earth or heaven
There’s not a task to mankind given
There’s not a blessing or a woe
There’s not a whispered yes or no
There’s not a life, there’s not a birth
That has a feather’s weight of worth
Without a woman in it

As her state-mandated retirement approached, friends would tell her she would soon have time to write and travel. She said she’d write a letter and travel to Ypsilanti.

Even after she stepped down from her active faculty appointment in 1968, she taught for several more years, and from her house on East University, she made the three-block walk to her office in the Dennison Building nearly every day. She kept up with the astronomy journals and taped a radio show called “Astronomy Report” that played on public-radio stations across the state.

She directed that her tombstone be inscribed with words from “The Old Astronomer to His Pupil,” by the 19th-century English poet Sarah Williams: I have loved the stars too fondly to be fearful of the night.

Sick with cancer, she missed the home opener in 1978 against Illinois. On Saturday, September 30, she was escorted to the game against Duke by her physician, the U-M surgeon Errol E. Erlandson. They watched Michigan trounce the Blue Devils, 52-0. She died a few days later.

“She was,” said President Robben Fleming, “an institution within an institution.”

—James Tobin

Sources were found chiefly in the Hazel M. Losh papers at the Bentley Historical Library.