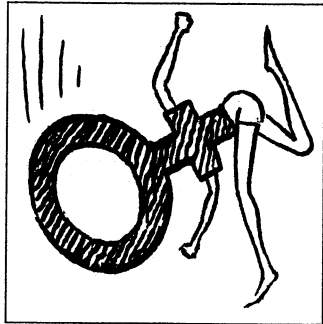


Title IX: Political Football

RUTH CONNIFF



Girls in ponytails and soccer jerseys packed the front of a room at the National Press Club in Washington, DC. They elbowed each other and giggled as kids from across the nation spoke lovingly of basketball, pole vaulting and field hockey, and in support of Title IX—the 1972 law that has become synonymous with the rise of women's sports. Since Title IX went into effect thirty-one years ago, girls' athletic participation has skyrocketed. The number of girls' playing varsity sports has gone up from one in twenty-seven in 1972 to almost one in two today.

Despite all the good feeling Title IX has engendered among girls and their parents, the law is currently under attack. The National Wrestling Coaches Association filed a lawsuit against the Education Department claiming that Title IX is decimating men's college sports, forcing colleges to cut hundreds of wrestling programs—along with gymnastics, diving and other teams—in order to meet “quotas” for female athletes. The aggrieved jocks have found an ally in President Bush, who formed the Commission on Opportunity in Athletics last June to re-examine the law.

The high school girls descended on Washington for their press conference-cum-pep rally just as the commission convened its final meeting at the Hotel Washington. Outside the hotel, the Feminist Majority and the conservative Independent Women's Forum held dueling press conferences. Inside the grand ballroom, a wrestling coach wearing a “No Quotas” button cruised the perimeter, handing out literature calling on the commission to “reject the gender politics of the special interest groups.”

That would be groups like the Women's Sports Foundation—which helps girls seek equal funding and facilities for their teams—and Dads and Daughters, whose executive director, Joe Kelly, emceed the high school girls' event.

Title IX, said Kelly, “is one of the best things that ever happened to fathers.” 5

“Sports is a natural comfort zone for men, and Title IX makes it a bridge to our daughters,” he said. He told the story of a friend, Dave, who coached

his son and daughter in basketball, and was appalled by the inferior facilities provided to his daughter's team.

“Dads get angry when daughters play on old fields or gyms that are in disrepair,” Kelly said. And that's what Title IX was designed to fix. “Guys like Dave are not radical feminists. They simply know sports are good for girls. They also know sports are good for boys. Don't tell me you're going to treat my daughter differently than my son.”

High school girls still get about 1.1 million fewer opportunities than boys to play sports, according to the National Coalition for Women and Girls in Education. But Bush's commission finished its work by making a series of recommendations to weaken Title IX. Instead of making girls' sports proportional to the number of female students enrolled, the commission recommended that schools aim for approximately 50/50 boy-girl representation. Schools that don't reach parity would be allowed to use interest surveys to show that girls are getting as much opportunity as they desire. According to the Women's Sports Foundation, the changes could result in the loss of 300,000 participation opportunities and \$100 million in scholarships for female athletes.

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—Joe Kelly, of Dads and Daughters

The deck was stacked at the commission from the beginning. High school athletes and coaches who support Title IX didn't get to testify. Title IX opponents like wrestlers' groups and the Independent Women's Forum had disproportionate input. The commission's two strongest Title IX advocates, Julie Foudy, captain of the US National Women's Soccer Team, and Olympic gold medalist Donna de Varona, were treated to eye-rolling by fellow commission-ers and outright hostility by wrestlers' groups. In late February, the two refused to sign the final report, charging that the commission failed to acknowledge continuing discrimination against female athletes.

Still, despite the battle-of-the-sexes tone in DC, some sincere anguish is driving the backlash against Title IX.

Doug Klein coaches high school wrestling at the Ida Crown Jewish Academy in Chicago. “I had such a good time when I walked on the team at William and Mary,” he recalls. Today his old college team has been cut, and other

teams no longer take walk-ons (as opposed to recruits) because, he says, they have to keep their rosters small in order to comply with Title IX gender-equity rules. His star wrestler recently visited Lehigh and Cornell, and couldn't even get a coach to talk to him.

"Boys who aren't superstars—nobody is interested in them. And that's really unfair," Klein says. "Somebody made the point on one of these [wrestling] websites: 'I'm 5'5", 120 pounds, what sport am I going to do?' There are not many opportunities in sports for little boys and little men."

That may be the most painfully honest comment ever made by an opponent of Title IX. Instead of focusing on the big men's sports that suck up all the resources in college athletics, a lot of little guys who are getting crushed blame women. Klein, too, blames Title IX for "gutting wrestling"—though he concedes that Title IX may not be the main problem.

"When you read the wrestling magazines, they're reluctant to point the finger at football," Klein says. "But football is the 800-pound gorilla." Indeed, major teams award up to eighty-five scholarships a year and field rosters of 100 or more players, while top football coaches can earn more than \$2 million a year. Schools could easily comply with Title IX by making small cuts in these big-budget programs, instead of cutting men's roster spots. Title IX advocates calculate that just by dropping scholarship spots for football bench-warmers—cutting back from the eighty-five players now allowed by the NCAA to the fifty-three used by the NFL, for example—and by dropping a few of the most ridiculous perks, such as hotel-room stays on home-game nights, schools could add back all those smaller programs they've been eliminating.

There is a myth that spending huge amounts of money on football makes 15 sense because the game will bring in even more. The reality is that in the race to field a winning team, jack up alumni giving and secure lucrative TV contracts, even big-time football schools are losing money. Take the University of Wisconsin. UW lost \$286,700 on its Rose Bowl appearance in 1998. Until schools get off the football treadmill, athletic program budgets will feel the squeeze, with or without Title IX.

Donna Shalala, President Clinton's Secretary of Health and Human Services, is one of the nation's biggest boosters of Title IX—and of big-budget football. As UW chancellor, Shalala brought the university's football program into the big time. She hired coach Barry Alvarez and built a giant new sports facility the same year she presided over the elimination of UW's baseball, men's and women's gymnastics, and men's and women's fencing teams. Now president of another football powerhouse, the University of Miami, Shalala is an unabashed proponent of Title IX: "It's had a huge impact on providing opportunities

for women's sports." Yet she is also an unabashed proponent of big-time football.

Shalala says it was a budget crisis, not Title IX, that forced the cuts at Wisconsin. "We cannot use Title IX as an excuse for our lack of disciplined management and our financial problems," she says. She argues that it's possible to pay for minor sports and be a football power: "People have to restrain their costs, and they have to be honest about what football costs, and go out and raise more money."

Shalala uses the populist language of Title IX, saying, "The whole point is to provide opportunities for men and women." But in practice, building an athletic department around big-time football has resulted in schools—including UW—killing sports programs that once provided opportunities for regular students. It has also meant that college sports, more and more, are not about promoting amateur participation, sportsmanship or character but rather about raising a school's profile and getting a piece of the sports entertainment action. "This is not," says Shalala, "intramural sports." While Title IX has protected many women from these trends, no structures are in place to save minor men's teams from the football monster.

Talking to university administrators about athletic department budgets is like talking to the Democrats about campaign finance reform. Everyone is in favor of more "opportunity" and "participation," but when it comes to reining in football spending, no one wants to cash out first.

According to Cheryl Marra, senior associate director of sports administration at UW, "We don't spend any more here than anywhere else. But who's gonna give first?" UW has to offer its football players chartered jets and posh facilities, says Marra; otherwise, "Ohio and Michigan will say to recruits, 'You know, at Wisconsin they don't treat you right.'" The only way out, according to Marra, is for the NCAA to crack down on excessive football spending. Then no school would be placed at a disadvantage.

The wrestlers' attack on Title IX is based on a gamble: that if the government relaxes Title IX rules, athletic departments will shift money back to their teams. But that's hardly a sure thing. Athletic directors are no more interested in minor men's sports now than they used to be in women's sports. Responding to the complaints of downsized wrestlers, Marra says, dismissively, "Why can't they accept that people don't want to play the same sports they did 100 years ago?"

Ironically, Title IX's very success is being used as an argument for its dismantlement. As with affirmative action, the law's opponents argue that the job is done—women have reached equality and no longer need special

attention. This argument resonates with girls of the post-Title IX generation, who feel pangs of guilt when Title IX is blamed for the elimination of minor men's sports. "I'm in favor of Title IX, but not for cutting guys' sports," says Kym Hubing, a sprinter at Wisconsin.

Indeed, many students now take women's athletics for granted. Male and female athletes hang out together and support each other. This is one of the most profound, positive effects of Title IX. "You're friends. You're equals," says Greta Bauer, a UW hurdler. "When you walk into a party, the guys will see you and punch you in the arm and say, 'Hey, how are you doing?' The other girls will look at you like, 'How did you get inside the circle?'"

Being "inside the circle" means that women in Division I sports are envied just like the men. There is an aura of exclusivity about hanging out in the expensive sports facilities, studying in the athletes' study hall, living in jock housing. Like breaking into any formerly segregated club, being part of the sports scene on campus means gaining privilege.

If the Education Department heeds the Commission on Opportunity in Athletics, the march toward equality will stall. High schools and colleges across the nation will stop counting heads and start taking interest surveys. That may sound fair to young athletes like Hubing. But when Title IX started, most girls couldn't imagine themselves as serious athletes. An interest survey at that time would have determined that only a few real tomboys deserved a chance to play. It was the opportunities offered under the law that created such a radical change in the culture. Women now make up 42 percent of college athletes — maybe not equality, but an enormous leap, thanks to the law. Interest surveys would freeze that progress where it is today.

And this would be a loss not only to girl athletes but to the culture of sports as a whole. Title IX has become one of the last bastions of amateur sports. While there are no limits on the amount of money a school can shift from other men's programs to football, Title IX insists they keep open athletic opportunities for women. Women's sports — often praised for their "purity," for the sheer joy of the athletes and for the fact that players get decent grades — have kept alive the ideal of the scholar-athlete.

But maybe not for long.

Now Conniff uses
s from the heart to reach
nce. See Chapter 2 for
of emotional appeals.

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