

Equitable sports opportunities for women

By MITZI WITCHGER

If high school girls played weekend basketball games for the past 70 years and had the same school support, primetime scheduling, commitment to coaching and media coverage as boys have had, they certainly would have a much greater following.

Undoubtedly more people will attend girls games when there is more parity in their programs. According to the June 16 *NCAA News*, that has proven to be the case as crowds are attending women's collegiate basketball games in record numbers with a net increase of more than 1.5 millions fans (a 28.7 percent increase) over the 1996 total.

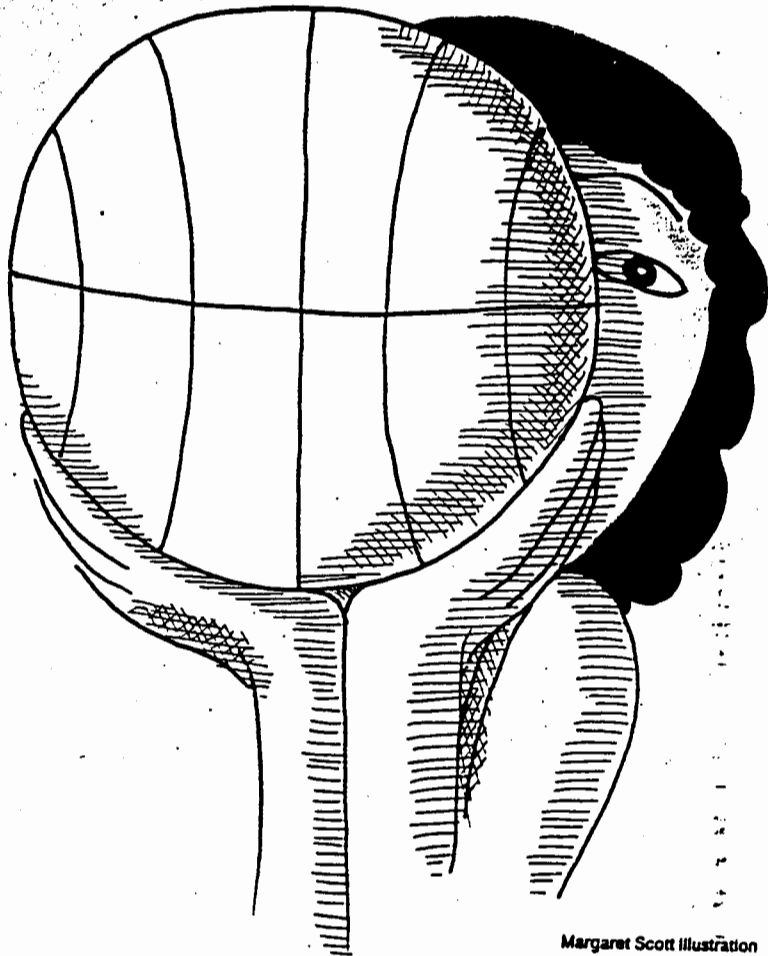
How did it happen that girls as well as boys, when asked to write about their favorite athletes, choose not only male sports figures like Reggie Miller, but also women like his sister Cheryl Miller, and Jackie Joyner-Kersey, Dot Richardson, Mia Hamm, Rebecca Lobo? When did people begin to realize that when we shortchange girls, we shortchange America?

June 23, 1972, is the date that is used as a benchmark to measure the progress of educational institutions' support of equitable sports programs for women. Of course many American women wanted to "play ball" before then. But 1972 is the year that Congress passed the Educational Amendments Act of which Title IX is a part.

Title IX states, "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex be excluded from participation in, denied the benefits of, or be subject to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving federal financial assistance." It insures that males and females in a school district, college or university receiving federal funds have equitable sports opportunities.

Gender equity is a paradigm shift in the way sports programs usually have been maintained. It is the assurance that if there are interscholastic or intercollegiate sports offered in a school setting, both genders are provided equitable programs using available resources.

Equity is about splitting the sports pie so that both males and females are nourished. It is about balance in a sports program, not



Margaret Scott Illustration

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just numbers. It is about having an attitude of fairness, using athletic competition in an educational setting to teach life lessons to female and male student athletes. It is about using the demonstrated interest of the athletes to measure what programs are to be implemented or changed.

It is not about giving one gender most of the pie because their programs seem to pay for the pie's ingredients, or saying "That's the way we've always done it, and it's worked so far."

Equity is not about which sports generate more dollars, or about scholarships, or state or national tournaments. It is not about

what college presidents, superintendents or principals, athletic directors, coaches or booster clubs may want to do, but rather, what they must do.

It is about rotating schedules equitably so that male and female teams have the same opportunity to have fans in the stands; about being sure facilities and equipment are available to all athletes, at times that are as convenient to one as they are to the other. It is about having the same type of recognition at pep rallies for all teams. It is about having an atmosphere where females know they can be athletes and receive the same level of support their male counterparts get.

In the past 25 years has equity been achieved? No, not by a long shot. Have athletic opportunities for females increased? Yes, by the hundredfold. Are schools working to bring women's sports on par with their men's programs? Yes, now more than ever. Are we done now? No, but we're a whole lot closer to the goal.

Witchger is a gender equity consultant from Noblesville who founded GREAT! - Girls Really Expect A Team!

Helping girls pursue hockey dreams

BY MITZI WITCHGER

"Mom, Dad, I want to play hockey." So said our daughter Libby eons ago on the way to yet another arena to watch another one of her brothers' hockey games.

Could we help her dream come true?

On that cold winter night, nearly

LETTER SPOTLIGHT

19 years ago, my husband Tom and I asked each other: Why hockey? For her? Do we really need another schedule to add to our busy lives? Don't just boys play hockey? Will she stick to it? Can she get hurt?

By the time we had found some answers and listened to her, instead of asking "why?" we were saying, "why not?"

Libby is still playing hockey. It has been a long haul for her and us, cold and sometimes lonely, but worth almost every minute. She played boys youth hockey and on the junior varsity and varsity boys programs in her Minnesota high school.

Next was Division I women's varsity ice hockey at Brown University, where she captained the team her senior year. That Bruin team twice won the regular season Eastern Collegiate Athletic Conference Championship, an Ivy League championship and the famed BeanPot Tournament in Boston. All done with few fans in the stands and little media attention, but these young women were playing the game they loved.

Today, Libby is still living a dream. She has exciting opportunities to make a difference as the goalie coach during the University of Minnesota's inaugural season of varsity women's hockey.

But when she was the lone little girl on a team, other hockey parents had reservations about Libby playing a "boys game." "Do you realize that she is taking a boy's place on the travel team?" parents would ask during her elementary school years.



Associated Press

U.S. women's hockey team beat Canada to win Olympic gold.

Early on, it became apparent that being subtle and civil to questions that reeked of exclusion was a better approach for us, Libby and girls in general than to feel insulted or angry. Most of the time, we have been successful in our affirmative attitude. We think it promotes female athletes in a stronger, more effective manner. We believe that being proactive rather than reactive scores more points for girls in the game of life.

These are some of the things we came to know about encouraging our daughter in her pursuit of athletics. Just as for boys, sports can add a new dimension to a girl's life. She can gain unique lessons about being an important part of a team. Winning and losing add character. She can learn about skill building, hustle, effort and commitment to a goal. She can stretch her muscle as well as her mind, her habits and her horizons.

As parents, we learned to praise Libby's efforts no matter what the final score of the game. We asked about her having fun on the team. We supported her as she questioned her own interests. We volunteered to help as team parents and managers. We

advocated for her when necessary.

We know that being an athlete has helped Libby form her own philosophy of life. She has chosen to go where the path does not lead; she has gone to where there is no path and blazed her own trail.

Women's hockey in the Olympics has expanded the attitudes of sports people everywhere, as well as more readily opened arenas and rinks to females, young and old, who love the crunch and shooosh of playing hockey. Lots of little girls can see role models, heroes and mentors now that the U.S. women's national team has won the gold.

We wish for all your daughters to be trailblazers like that team and like our Libby. Encourage them to be athletes, to be student-athletes, to try one sport or several. Give them support so they may explore their own strengths.

Maybe they'll get to the Olympics, maybe to coaching, certainly to becoming the best that they can be. It's an exciting journey of discovery for you and for them!

Witchger is a sports gender equity consultant who resides in Noblesville.