Reflections on Billie Jean King, Title IX, and Making the Most of Gifts That Have Been Given

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Editor's Note: To follow is a reflection paper that Erika wrote just days after attending the Girls and Women Rock: Celebrating 35 Years of Sport and Title IX Conference held immediately prior to the 2007 NCAA Women's Final Four in Cleveland.

Up until a week ago, Cleveland, Ohio was nothing but another city on the map to me. It was a place with a tradition-rich MLB baseball team and an NBA superstar, but nothing more, nothing less. Little did I know that today, not even one week later, Cleveland would stand out as the city that played host to one of the most memorable experiences in my life. From introducing nationally recognized experts in women’s sports to talking with leading civil rights advocates who helped make Title IX possible, such as the Honorable Birch Bayh and Dr. Bernice (Bunny) Sandler, the sights and sounds surrounding the Girls and Women Rock Conference as well as the 2007 NCAA Women’s Final Four taught me to look beyond the numbers in texts by showing me the importance of learning through experience.

The familiar phrase Women Rock! now makes me think of gender pride, our individual achievements as women, and our common bond, that being social change. The diversity I saw at the conference among women of all ages from across the racial spectrum provided a powerful example of how women will rally to the aid of their sisters who struggle to gain equal rights. I heard white women talking about the need to address the inequities that African-American women face regularly in sport. I heard older women calling for increased participation in youth organizations. I listened to male allies express their commitment to equality for women and women of color speak eloquently about the struggles that remain.

And I heard Billie Jean King, champion for social change and equal rights, speak before the City Club of Cleveland to an audience of approximately 1,000 awestruck people about the need to reach out across gender and racial lines for the bet-
terment of humanity. Interviewed by sports journalist, Christine Brennan, Ms. King said, “We have to do it, not just think about it. With diversity there is strength. In the end, we have to celebrate our differences, not tolerate them.” The lesson – in our unity we will find our greatest strength.

As we near the 35th anniversary of Title IX, I find myself considering the history of women in sport and society in light of the present and in relationship to the future. Once a dominant figure in her sport, Billie Jean King has used her celebrity and fame to create a platform to advance the interests of women as well as men in pursuit of a world free from discrimination. From her speech and what she said to me in a personal conversation later that evening, she continues to work to make a difference, aware of the progress that has been made but not satisfied because there is still more work to be done. I get the impression she will never be satisfied as long as there are people who need help around the world. King’s concern for the future was far more visible than her pride for things she accomplished in the past. Her focus is on her future goals to help people in Africa suffering from AIDS and to find ways to relieve the burdens of those in poverty.

In fact, most of the keynote and invited speakers at the conference said they were unsatisfied. Each applauded how far we’ve come in regard to equal opportunity, increased athletic participation, and awareness of women in sport, only to follow with what we need to do to improve. They called for coaches, current athletes, educators, administrators in athletic departments and government officials, representatives of the media and others to keep Title IX alive and moving forward. I not only appreciated this call, but saw the importance in what they suggested when looking back at how I came into my own athletic identity.

In order to best understand my socialization in sport, a brief history is needed. Dubbed by my childhood friends as the “tom-boy” of the group, I was a girl who would rather throw a baseball in the backyard than play “tea party” inside. I had Barbies, but the only action they saw was from the back of my closet where they collected dust, for I was more interested in playing with a basketball or running around the yard. Sport was a huge part of my life, and if there was a club or youth team, I was on it. From basketball to soccer to swimming to softball, I signed up for everything offered in my hometown and, as far as I can remember, there were no barriers keeping me from entry besides slight teasing here and there from my hyper-feminine friends. When I came home at night, how much fun I had that day was evident in every dirt and grass stain deeply embedded on my clothes. I was a girl and an athlete, and nobody ever asked me to trade in my sneakers for high heels. This continued throughout my lifetime, as I enrolled as a three sport athlete in high school, and became successful enough to have the privilege of playing at the collegiate level. Being an athlete is not just part of my identity, it is my identity, which I am proud of and see as a part of me so long as I keep breathing.

That said, I had never heard of the “X’s and O’s” of Title IX until I learned about it in my Gender Issues in Sport class at Ithaca College in my sophomore year. Whether my lack of awareness of Title IX had anything to do with never encountering any problems being a female athlete, I am really not sure. Still, it would have been important for me to hear about it when I was a young girl going through the athletic system, so I could best appreciate why I was able to participate. I never worried about being discriminated against because my personal experience shaped my understanding and led me to believe that that’s how it’s always been. When my mother recalled her experience in athletics, I assumed she had it just as good as me. Though I knew that historically women were denied equal rights in voting and careers, I never once imagined that women and their relationships with sport were included in that picture. I was never grateful for those who passed before me and paved the once dangerous and rocky route to a male dominated field simply because I had never heard about them.

Young girls need to be educated sooner so they can understand that playing sports is a privilege today as a result of the actions of the women heroes who stood up for us over the years. As an adult and a coach for young girls now, I see it as not only an opportunity, but a necessity, to make sure the upcoming generations appreciate those who fought for the very thing girls are allowed to do every time they shoot a basketball or swing a bat. Instead of saying “it was good for me,” we