

# How Title IX Made It Cool for Men to Like Women's Sports

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Suddenly, it's cool for men to like women's sports. Suddenly, TV, radio and internet talking heads who paid no attention to female athletes a couple years ago are chatting up Caitlin Clark, mooning over the college softball World Series and weighing in on Nelly Korda's LPGA Tour winning streak.

I know a male sports writer who wrote a column that began: "I love women and I love basketball but I hate women's basketball." I know passionate male golfers who would not watch women's golf if paid. That's mostly an older generation who are set in their ways and those ways were set in another time and another place.

But things are changing. As David Byrne and the Talking Heads sang: "And you may ask yourself, 'Well, how did I get here?'"

We know why TV is suddenly paying attention: Ratings, pure and simple. When the NCAA Women's Final Four attracted more viewers than the men's

Final Four, that moved women's sports to a front burner. But why have those ratings spiked?

In the case of college basketball, one reason the women's game is now more popular than the men's is that most female basketball players go to school for four years. There is not the one-and-done like in the men's game. When Caitlin Clark had a great junior year we knew we could see her amazing game again in her senior year.

Clark had star power because of her achievements but also because of her familiarity. She was likely better known this year than any male college basketball player because the good men leave for the NBA after one year. Fans don't have time to get to know them.

But there is a bigger reason, and that reason extends beyond basketball to every other sport in which women can compete: Title IX.

Title IX is the federal civil rights law enacted in 1972 that prohibits sex-based discrimination at any school that gets federal funds. Simply put, colleges offering athletic scholarships to men must offer a like number of scholarships to women.

The reason more men are now watching women's sports can be traced to Title IX in two indisputable ways. First off, the quality of play in all women's sports has improved dramatically because of increased opportunities for girls and women to compete.

Twenty-five years ago, there were a handful of good women's college basketball games a year, usually involving Tennessee, Connecticut, Stanford, Notre Dame and a couple of other teams that would pop up now and then. Now, the top 20 or 30 teams are extremely competitive because there are more good players, which makes more good teams – and more good games.

When I first started writing about the LPGA Tour in the 1980s it was rare for a player outside the top 20 or 30 in the field to win a tournament. The drop-off in talent from the top players to the also-rans was that great. Now, virtually anyone who makes it into a tournament can win it. The quality of play is at an all-time high and will only get better. That's part of what makes Korda's five-tournament winning streak so impressive.

But the improved quality of play and increased intensity of competition is only one impact Title IX has had. Here's another key factor: We are into a

second generation of Title IX babies. Girls are being raised by Moms who played college sports and they are getting much more encouragement at home to pursue their dream of being an athlete.

But not only is Mom involved; so is Dad. Fathers pitch in to drive their daughters to soccer practice or lacrosse or basketball or baseball or golf. Maybe Dad becomes involved as a coach. Dad watches his daughter play. Dad and the rest of the family watch women's sports on TV or have a family outing at a game.

Suddenly, men are watching women's sports because the females in their lives have brought them to it. Suddenly, if Dad hears someone disparage women's sports he jumps in to defend the games that his daughter plays.

The times are definitely changing. The first women's college basketball game I attended was at Madison Square Garden in 1976. Carol Blazjowski of Montclair (NJ) State scored 52 points against Queens College, breaking Elgin Baylor's record for the most points scored by an individual in The Garden.

I also saw Lusia Harris of Delta State play at MSG and Nancy Lieberman of Old Dominion, which won two consecutive AIAW National Championships in

the late 1970s. Think of that: Until the 1980s, the NCAA did not even recognize women's basketball.

The many years I've spent covering the LPGA Tour and women's golf in general have led me to this conclusion: The most-vocal critics of women's golf, both among the fans and the media, are those who don't attend the tournaments. Once you experience an LPGA tournament you realize how great the players are as athletes and as people. And you become a fan.

As the fan base for women's sports grows the next domino to fall will be corporate America. Those people who write the checks that make it possible for male professional athletes to earn so much money need now to support female athletes in the same way. And now is the time to act. The opportunity is ripe.

If I were the CEO of any corporation I'd be all over becoming a title sponsor of an LPGA Tour event and signing individual LPGA players to endorsement contracts. The buy-in for a tournament or an athlete is still a huge bargain compared to the cost of getting involved with men. The same is true for buying broadcast rights. And the same is true for any of the women's sports leagues, teams and athletes.

Those corporations who get involved now are getting in on the ground floor of a massive growth opportunity. Women's sports is the next big thing. For a more modest buy-in than required for men's sports, ensuring a healthy return on investment, women's sports have become a compelling investment opportunity.

Suddenly, it's cool for men to watch women's sports. Quietly, Title IX Moms and their daughters have taken Dad by the hand and brought him to practices, games and plopped him in front of the TV to watch women play.

Suddenly, women's sports are on a front burner. They are a hot thing and they are proof that Title IX was not only the morally right thing to do but also the financially smart thing to do. Just ask the University of Iowa how much it's made off Caitlin Clark.