
THE CrossFit JOURNAL

Women's Wait

In this two-part series, Andréa Maria Cecil explores women in sports and what supporters and critics have to say about the contentious Title IX legislation. In Part 1, Cecil investigates the past, present and future of female athletes.

By Andréa Maria Cecil

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Staff/CrossFit Journal

In sixth grade, Jean Stewart became unpopular with the neighbors.
She hit a boy. And she didn't just hit him; she "knocked his block off."

"I really didn't hurt him. I think he was probably off balance ... but he fell down. And, of course, little boys back then didn't like to cry," remembers 83-year-old Stewart, laughing. "I was shunned in the neighborhood for a while. But that was all right. The boys were afraid of me and the little girls didn't know how to react."

Arguably, her father was to blame.

An athletic man, James W. Stewart had been an amateur boxer before taking a job with U.S. Steel Corp.

"Of course, as soon as I was old enough to pick up a boxing glove, he taught me how to do these things probably for my own self-protection," Stewart says. "He taught me good health habits and things like that, and how important activities and athletics were."

So when young Jean encountered the boy in her Los Angeles neighborhood who said girls didn't know how to box, it seemed like a good time to teach him a lesson.

Her stepmother was not amused.

"She was really upset," Stewart recalls.

Dad, on the other hand, found entertainment value in the incident.

**"We weren't expected to run
and jump and play."**

—Jean Stewart

"My stepmother made him take me into the bedroom and talk to me about it," Stewart says. "He kind of smiled at me and winked."

She adds: "Dad and I didn't say anything more about it. And, of course, the gloves were taken away from me."



Desert CrossFit

Stewart became known in the CrossFit community as the "deadlifting grandma" when she pulled 153 lb.

Desert CrossFit



Kept out of sports for most of her life, Stewart is making up for lost time.

Stewart channeled that athleticism and ornery nature into softball and what was then nine-court basketball in junior high school; she played field hockey in her high-school years. But that's where it ended for most women of that era. Professional female athletes weren't the norm.

"There was such a difference. Women couldn't participate in sports," Stewart explains. "I wished I could do it, but it was the time. We weren't expected to run and jump and play."

Grace Larsen can relate.

"It was really like that. Girls just didn't do that sort of thing. We weren't supposed to play boys' sports," the 87-year-old says. "It just wasn't socially accepted for girls. It wasn't offered. It wasn't accepted."

Clearly amused, Larsen adds: "I don't remember punching a kid, but I certainly wanted to."

Growing up in the 1930s, Larsen didn't entertain the idea of playing basketball, her favorite sport.

"It just wasn't available, so you more or less forgot about it,"

she explains. "I figured, 'I'm not going to be able to play.' So you put it in the back of your mind."

But things change in 80 years.

Today, Stewart is widely known in the CrossFit community as "the deadlifting grandma," able to hoist 153 lb. off the ground. And Larsen plays shooting guard on the San Diego Splash 80-plus women's basketball team, which has won six gold medals in 16 years at the National Senior Games.

"It's just so much easier for (women) to get into sports now since Title IX. Girls just have all sorts of opportunity," Larsen says. "That's something we never had."

Certainly women around the globe have gained ground in sports over the years. But to say their struggle is over is missing much of the story.

It wasn't until the 1984 Summer Olympics that women were allowed to run marathons—18 years after Roberta Gibb hid behind a bush before sneaking onto the course to become the first known woman to run the Boston Marathon.

Sixteen years later, women were finally allowed to compete in weightlifting at the Olympic level.

But it was only three years ago that female ski jumpers petitioned the Supreme Court of Canada to be included in the 2010 Winter Olympics. The court denied their entry.

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And at the 2012 Olympics, women competed in boxing for the first time—15 years after the British Boxing Board of Control said women's menstrual cycles made them too unstable to participate in the sport. And besides, no one wanted to see a pretty girl get socked.

"There's a perception that we've done all we can do, and we've reached the pinnacle of what we can do, and there's no need to fight for equity in sport anymore," says Lynda Ransdell, president of the board of directors of the National Association for Girls and Women in Sport.

"And the reality is there's still a lot of inequity."

Illusion of Equality?

When Kirsten Cummings was a girl, her grandmother had a piece of advice: "Don't let anyone ever tell you that it's unladylike to play sports."

Grandma wanted to be sure that the fiction her own grandmother had told her didn't endure in her bloodline.

"I thought, 'OK, I'll be a tomboy because grandma said it was OK,'" 49-year-old Cummings recalls.

In 1982, 10 years after the U.S. government enacted Title IX, she became a member of the first college freshman basketball team that had 10 players who received full scholarships. Title IX prohibits discrimination based on sex in education programs that receive federal money;



Paul Boca

Breaking gender and age stereotypes, one jump shot at a time.

it's been both credited and accused of having profound effects on high-school and collegiate athletics—for women and men. (Please read Part 2 for more on Title IX.)

"Historically, this means that anyone older than me didn't receive scholarships ... mandated by the NCAA," Cummings explains. "Anyone younger than me received scholarships much like what we see today."

She describes the time as "a pivotal moment."

Cummings' experience growing up in the '70s differed from that of Stewart and Larsen—she grew up in San Diego, a great city for youth sports, with her dad as her coach. Still, it was not a stark contrast to what Stewart and Larsen had seen in their childhoods.

"The boys were expected to do well. Being a professional player was unheard of when I was growing up," says the founder and CEO of the National Senior Women's Basketball Association.

Yet, that's exactly what she did. After playing for California State University, Long Beach, Cummings went on to play basketball professionally for 14 years in top divisions in France, Germany, Israel, Italy, Japan and the U.S.

"My first contract that I got for basketball was \$14,000, and I only got half of it," she says. "By the time I retired, (women) were making ... \$100,000, and some of us were making \$300,000. Still, compared to what the NBA guys make, it's not even close."

Kobe Bryant, a Los Angeles Lakers shooting guard and the highest-paid National Basketball Association player in 2012-2013, earned more than \$27.8 million that season, according to ESPN.

You'll find progress over the years if you read "[Women in Intercollegiate Sport: A Longitudinal, National Study, Thirty-Five Year Update, 1977-2012](#)" by R. Vivian Acosta and Linda Jean Carpenter. Both women are professors emerita at Brooklyn College.

According to the study, nearly 1,100 colleges nationwide last year reported 9,274 women's intercollegiate teams—the highest number ever. Also among the findings: an

average of 8.73 women's teams per school during the same year and about 200,000 female intercollegiate athletes—the highest in history.

Still, there's that pesky fact: Female athletes just aren't treated the same as men, much less equally.

"It's the uneven nature of change," says Michael A. Messner, professor of sociology and gender studies at the University of Southern California. "It's really gotten so much better. But, at the same time, it's far from equal and there's still quite a long way to go."

Girls on Film

Researchers say basketball and tennis are two examples of sports that are more symmetrical when it comes to treatment of the sexes. But you wouldn't know it by watching mainstream sports TV.

"In terms of equity, I think there's still some ways in which school sports, youth-based sports, professional sports, college sports favor men," Messner says. "There are more resources, (there is) more honor, more attention, more status that boys and men get. Nowhere is that more evident than in the mass media."



Fred Greaves

The legendary San Diego Splash. They've won six gold medals in 16 years at the National Senior Games.



Fred Graves

Title IX has equalized federal funding, but the gender divide is still pronounced in media coverage of college and professional sports.

Messner—along with Cheryl Cooky, an assistant professor at Purdue University—co-authored a study called “Gender in Televised Sports, News and Highlight Shows, 1989-2009.” The study, their most-recent iteration, presented some abysmal findings. The professors analyzed six weeks of televised sports-news coverage on three Los Angeles network affiliates, and they also studied ESPN’s SportsCenter.

What they found was this: men’s sports received 96.3 percent of the airtime. Women’s sports: 1.6 percent—the lowest level in any year measured during the past two decades, Messner and Cooky say. SportsCenter’s coverage of women’s sports dropped in 2009 to 1.4 percent—slightly lower than the combined coverage of the three network news shows, according to the study.

“This is a precipitous decline in the coverage of women’s sports since 2004, when 6.3 percent of the airtime was devoted to women’s sports, and the lowest proportion ever recorded in this study,” the authors write. “Reporters continually devoted airtime to men’s sports that were out of season—pro and college football in March and July, pro baseball in November, or pro basketball in July—while failing to report on women’s sports that were currently in season.”

In the study’s sample, 100 percent of SportsCenter programs and 100 percent of the sports-news shows began with a men’s sports topic as the lead story.

In their past studies, Messner and Cooky had found that female athletes and female spectators alike were frequently depicted as sexual objects or “as the brunt of commentators’ sarcastic humor.”

And three network-news affiliates and SportsCenter gave scant coverage in main reports to the Women’s National Basketball Association even though it was in season, according to the study.

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Although that changed, the situation didn’t necessarily get much better.

“There was far less of this sort of sexist humor about women in 2009, though this may in part reflect that women in any form were increasingly absent from the broadcasts,” Messner and Cooky write. “On the rare occasions when women were featured in sports news and highlights shows, they were usually presented in stereotypical ways: as wives or girlfriends of famous male athletes or as mothers.”

This was not the case with coverage of their male counterparts, Messner notes.

And the study did find a few examples of stories that “made fun of men athletes, sexualized them, or focused on their transgressions” on the three network affiliates.

“The main difference in how these negative or derogatory stories about (male) athletes were presented, as compared with those on women, was that they were embedded within a seemingly unending flow of respectful and celebratory stories about men’s sports and male athletes,” Messner and Cooky write. “By contrast, a negative story on a woman athlete usually stood alone as the only women’s sports story in a particular broadcast.”

In the end, the two professors come to a deflating conclusion: “Twenty years later, this optimistic prediction of an evolutionary rise in TV news coverage of women’s sports has proven to be wrong.”

Coverage of women’s sports is “paltry” on network news and “anemic” on SportsCenter, they say.

“Television news and highlights shows remain two extremely important sources of sports information,” they write. “Their continued tendency to ignore or marginalize women’s sports helps to maintain the myth that sports are exclusively by, about, and for men.”

Despite the disappointing findings, Messner tells the *CrossFit Journal* there has been some positive change of late.

“The actual coverage of women’s sports and of college basketball on news and highlight shows is still terrible. I mean it’s almost non-existent. But nowadays you can almost watch any game on any channel,” he explains. “Back



Staff/CrossFit Journal

Women and men are given equal airtime at the CrossFit Games.

in 1994, only championship games and finals were on tape delay. Now there’s high-quality live coverage, (but it’s) not (like the) wall-to-wall coverage of men’s games.”

Messner is hopeful.

“I’d like to think that people who are the decision-makers and gatekeepers in the mass media might broaden their thinking about these things,” he says, “tapping into new audiences and broadening their audiences.”

While tennis opened the door and continues to be a leader in women’s sports, there’s still much to be desired, says tennis legend Billie Jean King. She was the first female to be awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, in August 2009.

“But beyond that, I am quite disappointed because things are not as good as you might think and we just have so much left to do,” she told the *Journal* via an email sent by her publicist. “The X Games are making inroads for women and the WNBA is coming into its own, but we are still struggling in soccer and other high-profile professional sports.”

Staff/CrossFit Journal



In 2012, the CrossFit Games kicked off with an event in which men and women competed side by side.

Jonathan Exley



Billie Jean King

Named among the 100 Most Important Americans of the 20th Century by *Life Magazine* in 1990, King is best known for her 1973 defeat of male tennis player Bobby Riggs in the Battle of the Sexes match at the Houston Astrodome

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in Texas. Riggs—considered the No. 1 male tennis player in the world in the 1940s—at the time claimed the women's tennis game was so inferior to the men's that even a 55-year-old like him could beat the current top female players. King, the world's top female tennis player in 1966,



While Title IX is well intentioned, critics believe it has increased female sports opportunities at the expense of opportunities for males.

beat Riggs, claiming \$100,000 in the winner-take-all match. She went on to found the Women's Sports Foundation in 1974.

"We needed a voice in the marketplace," King says. "I am proud of the work we have done and how we have become the guardians of Title IX in this country."

But Title IX is a double-edged sword.

For as much as it has given, critics say, it has taken away—not because it seeks equal opportunity, but because of how entities like the U.S. Department of Education have interpreted the law.

"For more than a decade there has been a war over the federal law known as Title IX," wrote Leo Kocher in a 2011 column published in *Wrestling Insider Newsmagazine*. Kocher is president of the American Sports Council.

The council describes itself as the lead organization seeking reform of Title IX regulations "that have led to the widespread elimination of opportunities for male athletes."

"It's a well-intentioned law," Kocher tells the *Journal*. "It's been turned into something that needs to be reformed."

In Part 2, Andréa Maria Cecil investigates the effects of Title IX on women and men and explains CrossFit's approach.



About the Author

Andréa Maria Cecil is a CrossFit Journal staff writer and editor.