

# Rock-solid roots

*MHS coach Josie Penza's community gymnastics focus is her tribute to a state title now a quarter century old*

**By Chad Konecky**  
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Josie Penza still gets chills when you finally drag the anecdote out of her.

Of course, she was Josie Lemmi back then. And she was a lot closer to 14 than 41. But the Sumner Avenue native remembers Medford High's first and only state gymnastics championship like it was yesterday.

"It was one of those storybook endings," says Penza, a 1978 graduate of Medford High and now a health and physical fitness teacher at the school. "I was the last girl up and I needed and 8.8 The place was dead silent. Everybody was waiting for me to fall. If I'd have fallen off, it was over. That was the highpoint for me: Having to nail a bar set and doing it with the (1977) state title on the line." Penza, er, Lemmi scored an 8.85. The Mustangs, who won four consecutive Greater Boston League championships from 1975-78, were champions. But that's not the half of it, says Penza. The routine that clinched the state title – and many of her teammates' routines – were honed within the humble structure of the Medford Community Schools Gymnastics Program. Not a fancy club. Not a private compulsory-cranking factory. A community gymnastics program.

"The point is, I never took private gymnastics instruction," says Penza. "I was a byproduct of the Medford Community Schools Gymnastics Program. I never did a compulsory in my life. I went and paid my 25 cents and worked in that gymnastics room (at Medford High) and took

full advantage of the optional gymnastics program. I was the ghetto gymnast. No one knew who I was. We had great gymnasts. It was a great team. Just nine of us. Now we're back. This is payback."

Penza never forgot where she came from. She went on to become the only Division I scholarship athlete from the '77 squad, later winning an Eastern College Athletic Conference individual uneven bars crown and finishing among the nation's top 10 in the event. She has coached gymnastics in the Franklin, Burlington, Watertown and Dracut school systems as well as Winthrop Gymnastics Academy. But the only one she owed a debt to was Medford. In 1995, she resurrected the defunct program that made her a champion.

Today, with the help of former teammates and current instructors like Camile (Arena) Bardaro, Lois (Carew) DiMare, Ann Marie (Rose) McNeil and Donna (O'Neil) Rizzo, along with recent alumni Kelly Corrigan (Class of '96) and Nicole Fortino (Class of '98), the Medford Community Schools Gymnastics Program is thriving. The program boasts over 150 students in seven weekly classes, one each on Tuesday through Friday, and three on Saturday. Participants range from infants to age 18. Out-of-town residents are welcome and per-class fees are \$8 to \$9.

"We started it up again when I returned to the school as a teacher in 1995 and it's now one of the most accessible programs with one of the

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STAFF PHOTO BY MARC VANSOCCOLLO  
Former Medford High state champion gymnasts (left to right) Lois DiMare, Camile Bardaro and Josie Penza, are giving back to their community as instructors of the Medford Community Schools Gymnastics program.



STAFF PHOTO BY MARC VANSOCCOLLOS

These five aspiring gymnasts follow coach Josie Penza to their next gymnastic station.

## Penza's rock-solid roots

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biggest enrollments in the city," says Penza, who returned from a dislocated elbow as a senior to win the bars title and help Medford finish third in the state.

"I'm so excited these women come in and help and do it because someone did it for us. You couldn't pay them enough for what they do. I would never have earned a college scholarship without people like (Raytheon engineer) Lawrence Tacito, who earned four bucks an hour

putting himself through college by coaching us back then. It was mentors like him who influenced me to go into coaching and teaching."

"It's special to be a part of," says DiMare, a Winthrop Street resident. "I'd been out of the sport for a while. I was really able to go back and help this year. Things are different now as far as (kids' distractions and other pursuits), but it's a lot of fun teaching the little kids. They're the future."

So could it be done again, 25 years later? Could a no-name gymnast

help lead Medford to a state title?

"I think it can still be done," says Penza. "A kid could still come through this program and earn a college scholarship. The only thing that can stop a kid is apathy. There are three gymnasts at Medford High, a Level 8, 9 and 10, who aren't members of the gymnastics team. That's probably because it's a lot of work. You have to want it. That's why we put an emphasis on keeping gymnastics fun. That's what will bring more kids."