Long before she decided to devote her life to God, field hockey was a passion for Barb Smith.

While 30 years have passed since Smith played field hockey, the lessons she learned from the sport still play a role in her life today as a nun.

A 1979 Edwardsville graduate, Smith was a senior defender on the 1978 EHS field hockey team that posted a 13-1 record and beat Chicago University High 5-0 in the final to win the first state championship in school history. She was a sophomore on the 1976 team that placed second.

Smith is now a Benedictine sister at Mount St. Scholastica in Atchison, Kansas.
“Even today, I still have my field hockey stick, and I take it with me for vocation talks,” said Smith, who played until she was 30. “I tell people that stick is how I got into religious life. It’s all about community and it’s all about having each other’s back.

“In the Benedictine order, we have a very structured life, and we have a community to rely on. In field hockey, we were all there for each other, and we learned to communicate with each other to get a goal. That sense of community is one reason why I love the Benedictine lifestyle. We seek God together to reach our goal.”

At Edwardsville, Smith fell in love with field hockey after being introduced to the sport by EHS coach Sharon Petty.

“I’ve always been into sports, as my dad influenced me, and I began playing city league softball when I was 9 years old,” Smith said. “Once I got to high school, they offered four sports for girls – field hockey, volleyball, basketball and softball – and I played all of them.

“I didn’t know what field hockey was at the time, but we played it in PE and that’s where Sharon Petty asked if I would be interested in playing on the team. Coach Petty was such a positive person, and her enthusiasm and determination were some reasons why I enjoyed field hockey so much.”

Smith played all four sports until her junior year, when the start for volleyball season moved up and created an overlap with field hockey. She gave up volleyball to continue playing field hockey.

At EHS, Smith was a key part of the 1977 and 1978 teams, which allowed only four and three goals, respectively, while posting 11 teams and 12 shutouts, respectively. Karen Berry and the late Deb Ludwig were also among the defensive standouts for the Tigers.

“We had a lot of fun, but we worked really hard,” Smith said. “Deb Ludwig was our goalkeeper and Karen Berry was the fullback that was in front of me.

“You need to have a good communication system and the basic skill set and Petty laid down the groundwork for that. We had that sense of teamwork, and we were always covering each other. We had Sandy Gerstenecker at halfback and Deb Seybert up front, and everybody would come back and help us.”
Smith’s first loves were being a caretaker of horses and playing sports, and after graduating from Edwardsville, she continued her field hockey career at Southern Illinois University Carbondale. She earned a bachelor’s degree in zoology with a minor in animal science and mathematics.

“I had a full-ride scholarship to Carbondale and that’s how I was able to get through college,” said Smith, who received honorable mention All-America honors as a junior in 1981. “I owe a lot to Sharon Petty because she encouraged me to go for the scholarship.

“In high school, Deb Seybert and I worked out a great deal and tried out for the Olympics before our senior year, and then I tried out again my first year of college.

“It was my parents, my team members and coaches who were always supporting me at the games that I give credit to for making me a better player. I would not be where I am today without the support of all of them along the way.”

After graduating from SIUC, Smith worked initially in bovine research in Watkinsville, Georgia. She then worked at United Parcel Service, first as a Christmas driver hire, driving for six years, and eventually moved into management in the Washington, D.C., area.

“I worked for UPS for 10 years and, as a driver, I felt like I was being paid to work out,” said Smith.

Smith continued to play field hockey wherever she moved. She began a Deep South club team in Athens, Georgia, right out of college and then moved to the D.C. area in 1987 and played on the Baltimore club team until 1992. She played on the Southeast select team out of Washington, D.C., as a club player several years, and the highlight for her was playing in the John F. Kennedy International Tournament in front of the Lincoln Memorial.

“It was men and women playing from all over the world,” Smith said. “We were playing the Russians one year and I was injured, so that was one of the last games I played.”

A serious car accident in 1992 forced Smith to reevaluate her future.
“My fast-paced life of working 70 hours a week stalled for a while, and I had to change my job in UPS to human resources,” Smith said.

“I was starting to have some seizures with a brain injury from the accident, and eventually asked to take a leave and do some volunteer work. My mom sent me a magazine article about Dr. David Snowden and ‘The Nun Study’ about sisters and Alzheimer’s disease.”

In 1994, Smith volunteered with the School Sisters of Notre Dame in Mankato, Minnesota, for six weeks to learn and meet Snowden in reference to “The Nun Study.” It turned out to be a life-changing decision for her.

“I fell in love with the sisters and felt like I was being called to the religious life,” said Smith, who currently works in the development office at Mount St. Scholastica. “The only problem was that I was raised Methodist, not Catholic. I just thought that you had to love God, so I was pretty naïve in that sense.

“I started meeting with the sisters in 1995, became Catholic, volunteered at BONA (Benedictine Outreach to the Native Americans) in Belcourt, North Dakota, on the Turtle Mountains Indian Reservation, and eventually joined the Benedictine Sisters Order (OSB) in 1997 in North Dakota. I was up there for four years until 2001. At that time, I left and worked as a chaplain at Barnes Jewish Hospital in St. Louis but continued seeking another Benedictine community to join. In 2002, after visiting with the sisters in Atchison, Kansas, I joined their community and I’ve been here (at Mount St. Scholastica) ever since and love being a sister.”

Smith’s many ministries at Mount St. Scholastica include working for Water With Blessings (WWB), a nonprofit. WWB provides water filters in 49 countries and developed a program to train over 160,000 women to use and maintain water filters so their children and families can have clean water free of parasites.

“It’s an amazing nonprofit and it can affect children and their families all over the world to give them clean water,” said Smith, who went with college students to Honduras for WWB and then traveled to Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria in 2017.

Smith’s life experiences, from field hockey to her current duties at Mount St. Scholastica, have taught her the importance of pursuing one’s passions while finding ways to help other people.
“One of the avenues that led me to where I am today in religious life is that I first volunteered. From asking youngsters at our Leadership Camps for girls or vocation talks at schools, I asked the girls if they participated in volunteer work. And many did. So, I would encourage them to continue this throughout their life,” Smith said.

“When I first volunteered with the School Sisters of Notre Dame several years ago, I was led on a great journey and since then I encourage young people to be open and listen with the ear of the heart, listen to that inner voice. You never know where or what you’re being led or called to, and whatever your belief system is, listen and you will be led to many things.”