

Sports, sex, and Title IX

STEVEN E. RHOADS

THIS past July, the Department of Education reaffirmed existing Title IX regulatory policy, rejecting several changes proposed earlier in the year. Title IX supporters were surprised, delighted, and triumphant; would-be conservative reformers were bitterly disappointed.

Contentious from its inception, the 1972 law to end sex discrimination in publicly funded schools had become the subject of intense controversy when the Department of Education's Commission on Opportunity in Athletics announced proposed modifications to it earlier this year. Women's sports groups and feminists argued that several of the commission's recommendations threatened to undermine Title IX's central guarantee that "no person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance." Those

in favor of reform, meanwhile, argued that the way in which Title IX has been interpreted by federal regulatory agencies and the courts has resulted in significantly decreased athletic opportunities for men. Reformers were cautiously optimistic that at least some changes were forthcoming. Title IX reform was on the 2000 Republican agenda, and many prominent women on the commission supported reform measures, including a female coach, an athletic director, and a WNBA All-Star.

In the end, the Department of Education adopted none of the recommended changes, promising instead to aggressively enforce the existing regulations. Why did the Department of Education back away from reform, rejecting the recommendations of its own commission? Many political observers believe the decision was a matter of politics, in light of the upcoming presidential election year. There is clearly broad public support for equal opportunities for women in sports. The question is whether Title IX as currently interpreted is the right vehicle for achieving this goal.

The quota factor

Under the current law, institutions can meet Title IX requirements in one of three ways. The first (and safest) is essentially a quota system in which schools orchestrate their ratio of athletes in proportion to the male-female ratio on campus. The second does not involve a quota system as long as the school is moving toward quotas through a "history and continuing practice" of expanding opportunities for female athletes. The third way is to ensure that the interests and abilities of female athletes have been "fully and effectively accommodated." As interpreted, this means in effect that a school cannot deny a female student the opportunity to play the sport of her choice simply because the school does not offer the sport.

Not surprisingly, most universities have chosen the first option, aiming for an athlete sex ratio as close as possible to the male-female student ratio on campus. Given tight budgets, they have attempted to reach this goal by cutting or trimming male teams and adding new teams for women.

The effects on athletic departments have been substantial. From 1985 to 1997, more than 21,000 spots for male athletes have been cut, and more than 359 male teams have disappeared since 1992. Christine Stolba of the Independent Women's Forum reported to the Title IX commission that "between 1993 and 1999 alone 53 men's golf teams, 39 men's track teams, 43 wrestling teams, and 16 baseball teams have been eliminated. The University of Miami's diving team, which has produced 15 Olympic athletes, is gone."

Wrestling teams have been particularly devastated. Intercollegiate wrestling has been a sport for nearly 100 years and ranks fourth in revenue production of all NCAA Championships. Wrestling is also growing at the high school level and attracts nearly a quarter-million boys—numbers that make it the sixth most popular high school male sport. Yet, as Stolba testified, scores of collegiate wrestling teams have been discontinued to satisfy Title IX strictures. With athletes represented in numerous weight classes, eliminating the wrestling team, or the number of slots on the team, can make sports-participation proportions much closer to student-enrollment proportions with respect to sex.

Brown University's sports program offers another example of Title IX's effects on male sports. In 1995, Brown had 17 women's teams and 16 men's teams, yet the number of male and female participants was nowhere near equal, and not just because the football team was large. Almost all of the women's teams had room for additional athletes (93 slots in total) whereas the men's teams had an overabundance of players competing for available positions. To increase the number of women athletes, Brown began creating new women's teams and cutting the benchwarmers on male teams. Male students interested in minor sports were told they could try out only if they could recruit two women who would try out for other teams. The Brown athletic director found turning away the male walk-ons the hardest part of complying with Title IX. "Eager, willing athletes" who would not travel and who cost the university little or nothing were told to "stay in [your]

dorms so [you] won't screw up the numbers."

As a result of Title IX, teams and slots on teams are being cut for male athletes, some of whom have been committed to a sport since early childhood, while new teams are created for women who have never played the sport. In some cases, full scholarships are awarded to women with no experience.

Playing politics

The objective of the Title IX reformers was not to eliminate the law or to return to an era when girls and women rarely participated in athletics. Rather, the reforms sought to provide athletic opportunities for both sexes based on actual interest. Because men are on average more interested in playing intercollegiate sports than women, a policy that creates an equal number of places on sports teams on the basis of sex means that men will have fewer athletic opportunities than women. Equal opportunity, reformers assert, requires that colleges provide athletic opportunities based on interest, not on the male-female proportion of its enrollment.

This general concept was endorsed by a majority of the Title IX commission which recommended that schools be permitted to engage in "interest testing" to help satisfy Title IX compliance regulations. These recommendations suggested that institutions "conduct continuous interest surveys on a regular basis as a way of ... allowing schools to accurately predict and reflect men's and women's interest in athletics over time." Furthermore, they would have allowed schools to compare the ratio of male-to-female athletic participation with "the demonstrated interests and abilities shown by regional, state, or national youth or high school participation rates."

Such recommendations did not sit well with traditional Title IX advocates. Defenders of the current law note that statistical equality has yet to be achieved—women represent 56 percent of the national collegiate student body but only 42 percent of intercollegiate athletes. Many advocates also view the shrinking disparity in rates of sports involvement as proof that women will participate in in-

tercollegiate sports if opportunities are created.

But there is also a less frequently articulated reason why so many feminists resist changes to Title IX, especially when those changes would not necessarily decrease sports opportunities for women. Advocates of the law argue that “interest surveys may prevent future progress in providing opportunities for women because offering opportunities regardless of interest may encourage participation even where none currently exists.” Thus Title IX, originally an antidiscrimination law, is transformed into a federal endeavor to adjust women’s interests in ways favored by their feminist betters. A *Village Voice* essayist recently explained some other reasons to reject the commission’s recommendation for interest testing:

[Reformers] insist that universities conduct surveys to determine student interest in sports and use *those* numbers as the basis for determining proportional spending, but that misses the *substantive* work of Title IX, which aims, among other things, to redress a culture that consistently applauds boys for athletic achievement and pours resources in their direction. Is it any wonder that they would express more interest?

Title IX, by this interpretation, is one part of a sociological campaign to aid the broad feminist endeavor to “redress a culture”—American society—that is seen as sexist and that discourages females from playing sports. Actress and amateur archer Geena Davis told the commission: “I am here to take you on a short ride in Thelma and Louise’s car if you think it’s fair and just to limit a girl’s opportunity to play sports based on her response to an interest survey.”

That feminists and women’s sports groups have so vociferously opposed even mild reforms to Title IX makes a dispassionate public discussion of the issues difficult. This is unfortunate. For the law in fact raises two very important questions—namely, are men more interested than women in competitive sports, and if they are, is this interest rooted in natural differences or is it the result of societal discrimination?

The sports fan

There are two primary ways that interest in sports can be measured: One is to look at rates of participation in athletics and the other is to measure how often sports competitions are viewed or followed. One would expect that college students who like to play competitive sports would be more interested in watching them than those who prefer non-sport activities. Not surprisingly, in psychological tests administered to establish areas of interest, one of the greatest differences between the sexes concerns sports. Young men are much greater sports fans than young women; in one study, Loyola Marymount professor Lawrence Wenner found that 20 percent of men but only 4 to 5 percent of women are avid sports fans.

There is further differentiation when it comes to what types of sporting events the sexes prefer to watch and to the details they focus on. Many women find an emotional connection to sports through watching personal profiles of the athletes, whereas men tend to find the emotion in the competition itself. It is no accident that the Olympics are one of the few major sporting events that attract almost as many female viewers as male. Television executives carefully structure broadcasts to emphasize the personal lives of the athletes, to attract more female viewers. The president of NBC Sports once said:

Men will sit through the Olympics for almost anything, as long as they get to see some winners and losers.... Women tend to approach this differently. They want to know who the athletes are, how they got there, what sacrifices they've made. They want an attachment, a rooting interest.

A study by Stephanie Sargent and colleagues, published in the *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, found that college men prefer to watch combative sports in which there is "direct physical contact between performers," and in which one individual or team wins at the expense of another. Men's favorite sports emphasize strength, stamina, power, domination, agility, and speed, whereas women prefer stylistic sports that "emphasize beauty and elegance of body position and movement but also stress speed,

agility and strength.” Women’s favorite sports do not involve “physical contact between competitors,” and competitions are judged by comparative rankings “rather than in [a] one winner/one loser fashion.”

One of the sports most popular among women is female ice-skating, which emphasizes grace and artistry as much as strength and speed. Ice-skating is one of the few sports where female interest dwarfs that of males. According to the 2002 *By The Numbers*, edited by John Genzale, more than 70 percent of girls follow figure skating while less than 20 percent of boys do.

Who plays?

The patterns researchers have found in sports-viewing preferences consistently predict male and female preferences for playing sports. Surveys of college students invariably show that young men are more interested in intercollegiate athletics than are young women. At California State University, for example, a survey found that 61 percent of enrolled students interested in intercollegiate athletic competition were male.

Examining patterns of interest and participation in the school setting is a generally reliable method, but suffers because there are reasons other than interest that explain why an individual chooses to participate: Doing so might help win or maintain a scholarship, earn prestige among a student’s peer group, or please the student’s parents. The best way to judge interest in playing competitive sports may be to compare how the sexes participate at the recreational level, where participation is based on nothing more than the love of competitive sport itself. Here the differences are even more significant. A 1992 National Educational Longitudinal Study of high school seniors probed for participation in a wide range of activities: sports, music, art, dance, religion, spending time with parents or friends, and volunteering, among others. Far and away the largest sex difference was participation in “non-school sports,” with male participation three times greater than that of females. At the collegiate level, anyone may play intramural sports, but an article published in

the *Chronicle of Higher Education* reported that typically there are three or four times more men than women who do so.

The biology of sports

Why are males more interested in sports? Title IX defenders insist that societal discrimination is the culprit. A typical view is articulated by Valerie Bonnette, head of Good Sports Inc., a Title IX consulting firm, who says that “women aren’t born less interested in sports. Society conditions them.” Those who advance this position rarely if ever have evidence to buttress their views, and it is no wonder, because there are no data to support their position. If the cumulative impact of social conditioning explained the different interest levels of the sexes, one would expect that the youngest boys and girls would show a rough equality of interest in sports and that they would display similar levels of competitiveness. The reality, however, is that very young girls and boys show marked differences in their interests and levels of competitiveness.

Differences in athletic interest between the sexes begin early. According to Thomas Power’s comprehensive book, *Play and Exploration in Children and Animals*, studies show that in the preschool years girls are more interested in dance and boys are more interested in balls and rough play, and that these differences begin to appear before the age of two. By grade school the boys’ games are more competitive, longer in duration, with more rules and interdependence between players, and with clear winners and losers. By contrast, psychologist Anne Campbell, in her book *A Mind of Her Own*, reports that

girls prefer turn-taking games such as skipping or hopscotch where the form of competition is more indirect. In fact, girls seem to dislike situations where winning means that another person must lose.

Psychologist Eleanor Maccoby, a leading expert on sex differences in children, cites a study which shows that, during the free play of fourth and sixth graders, boys

competed with other boys 50 percent of the time, whereas girls competed only 1 percent of the time. Both Campbell and Maccoby present numerous other findings of sex differences. Boys often compete as part of a group, and their groups are larger than girls' groups. There are frequently arguments among the boys, but the disputes are not taken personally and tend to be resolved by rules. Boys enjoy these adversarial situations and prefer to have the best players, and not necessarily their friends, on their team. Girls, in contrast, want their friends on their team and don't want to compete against them. They usually prefer to play in smaller groups and, as Campbell notes, will "abandon a game if it causes arguments." These differing preferences obviously make team sports more attractive to boys.

But observations of early childhood behavior are only part of the considerable evidence that explains why males are more interested in sports than females. The most important evidence is hormonal rather than developmental. Experiments with nonhuman primates and the study of girls exposed to high levels of androgens—the male hormones testosterone and androsterone, which control the development and maintenance of masculine characteristics—compellingly demonstrate the importance of hormones, from early fetal development through puberty, in directing boys' and girls' interests.

In-utero exposure to male hormones is crucial in understanding sex differences. Girls exposed to anomalously high in-utero doses of androgens show more interest in rough play and are more interested in sports, including more violent ones like football. These results are consistent whether one looks at girls whose excess hormonal exposure comes from congenital adrenal hyperplasia (CAH) or because their mothers were given hormones to sustain at-risk pregnancies. For example, Sheri Berenbaum and Elizabeth Snyder report in their 1995 study in the journal *Developmental Psychology* that 70 to 80 percent of girls affected by CAH engaged in competitive athletics more often than most girls.

Two cheers for cheerleading

Cheerleading and competitive dance are two sports that appeal broadly to young women and attract some of the best female athletes in school. These sports emphasize beauty and elegance but also require speed, agility, and strength; their athletes make use of the weight room and athletic trainers; and their coaches are on salary. Cheerleaders often earn varsity letters and receive scholarships.

If officially recognized as sports, cheerleading and competitive dance could enable many colleges to meet the Title IX proportionality standards. Yet the Department of Education and the NCAA do not recognize competitive dance or cheerleading as sports, and members of these teams do not count for Title IX compliance purposes. The Department of Education's principal objection is that cheerleading and dance teams usually perform to raise spirit at contests between other athletes, and Title IX guidelines stipulate that at least half of all outings must be in a competitive setting or the activity will not be considered a sport. In response, the University of Maryland recently divided its cheerleading team into a "spirit squad" and a competitive squad. The latter group will attend only cheerleading competitions and will be eligible for scholarship money, a move the school made "to keep Maryland in compliance with Title IX while returning some scholarships to the school's eight underfunded men's programs." Senior team member Erin Valenti opted to stay with the spirit squad, which must fundraise to cover its costs. "They're splitting us only so they can convince whoever the head of Title IX is that cheerleading can be considered a sport," she said. "To make it a sport, you're taking out the whole reason to do cheering to begin with." That is, the cheering part.

One suspects that an important but unarticulated source of indifference to the dancers and cheerleaders is simply that dance and cheerleading have traditionally attended male sports performances and as such are monuments to the pre-feminist cultural norms that women's sports advocates struggle so intensely to discard. Jessica Gavora, author of *Tilting the Playing Field: Schools, Sports,*

Sex, and Title IX, comments, "It is a measure of the scorn Title IX activists have for what they regard as traditionally female pursuits—and the perverse reverence they have for traditionally male activities—that they refuse to recognize these talented and dedicated young women as athletes."

Instead of encouraging competitive dance and cheerleading, women's sports advocates concentrate on promoting sports that many young women find uninteresting. The majority of the NCAA's "emerging" sports are not, in fact, growing fast at the grass-roots level. For example, collegiate crew for women is expanding only because colleges see it as a way of accommodating a large number of female athletes in first, second, third, and fourth boats at very little expense. Collegiate women are also attracted because, as a recent "60 Minutes" program explained, it is sometimes possible for a woman to get a full scholarship for crew even though she has never rowed before. In 2002, there were a grand total of 88 high school crew teams in the country. Compare this with the 64,000 girls on competitive cheerleading squads who have received little or no help from women's sports organizations.

Beyond love of the game

At the same time that Title IX has marginalized two sports that many young women are genuinely interested in, it has caused much-publicized trauma to men's athletics. Yet the damage caused by Title IX cannot be measured simply in terms of lost recreational opportunities for men. If Title IX advocates were not so intoxicated by ideology, they would acknowledge that men and boys need sports more than women do. Eleanor Maccoby believes that sports can be necessary to cement male friendships in a way that they are not for most women. In her book *The Two Sexes*, she explains that "boys' friendships tend to be less intimate than those of girls" because they are activity-dependent. Men bond with other men through activity, especially competition and sports, and uniquely value the nonverbal friendship that develops with a male teammate or even with a competitor.

Consider what Title IX advocates call the “hapless tackle dummies” who ride the bench on football teams and the other male walk-on athletes who rush to join teams they know they will most likely never play for. It is widely acknowledged that women are different in this regard. The female softball coach at California State University, Northridge says that “most [women] tend to quit the team” once they “realize that they will not be able to play in games.” As Norma Cantu, enforcer of Title IX regulations in the Clinton administration, explains: “They decide that, with no scholarship and no playing time, they are better off doing other things.” In other words, women offered the same type of opportunity as their male counterparts will often choose to pursue other interests.

Why are men more willing to ride the bench? Men will do so because it helps them connect with other men, which is much harder for them to do absent an activity such as sport. The bench warmer who plays in practice and cheers on game day is a member of a team on a mission. Women, on the other hand, dislike hierarchy on teams and they often need encouragement from coaches to maintain enthusiasm. Bench warmers in college rarely get encouragement, and their parents don’t come to the games to see them ride the bench. Moreover, the emotional connection with peers that many men can get only with competitive activity women are able to get from close friends outside of sports.

Another benefit young men derive from participation in sports is that it reduces displays of aggression and violent behavior. One effect of testosterone is its tendency in some young males to stimulate pointless violence, and sports—especially rough ones such as wrestling and football—can channel male violence into a rule-bound activity, providing a healthy outlet for aggression.

Reform Title IX

The obsessive attention that many Title IX defenders pay to ratios of male and female athletes is even more surprising when one considers that in high schools and colleges, girls outnumber boys in almost every extracur-

ricular activity—student government, honor societies, school newspapers, debating clubs, and choir, among others. Girls outperform boys in virtually every academic category as well. Nationally, men currently represent only 44 percent of all college students, and the federal government predicts that by 2010 the percentage will have fallen to 41 percent. Women are more likely to finish college and currently earn 25 percent more bachelor's degrees than do men.

It is time to think seriously about how to reverse these trends. If more young men had a chance to play sports, more would likely stay in school, especially at those colleges where men's teams have been harshly treated to conform to Title IX requirements. The Department of Education would do well to revisit this issue, and identify competitive dance and cheerleading as sports to be included in Title IX calculations. Also, schools should be allowed to engage in testing to determine student interest in sports. It is to the benefit of neither young men nor young women to persist in a policy that reduces opportunities for dedicated athletes by creating unwanted sports opportunities for others.