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Donna de Varona - Lafayette Native, Olympic Gold Medalist, pre-Title IX athlete and Title IX crusader

By Jon Kingdon



Photo provided

When the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was enacted, it outlawed discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, and national origin. As a supplement to this act, 50 years ago, on June 23, 1972, Title IX was passed as a federal civil law that prohibited sex-based discrimination in any school or other education program that received federal money.

The text of Title IX as written and signed into law by President Richard Nixon was as follows: "No person in the United States shall, based on 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."

Donna de Varona, a Lafayette native, became an internationally known swimmer when she competed in the 1960 Rome Olympics at the age of 13 and followed that up at the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, winning the 400-meter individual relay, setting an Olympic record and a second gold medal in the 4x100 meter freestyle relay that set a world record.

"There weren't any sports for girls when I was growing up," de Varona said. "Little league organized girls out of the game. I used to play sandlot baseball with my

brother but when little league baseball began, I went as the bat girl because I got to be near the game and the guys. Dolls didn't do it for me."

The few sports available to girls were swimming, track and field, gymnastics, and tennis. "Basic swimming was being elevated by coaches who were just donating their time to build a program," de Varona said. "When I was 12, if you were fast enough, you could swim open. That's where I was, very fortunate to be in the right place at the right time, in the right state in the right community."

It was de Varona's father, Dave, a football player, and rower at the University of California, Berkeley who made it clear to de Varona that there was an unequal access to sports. "My father played sports because he could," de Varona said. "However, he always talked about how unfair it was that guys got scholarships and women didn't, so he planted the seeds for me as we would always have these dialogues. You could play tetherball or baseball during recess but interscholastic high school sports for girls didn't exist."

Without Title IX, it was the parents who were there to ensure that their girls would get some opportunity to participate in sports. "It was Mom and Pop who were the ones that fueled the movement totally," de Varona said. "Since I was so successful at 13, my way was paid for the National Swimming Championships, but it was the parents that supported our movement during that period."

With her coach in Santa Clara, de Varona and her family moved to San Jose after her sophomore year at Acalanes. "Acalanes was a top school and I hated leaving it," de Varona said. "It's such a beautiful area and a lot of my buddies still live there. I was able to train there during my freshman year even though there wasn't a girls' swim team."

So, despite breaking 18 world records, winning 37 national titles and two Olympic gold medals, it became clear to de Varona, in this pre-Title IX era, she needed to find a new career path since there were no women's college swim teams. "I was aware that the guys were going off to college," de Varona said. "I accepted my reality and that's why I made the decision to retire at 17 because even the coaching community knew that it was over for us. There was a lot of stuff that was percolating, and I was living at the apex of feminism, anti-war and civil rights. We were being treated differently and we had limitations that the guys did not have."

De Varona then contacted ABC about a position in their sports department, having developed a relationship with ABC's The Wide World of Sports show in her swimming career: "I asked if they would consider using me as an expert commentator," de Varona said. "They told me to think about it because they did not want to be accused of turning me into a professional. I sat on it for a while and then called them back and said, 'I'm ready.' They flew me back to New York, got me a work permit because I was only 17 and I ended up

calling races with Jim McKay at the men's senior national championships at Yale University."

De Varona attacked the media world with the same commitment that she did in the pool, eventually earning an Emmy, two Gracie's (presented by the Alliance for Women in Media Foundation) and covered 17 winter and summer Olympic games. In 2006, she was inducted into the Museum of Television & Radio's first class of 50 "She Made It" pioneers in media.

"They thought I was too young sometimes and I did not know anything other than swimming, but I was encouraged by Boone Arledge, the president of ABC sports, to get more experience," de Varona said. "I finally landed a job at Eyewitness News, which was the hottest local news station, and I became the first woman to cover the New York area sports. I gained a lot of experience about how to produce a spot and to be really aggressive in getting interviews with the top athletes like Joe Namath and Dr. J."

De Varona did not back down in what was essentially an all-male environment. "I loved being in a man's world and that's why I went into sports broadcasting. I always felt the men had more fun and I loved the team aspect and camaraderie. Make no mistake, I love being a woman, but I loved their lives better and their career paths. I always wanted to live a life of passion and my passion was firmly rooted in sports."

The move back East earned her national exposure. "I'm in New York City and hanging out with Howard Cosell and Jim McKay along with the captains of industry," de Varona said. "We went through the period when New York almost went bankrupt. I was hanging out with the Tisch and Rooney families. That platform gave me such a great trajectory in life and I'm really grateful for it."

When de Varona went to Washington D.C. to lobby for Title IX, ABC was getting calls from football coaches asking them why they were letting her go to Congress and testify. "My retort to my colleagues at ABC was that if Howard Cosell could go and talk about the ills of boxing, why can't I talk about a bill that's opening up the doors for women," de Varona said. "And by the way, this is going to offer more opportunities for coverage with the added sports in the summer and winter Olympics which ABC needed to fill their airtime."

Though de Varona did not get to meet with Sen. Patsy Mink (D-Hawaii) who co-authored and advocated for the passage of Title IX, she did meet with many key figures responsible for the passage of the legislation. "I did work with Senator Birch Bayh (Indiana) who was part of our coalition and the first President Bush who appointed me to a commission to change how Title IX was applied," de Varona said. "We had the support of Republicans like Senators Ted Stevens (Alaska) and Robert Packwood (Oregon) along with Democrats like Ted Kennedy (Mass.) and Bill Bradley (N.J.). Stevens deserves a ton of recognition for always being our defender and fighting against his own people like Orrin Hatch (Utah)."

Though breaking the initial inertia in upping the athletic teams for girls and women was slow and at times arduous, the work of the politicians, parents, coaches, athletes, and the general public proved successful as evidenced by a comparison of participation numbers by high school girls in 1971 and 2020: Cross Country (1971 - 1,719; 2020 - 219,340); Soccer (1971 - 700; 2020 - 400,000); Softball (1971 - 10,000; 2020 - 362,000); Cross Country (1971 - 1,719; 2020 - 219,345).

"These numbers help with the debate as to what sports does for women and how it empowers our culture," de Varona said. "When I worked at Ernst and Young, the Peterson Institute found a correlation between how countries support their women athletes and its impact on their GNP."

The executive director of the National Collegiate Athletic Association, Walter Byers, spoke out against Title IX claiming that it was going to lead to the "possible doom of intercollegiate sports." Ironically, Byers became an avid supporter of Title IX. "I had a lot of arguments with Walter when I was testifying in Washington," de Varona said. "After he retired, he wrote a whole book, championing that Title IX was the right thing to do."

Many of the high school and college wrestling teams were eliminated because of gender quotas. Louis Suba, Miramonte's wrestling coach, was a wrestler at Indiana University at that time. "There was a lot of resentment among the wrestlers because so many colleges had dropped their programs," Suba said. "I remember there being petitions to rescind Title IX."

In 2004, the first year that women wrestling became an Olympic sport, females wrestling for their high school teams became the fastest growing group of new participants, boosting many high school and college wrestling programs.

"I was 100% positive when the girls started coming out because it really helped to grow the sport and revive the programs," Suba said. "I'm always looking for more girls to come out and join our team."

It's the ancillary benefits of sports for women that de Varona believes is most important in the long run. "It's the feeling of empowerment and to be treated with dignity and respect," de Varona said. "At Ernst and Young I developed a program to help athletes in their lifecycle to move from competitive competition to post-athletic careers. Whenever I was talking about Title IX, we'd make the point that this isn't just about being on the podium, it's about learning all the lessons sports teaches like confidence, teamwork, focus outside of sports, handling victory and defeat, etc. We found that 94% of women in corporate America have had a sports background and 50% competed in college and those women look for women that have had a similar experience because they don't see their job as nine-to-fivers. They're committed to their professions, and they work until they complete the job. Our research was groundbreaking, because no one had looked at

the trajectory after the field of play."

To keep the momentum going, de Varona joined with Billy Jean King to establish the Women's Sports Foundation, serving as their first president from 1979 to 1984, eventually becoming the chair and Honorary Trustee for the Foundation. Over the years, the Foundation has raised more than \$30 million to support its programs.

"This is what increased the opportunities after Title IX," de Varona said. "Of course, we couldn't get equality overnight. We had to pump the pipeline and get over a lot of stigmas such as that girls that played weren't feminine or that they wouldn't be interested in sports. What we found was that we had to have our own movement, which was aside from the feminist movement which really thought of us as a mental exercise. Yes, women should have equality, but the feminist movement was mostly focused on other very important things like equal pay for equal work but those who led the movement really weren't athletes. So, we had to create our own home with the Women's Sports Foundation where we could do research, where we could provide scholarships, where we could advocate for Title IX implementation, where we could honor each other and help rewrite the history books which we've done."

The foundation also started the National Girls and Women in Sport Day. "It enabled us to go to Washington and educate incoming legislators about the role of Title IX and we were also able to introduce our young women to the political process because where else would they be able have that experience of leadership or meeting sponsors," de Varona said. "We also provided a dinner every year where we could meet and greet and know each other and understand our strengths and numbers. I don't know if we would have made it without the foundation and, I'm sorry but I'm not going to brag but we may not have made it without my leadership."

De Varona made it a point to not overlook the achievements of the minority women and their accomplishments. "They don't get the recognition," de Varona said. "Who's heard of Wyomia Tyus or Evelyn Ashford? Here's Wyomia who won back-to-back 100 meter runs in 1964 and 1968 and then Evelyn Ashford, who won gold medals in the 1984, 1988 and 1992 Olympics and they're lost in history and it's just not right. As far as women are concerned, the women that joined me in the creative years of the Women's Sports Foundation were critical. The press tends to look at only one person. We created an army of people behind this movement, many who never were going to earn a cent by supporting Title IX and the Women's Sports Foundation, which was the only organization that was fighting for girls and women in sport."

This is why de Varona feels it is so important for the current high school and college athletes to learn about the history of Title IX. "My daughter Joanna used to ask me why they don't teach about it in school," de Varona said. "This is part of civil rights. Now they just take it for granted and they don't understand that it could go away. We have to take responsibility to step up and protect the gains that we have made."

So, what would it take for de Varona to say that her mission is done? This is the answer she gave in an interview with Leslie Visser: "We're there when every high school, middle school, and grammar school kid has a sport opportunity. We're there when we understand that sports teach us how to compete in our competitive world. We're there when we understand sports provides fitness opportunities. We're there when we can figure out this changing evolving world on the collegiate level because the NCAA isn't the only one responsible, every institution is. Then let's get to the parents and have them advocate for not only their kid but every other kid."

Since de Varona retired from competitive swimming in 1965, she has served five terms on the President's council on Physical Fitness and Sports. She helped with the passage of the 1978 Amateur Sports Act which restructured how Olympics are governed in the United States. She was a consultant on legislation that worked to promote and safeguard Title IX. She was named a special advisor to President Clinton's Drug Czar, Barry McCaffrey, helping with the establishment and funding for the United States and World anti-Doping Agencies. She was appointed to the United States Department of State's Empowerment of Girls and Women through the Sports Council by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. She has received the Olympic Order, the highest honor presented by the International Olympic Committee and has received five honorary doctorates. She was inducted into the International Swimming Hall of Fame and the National Women's Hall of Fame.

A graduate of UCLA (1986) with a degree in political science, she and her husband John Pinto have two children, Joanna and John.

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[back](#)

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