What Women Need

Earlier this year, a former colonel in the US Army came to Duke to do team building exercises with the women’s basketball team. He asked us beforehand to e-mail him an example of a female athlete we considered a role model. I was stumped. There were women I looked up to—my mother, my first basketball coach, one or two teachers. But there were no athletes that left an indelible mark on my memory. Now, as a college athlete and an aspiring professional athlete, I find myself faced with a series of questions (Is this a viable career? Is it rewarding, intrinsically and financially for someone like me?) that would be more easily answered if I knew about those who came before me.

I grew up in New Jersey—but within the confines of the great Oil and Petrochemical Refinery State, I grew up on baseball fields, soccer pitches, and basketball courts. My two older brothers frequently dressed me up in hockey goalie gear to practice their slap shots. When my dad coached their Little League team, I was the batgirl, and I donned a full uniform. When I was 5 years old, I went to a soccer camp at Duke for boys aged 7 to 14. My brothers were quick to protect me from the other campers being too physical, but always reserved their own right to give me a solid shove. In fact, one day when I was in middle school, they brought me with them to the YMCA to let me play pick-up basketball on their teams. When I decided to argue with my oldest brother about a foul call, he threw the ball at my face and chipped my tooth. I broke my arm before middle school one morning doing monkey bar training with my other brother. When I fell, he told me to get up. I walked to the nurse alone; he was convinced there was nothing wrong with me.

My life has been inundated with sports. We didn’t watch Saturday morning cartoons when we were younger. We watched Saturday morning ESPN. Sundays were not a day of rest; they were days of three-hour car drives for soccer tournaments. I took to sports as avidly as my brothers did. But to this day, I cannot remember watching many women’s soccer or basketball games, or idolizing any female athlete. I went to one WNBA game, but that was only because I was a Brownie, and I wanted to get a badge and play in Madison Square Garden at halftime. I wore number 9 when I played soccer, just like every other girl who played soccer in the late 90’s, because of Mia Hamm. She was the closest thing I got to a role model—I even read her biography. But my real role models in sports were Larry Bird, Pete Maravich, Magic Johnson, Shaq, Grant Hill, and Shane Battier. Boys were better than girls at sports, and I’d always been able to play with the boys, so why shouldn’t I idolize them?
That was when I was in middle school. And while to this day I idolize those men, it struck me as strange on that day earlier this year, when I was asked for a female athlete role model, that I came up blank.

It struck me as strange, but it struck me, also, as evident of some larger theme of my life. Last year, when Ashley Camano wrote a *Chronicle* article about Title IX’s 40th anniversary at Duke, she began the article with what became a somewhat controversial quote: “I’m not a feminist. The passion that the recycled, two-word phrase ‘girl power’ is supposed to invoke just doesn’t do it for me.” I identified completely with her words, yet they stirred the emotions of some of the more outwardly feminist Duke students who didn’t know why “feminist” shouldn’t be a proud title. I grew up around boys who did nothing but push me towards every dream I had, and I grew up ignorant of any bounds my gender could impose. I didn’t need to be a feminist. Books about girl power never did anything for me. I didn’t need someone to tell me I was as good as the boys—it wasn’t girl power, it was just power, and I had as much of it as my brothers, if not more. In my own little world, where women never were less than men, I could not grasp why we needed our own form of power. It seemed like weakness, and it made me look away from women as role models in my athletic life.

I am not alone in lacking any meaningful connection to, or admiration for, the stories of women who laced up before it was “mainstream.” In fact, in many regards, I stand out because I have actually heard some of these stories. Billie Jean King beating the arrogant Bobby Riggs in the Battle of the Sexes. Pat Summitt driving her team’s van to away games at the start of her coaching career. Teams sleeping in the gyms they were playing in the next day, wearing the same jersey three games in a row, without washing them. My mom playing a foreign version of basketball—in which there were two zones and six players, three guards who played only defense, and three forwards who played only offense (this was true everywhere except in the great state of New Jersey, where two of the six players were allowed to play both zones. How bold.).

It seems to be one of those generational things, akin to the “when I was a kid we walked two miles to school uphill both ways” stories. Except that those stories were often false or exaggerated, and they were never indicative of larger societal stereotypes, or injustices, or lack of opportunity. These are. But my generation of women and even those ten or fifteen years older have avoided these stories as if they were the winning-touchdown-pass-as-time-expired story your dad always tells on Thanksgiving. We don’t mind hearing about it, but it’s an old shtick. It doesn’t *mean* anything, though it should.

(In some ways, this is true beyond the realm of sports and in the entirety of the women’s rights movement. My generation has grown up with every possibility. But we don’t honor or comprehend how we got here. Women of my mom’s generation are perpetually frustrated by this. As Anne Marie Slaughter wrote, “We
who have made it to the top, or are striving to get there, are essentially saying to the women in the generation behind us: ‘What’s the matter with you?’

One of my closest friends, a college athlete, didn’t know what Title IX was until about two weeks ago. I could tell you, off the top of my head, the year Jackie Robinson first played in the Major Leagues (1947). I could not tell you what year the WNBA started. I could not tell you what year Jackie-Joyner Kersee went to the Olympics. I could tell you the year Tommie Smith and John Carlos gave the Black Power salute (1968). I could tell you the jersey numbers of Bird, Magic, Maravich, Jordan, Lebron, Wade, Worthy, and Kareem. I couldn’t tell you Lisa Leslie’s jersey number, or that of Cheryl Miller, or Julie Foudy, or Michelle Akers.

More importantly, I could not tell you what it meant to be a female athlete in 1950 or 1960 or 1970 or how it might feel to want to be an athlete without the choice. Given what sports have meant in my life, and that this was a reality only 40 years ago, I should have some idea.

Title IX and the expansion of opportunities in sports for girls have had a profound impact on my life. They’ve afforded me a free education and free medical care. They’ve taken me to places I’d never been, from California and Utah and Colorado to France, and even the White House Navy Mess. Mostly, they’ve allowed me to look at my older brothers and feel as strong, if not stronger; as qualified, if not more so; as good, if not better. They’ve enabled me to look some of our nation’s most successful people in the eye, in an environment where I could hold a conversation with only minor stuttering and babbling.

Yet, as I approach the end of one era of my athletic career and enter the ever-changing world of women’s professional sports, I am struck by how little I know about it, the players in it, the lives they lead, and the lives their predecessors led to create this opportunity for me. It’s troubling, not just because it seems ungrateful, but because “not knowing” was a burden they bore, so that I didn’t have to. My mom, Nancy Lieberman, Ann Donovan, they grew up not knowing if they could play sports, or if it would ever be a viable career option. They grew up without females whose lives they could emulate or admire.

It seems to be a trait particular to women that we don’t give each other much credit. We would like to think, and it would be less burdensome to think, that we were endowed by our Creator with these opportunities, just as we were endowed with some abilities. We were not.

From now on, whenever I take the court, I will remember to give credit to the women without whom I would have no shoes to play in. I will remember Carol Blazejowski winning the Wade Trophy, and Lisa Leslie dunking in the WNBA, and Julie Foudy making her penalty kick to win the World Cup. Because I respect what came before me, and because that is the foundation on which my future will be built.
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