I n 1986 Charlotte “Char” Joslin ’90, M.B.A. ’95, was a freshman at Radcliffe College. Joslin is still around, but Radcliffe College is not, nor is an athletic archetype that Joslin represented: the three-letter woman. She played varsity in three sports at Harvard, lettering all four years in field hockey, ice hockey, and lacrosse. Joslin was in all likelihood the last of the three-sport Mohicans. College teams now recruit specialists, athletes who find not only their sport but their role within it—say, soccer forward—at earlier and earlier ages.

Specialization was under way even in 1986 (see “The Professionalization of Ivy League Sports,” September-October 1997, page 36), but it is only one of the many changes that have rippled through athletics. With specialization comes the opportunity to spend all 12 months training for one sport, in-season and off-season both. Intense, high-level competition, much of it on club teams, has filtered down to ever-younger cohorts; adult training and coaching also kicks in earlier. The result is better-conditioned, more skillful, and less versatile college athletes than in years past. Those players are more heavily recruited than ever, and come from all over the world, especially in international sports like soccer, tennis, basketball, squash, and rowing.

Approximately 20 percent of undergraduates now play on the teams that Harvard fields in 41 varsity sports—the most of...
any college. Add to this the participants in intramural athletics and club sports, of which there are 31, plus those who exercise for recreational and fitness reasons—the Malkin, Hemenway, and Murr gyms buzz constantly—and by some estimates nearly 80 percent of the College leads the vigorous life.

Several sports where Harvard has had a long record of success have stayed at or near the top of collegiate rankings—men's heavyweight and lightweight crew, women's basketball and squash, tennis, football, and swimming and diving. Other dominant programs have become part of the pack, including men's squash and ice hockey. In still other instances, Crimson squads have risen from humble records to great ones, as with men's and women's fencing, which won a national title in 2006; wrestling, which has produced national champions Jesse Jantzen '04 and J.P. O'Connor '10; and men's basketball, where coach Tommy Amaker's team last year shared the Crimson's first Ivy title (with Princeton). Four Harvard teams have won NCAA championships, and all four have come since 1986: men's ice hockey in 1989, women's lacrosse in 1990, women's rowing in 2003, and the coed fencing title of 2006. Harvard has also won many national championships in non-NCAA sports like men's rowing; women's squash was the most recent one, in 2010. These athletes deploy their skills in a changed physical plant. The department of athletics and its coaches moved to the newly opened Murr Center in 1998; in retrospect, it is hard to believe that the department once operated out of a square brick building at 60 JFK Street, or that the three Palmer-Dixon courts were the only indoor tennis venues at Harvard, which now has six courts at Murr, along with a bank of new, international-size squash courts. The Stadium's playing field has been changed to artificial turf, making it possible to inflate a bubble enclosure there each winter and get far more sportive use from that space. New lights atop the Stadium also enable nighttime football games, as well as after-dark contests in other sports. The illuminated, artificial-turf Soldiers Field Soccer Stadium welcomes nighttime practice sessions and games as well, an accommodation prompted by the nocturnal habits of current undergraduates. If Char Joslin were a freshman today, she would still, no doubt, become a star athlete, but her star would shine in a different sky, with some new constellations.

~Craig Lambert

May 22, 1997. Frank Hogan '97, the Ivy League's pitcher of the year, throws eight strong innings as the baseball team upsets fourth-ranked UCLA, 7-2, in the NCAA tournament's opening round.

March 14, 1998. Behind 35 points and 13 rebounds from co-captain Allison Feaster '98, the women's basketball team stuns top-seeded Stanford, 71-67, in an NCAA first-round game. Harvard is the only sixteenth-seeded team ever to oust a top seed in tournament play.

April 28, 1998. Ace pitcher Tasha Cupp '98 crafts a perfect game as the softball team defeats Rhode Island, 3-0. Unbeaten in its 12 Ivy League contests, the team makes its NCAA debut in May.

March 27, 1999. The women's hockey team defeats New Hampshire, 6-5, in a national championship final. Angie Francisco '01 has a hat trick; Jennifer Botterill '02 scores the deciding goal. The team finishes with a 30-game unbeaten streak and a record of 33-1.

June 5, 2001. Three women track stars are NCAA titlists: Dora Gyorffy '01 wins the outdoor high jump, Kart Siiats '02 wins the indoor high jump, and co-captain Brenda Taylor '01 wins the 400-meter hurdles.

November 17, 2001. Coach Tim Murphy's football team completes Harvard's first unbeaten, untied season (9-0) since 1913, capping it by outscoring Yale, 35-23, at Yale Bowl.

May 31–June 1, 2003. Men's and women's crews win three national titles in a span of two days. The men's heavyweight and lightweight boats take firsts at the Intercollegiate Rowing Association regatta at Camden, New Jersey; a day later, Radcliffe's heavies outrow top-ranked Stanford to earn an NCAA championship at Indianapolis.


June 3, 2005. The sailing team wins the women's intercollegiate championship—the team's third women's or coed title in four years.

November 19, 2005. In the Ivy League's first triple-overtime game, the football team overcomes a 21-3 second-half deficit at Yale Bowl, ties the score with just over three minutes to play, and prevails at last, 30-24. Halfback Clifton Dawson '07, who will graduate as the Ivy League's all-time rushing and scoring leader, makes the tie-breaking touchdown.

March 19, 2006. With nine all-Americans competing in foil, sabre, and épée, the men's and women's fencing teams win their first national championship. Benji Unger '08 is the individual champion in épée.

August 16, 2008. Emily Cross '08, the women's fencing team's first NCAA titlist, is a silver medalist at the Beijing Olympics.

November 21, 2009. The football team records a fifth straight win at Yale Bowl, scoring two late touchdowns in a 14-10 thriller. Quarterback Collier Winters '10 throws long passes for both Crimson tallies.

March 7, 2010. Senior Colin West '10 and freshman Laura Gemmell '13 win national squash titles. The unbeaten women's squad (12-0) wins a national team championship for the twelfth time in program history.

March 5, 2011. The renascent men's basketball team (23-7, 12-2 Ivy) defeats Princeton, 79-67, to give Harvard a share of the Ivy title for the first time since the inception of formal league play in 1956.