THE RIGHT VARSITY JACKET, AT LONG LAST

When Wendy Clark, ‘83, found a package on her doorstep from M Den on Tuesday, she could barely contain her excitement. Inside was a brand new varsity letter jacket, sent to her from the U-M Athletic Department to commemorate the two seasons in 1979 and 1980 that she played on the field hockey team.

“I immediately took a selfie while wearing it and posted it on Facebook,” she said, laughing. Clark was not the only one. Scores of former U-M women athletes who also received the leather-sleeved jacket with the yellow Block M also posted images—many on a closed-group Facebook page where the glee was apparent. After all, they had waited a long time for the right version of the letter jacket they earned.
Nearly 700 women who played a varsity sport at U-M between 1973 and 1991 have received brand new varsity letter jackets this week. They replace those that the women received as students. At the time, it was different from the jacket their male counterparts were offered. The jacket the women received had a smaller orange square M rather than the men’s maize Block M.

The captain of U-M’s first varsity field hockey team, Sheryl Szady, ’74, MA’75, PhD’87, still remembers the moment she received the jacket. It was 1975, a year after she had graduated, but the first time varsity jackets were being offered to current players and alumnae given that the program was still only two years old. “I looked at the shape and color of the M and thought, ‘This is wrong, wrong, wrong.’”

Many of the other athletes also noticed the difference, but Szady spoke up and continued to point out the difference for forty years. In June 1975, she was even featured on the front page of the Ann Arbor News in an article highlighting the University’s decision to give the women the same Block M as the men. She wanted them to act on the promise. They did, but not until the fall of 1991.

Fast forward to March 2016, when Szady—who is now retired after working 27 years in the U-M Office of University Development—ran into U-M’s new athletic director, Warde Manuel, ’90, MSW’93, MBA’05. Though he had only just started the job, Manuel had already heard about Szady’s impassioned campaign to get new jackets for the early letter winners from his predecessor, interim athletic director Jim Hackett, ’77.

“Warde said, ‘Let’s do it,’” recalled Szady.

In April, 897 women varsity letter winners who participated in athletics during that era received a letter from Manuel that read, “The athletic department is thrilled to offer you a new varsity jacket—the same jacket supplied to Michigan men and women since 1992.”

By May 17, 672 jackets had been ordered. Since then, 87 percent of the women contacted have responded to the jacket offer, which should help rectify any past inequity.

“Thanks to Sheryl Szady and many others I’ll never know,” Clark posted on her Facebook page. “I now have the same jacket as every Michigan Man. Thanks to Warde Manuel, our new AD, for giving the green light. I will say the sleeves are plenty roomy, and it’s nice to have the leather.”