

Girls and women are participating as never before in all levels of organized sports in the United States, thanks to changing public attitudes and a landmark law.

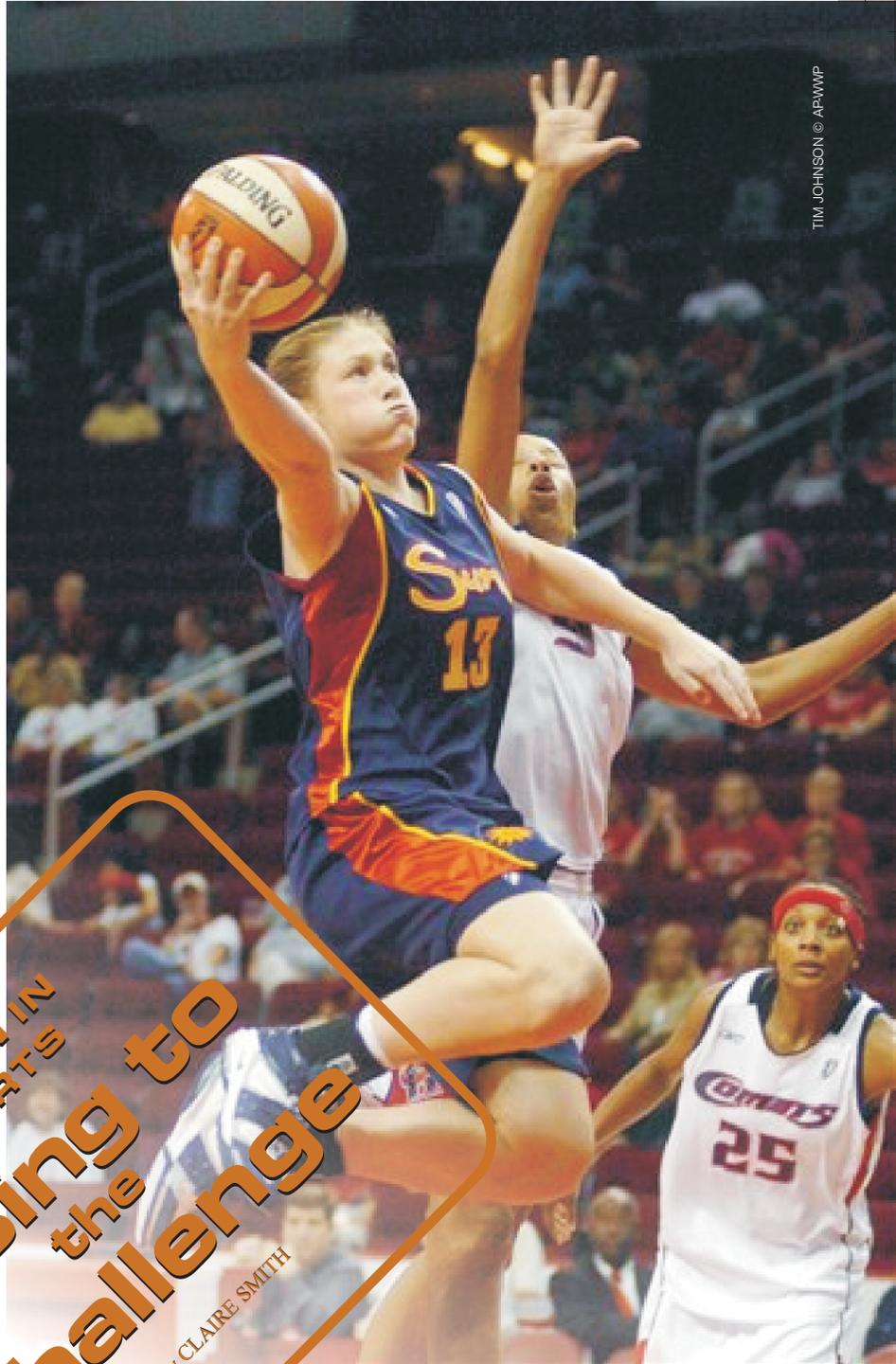
When C. Vivian Stringer, in the beginning stages of what has become a hall of fame career, saw her women's basketball team from tiny Cheyney State College in Pennsylvania qualify in 1982 for the first women's national championship sanctioned by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), it was like reaching for the moon.

If the event was merely new and uncharted territory for the NCAA, it was unprecedented in women's ranks. The NCAA is the leading organization that governs inter-collegiate athletics in the United States and that, for years, had sponsored every high-profile men's championship tournament.

Even for the most celebrated names in women's basketball, achievements had always occurred well under the radar of major college men's sports, with their generous donors and revenue-earning television exposure. So to qualify for that first championship, Stringer's team had to, well, get there.

The road from rural southeastern Pennsylvania to the inaugural event, held on the Norfolk, Virginia, campus of Old Dominion University, had many stops along the way for bake sales, raffles, pleas for donations, and any other fundraising technique Stringer and the team from the historically black college could devise.

"I remember going to a church to solicit money so that we could have little white Cs sewn on our sweaters so we'd look nice getting on airplanes," Stringer said of the long road to that first title game in which Cheyney State



TIM JOHNSON © AP/WIDEWORLD

WOMEN IN SPORTS
Rising to the Challenge

By CLAIRE SMITH

lost to storied Louisiana Tech. "A sporting goods store volunteered to give us uniforms so that we'd have more than one set. Our administration solicited local companies. On campus, there was as much a fear of our being successful than not, because there was always the thought, 'How are we going to pay to go to the next round?'"

Now, fast-forward to the year 2000. Stringer was coaching her current team, nationally ranked Rutgers University in Piscataway, New Jersey. When Rutgers upset the University of Georgia in the NCAA Western Conference finals, it meant a third trip for Stringer to the "final four," the championship round of games

*Connecticut
Suns' Lindsey
Whalen (13)
drives to the
hoop for a layup
as Houston
Comets' Janeth
Arcain (9) tries to
defend in their
WNBA preseason
game in May
2005 in Houston.*

involving the four surviving teams. By then, the coach learned, the mode of transportation for such teams was very much first-class in every way.

Media and Crowds

Life at the top for such women's teams, at the dawn of the 21st century, was nothing short of top-of-the-line. Women athletes not only had access to national television audiences—and national television funding—but also expected, and received, staples that once were the sole province of the men's basketball teams. These included, in addition to major media coverage, custom-built team buses, chartered air travel, first-rate hotel lodging and—not the least of the benefits—loyal fan bases. In fact, the “final four” destination in 2000 was not a sleepy college campus, but metropolitan Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where a sparkling new professional sports facility, with its 20,000 seats,

stood ready to receive the women athletes and their enthusiastic followers.

Capacity crowds turned out to see not only Rutgers, but also several superlative, nationally renowned squads—such as the University of Tennessee and the University of Connecticut, the modern-day basketball dynasty that has become something akin to the Beatles of a generation ago when it comes to popularity among prepubescent girls. Nationally televised in prime time, the two-day weekend event was completely sold out. The semifinal round brought out the largest crowd ever to see a college game—women's or men's—in Pennsylvania's history, as well as a record number of media.

Looking back, Stringer, now a member of the Women's Basketball Hall of Fame, recalls that weekend as a major development. “To walk in and see that giant arena filled, to see the impact of the sport in Philadelphia and elsewhere, was something you never would have dreamed of in 1982,” she said.

Women's sports have changed dramatically on so many levels in recent decades. To be sure, there have been bumps in the road; one was the demise of the professional Women's United Soccer Association, the result of low revenue and sagging ticket sales. Yet despite such setbacks, the growth of women's sports—from youth programs to secondary school and university levels and on to professional leagues and competi-

tions—can only be described as phenomenal.

Surely, tennis legends Althea Gibson and Billie Jean King never might have envisioned the success, worldwide recognition, and unprecedented earnings of today's women tennis stars like Serena and Venus Williams. Legendary golfer Babe Didrikson Zaharias could not have foreseen the explosion in popularity of women's golf, with its galaxy of international stars such as Annika Sorenstam of Sweden and Se Ri Pak of South Korea.

The Impetus of Title IX

The dramatic flood tide of talented women athletes onto American playing fields—and the opportunities that came along with them—no doubt benefited from the women's movement of the late 1960s and 1970s, with its emphasis on self-empowerment at every level. But the true impetus was Title IX, the landmark U.S. law signed by President Richard Nixon in 1972 that guaranteed equal rights for girls and women in every aspect of education, including athletics.

As colleges and universities began to enforce the law, partnerships arose between women athletes and the many institutions that drive sports in the United States—among them the NCAA, the Olympics and television. Once the world of amateur athletics for women opened up, so, too, did the doorway to corporate America, which led to more and more sponsorship for professional women's sports.

Many will debate whether Title IX has ever been properly or fully enforced, let alone realized to its fullest intent. Clearly football and men's basketball remain the towering forces on the nation's campuses. There's an argument, too, that Title IX fueled, rather than calmed, a gender war, with evidence that the enforcement of the law may have had a detrimental effect on men's sports; a 2002 U.S. General Accounting Office study found that 311 men's wrestling, swimming and tennis teams were eliminated from American inter-university sports programs between the years 1982 and 1999.

Hot button issue or not, Title IX still stands. In July 2003, the U.S. Department of Education issued a report, based on a year-long review, in which it reaffirmed Title IX's existing compliance rules and regulations, with only slight changes in emphasis.

Evidence of the determination across the United States to take Title IX seriously can be found in the November 2003 decision by a federal judge in Pennsylvania ordering a university in his jurisdiction to reinstate its women's gymnastics program. Because of budgetary shortfalls and a cut in state funding, West Chester University had eliminated the program in April 2003, along with the men's lacrosse team. But the men's squad was much larger; as a result, the court

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found, the university did not meet its legal obligation to accommodate women athletes proportionately under Title IX. Gymnastics is part of the school's athletic landscape once more.

Arguments as to the law's merits and tangential effects likely never will go away. It is a debate for the ages. What is not debatable is this: Title IX changed the sports landscape in America forever.

Women's Professional Basketball

A stunning example is the professional Women's National Basketball Association. It exists with glitter and glamour that girls could not have imagined 30 years ago, in major-league cities and state-of-the-art arenas. Members of the two-time world champion Los Angeles Sparks, that city's women's team, garner as much "show time" as the men who play for the Lakers, the National Basketball Association (NBA) team that sponsors the Sparks.

"When you walk into Madison Square Garden to see the New York Liberty, you take a step back and say, 'This is women's professional basketball!'" Stringer said of the New York's team entry. "There are just some things I could not have envisioned."

As much as Title IX allowed for the trickle-up effect, it also unleashed a cascade of opportunity onto the playing fields where young girls now do more than merely observe or lead cheers. Statistics speak loudly: According to the Women's Sports Foundation, a non-profit advocacy group, before Title IX was enacted, only one in 27 girls participated in sports at the secondary school level. The foundation now puts that number at one in every three girls. And as the teenagers have moved on, so has their interest in sports. The latest Education Department statistics show that some 150,000 young women are involved in collegiate sports—five times the 32,000 who were estimated to have participated in inter-collegiate sports in 1972.

There are undeniable success stories behind the myriad statistics. For instance, it was rowing—not basketball, soccer or softball—that first propelled women to an unprecedented status at the NCAA level. In January 1996, the NCAA elevated its women's rowing division to championship status, but did not do the same for the men. That decision meant not only that the NCAA agreed to fund the sport's national championship, but also that rowing—historically enjoying strong participation by both men and women—only has NCAA sanction and championship status for its women crews.

Nikki Franke is living proof of the quieter successes that are telling in their lasting impact. Franke, a former Olympian and the longtime coach of the renowned fencing program at Temple University in Philadelphia, traces the growth of her women's team

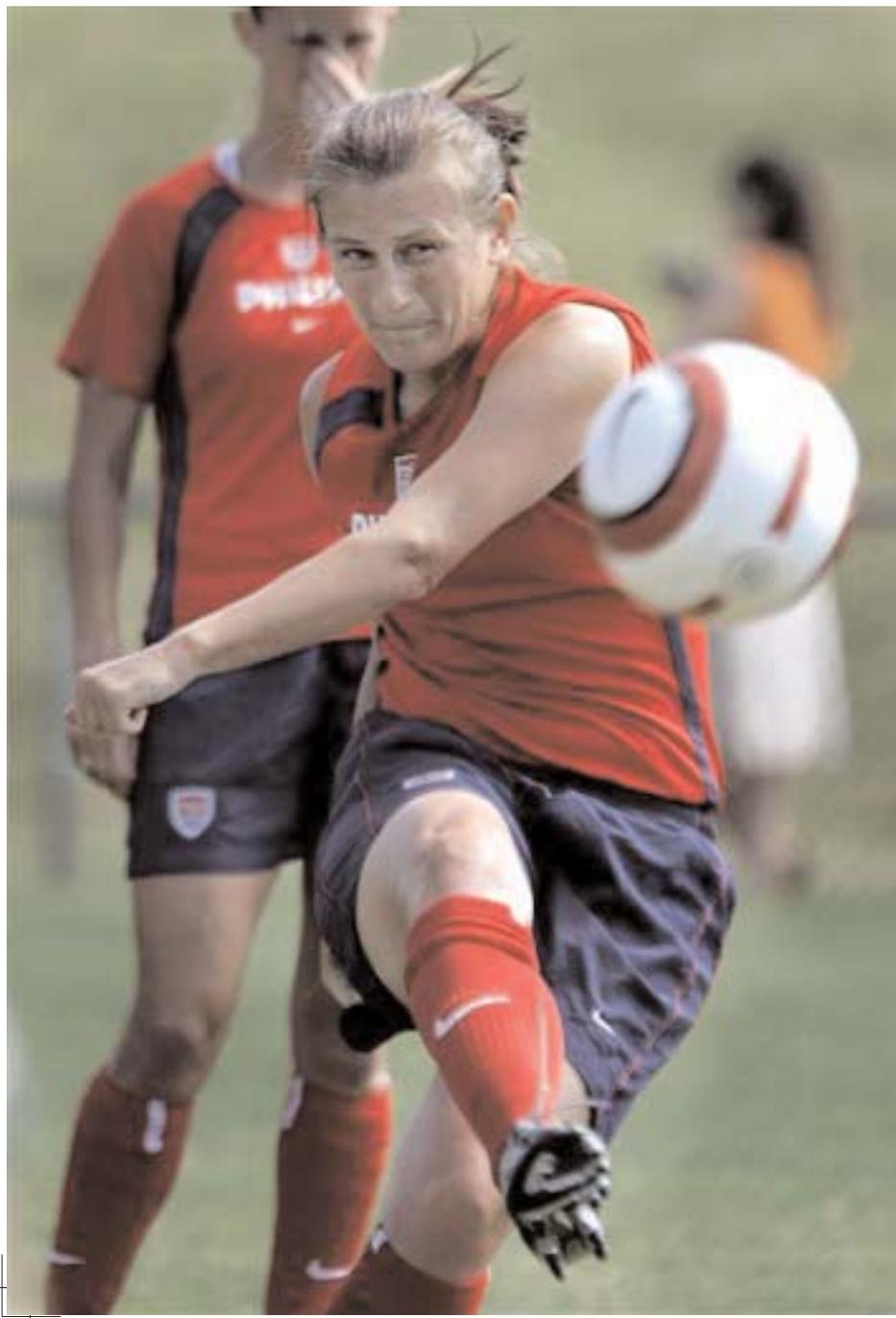
JIM MCKNIGHT © AP/WIDEWORLD



U.S. Women's National Ice Hockey team goaltender Erin Whitten (34) and other members of her team listen to the introduction of the Russian Women's National Ice Hockey team in March 1997, at Lake Placid, New York, before the start of their second game. The American women won 13-0.

directly to Title IX. In 1972, the year Title IX went into effect, the school elevated fencing from the club level to a team sport for women. “There were no scholarships at the time, but they had a team,” Franke said. “That’s how it all started.” Today, she observes, with all the status her squad has achieved, there are “walk-ons,” young women with no history of competition at secondary school levels. And they are accepted, just as they are on men’s teams. “If a lady wants to work hard and learn,” Franke notes, “we will work with her.”

Tiffany Milbrett practices with the U.S. Women’s National Soccer Team at Klockner Stadium in Charlottesville, Virginia, in June 2005.



STEVE HELBER © AP/WIDEWORLD

Continuing Challenges

But challenges remain. Gender remains an issue in coaching ranks. Wanting to be like the men in some ways has meant turning women’s sports over to the men. Yes, Franke can point to an unending string of successes. She can also point to a lonely legacy. As of 2002, Franke was one of only three women serving as head coach of the top10-ranked fencing teams. “I would like to see a lot more women involved, more coaches on all levels,” said Stringer. “We need to encourage more women in that regard.”

The women’s game in the United States also needs more women as consumers—to bring the full weight of their spending dollars to bear—particularly at a time when women have increased their presence geometrically as wage-earners in the United States. The downfall of the Women’s United Soccer Association—with its stellar athletes—resulted from an inability to build corporate support and sponsorships at a time when the U.S. economy turned downward. Its demise was a bitter disappointment.

“It’s frustrating,” said Lynn Morgan, a former soccer association executive, at the time of the association’s folding. “You put in so much effort and so much investment but the needle moves so slowly. You see the potential, but you just can’t make the quantum leap to get there.”

What is left, in professional league ranks, is the 14-team Women’s National Basketball Association, in partnership with the men’s National Basketball Association, supported passionately by the NBA commissioner David Stern. Yet it, too, must increase revenue, or it could suffer a similar fate.

Beyond the Field of Play

Countering these challenges, though, are other successes—just beyond the field of play itself. Sportswriters and sports broadcasters were once exclusively male. But no longer. Women now often handle the commentary and announcing for tennis and golf telecasts in the United States, and they also provide extensive color commentary on the sidelines at football and basketball games. They are not just window dressing, but serious sports journalists.

For a while, in the 1970s and 1980s, women battled against great odds to be allowed into professional teams’ locker rooms along with their male counterparts for post-game interviews. Double standards continued to exist. As Chris Beman, a broadcaster for the ESPN cable network, observed in the mid-1990s, he could mispronounce a name without any repercussions, but women who did the same would be in deep trouble. “Rightly or wrongly,” he said, “some viewers might look at a



woman sportscaster as guilty until proven innocent, and the males are innocent until proven guilty.”

But gradually, the criticisms and double standards have eroded. When this reporter was physically forced out of the (professional baseball) San Diego Padres’ locker room during the 1984 National League Championship Series, the response from varied—and very male-dominated—bastions was immensely medicinal, not to mention helpful. The Baseball Writers Association of America strenuously protested the Padres’ policies to the office of the baseball commissioner—not because a woman had been evicted from the workplace, but because a baseball writer had.

Within a month of taking over as baseball commissioner [in 1984], Peter Ueberroth opened professional baseball’s doors to all officially credentialed reporters, regardless of gender, just as they previously had been opened in the NBA and National Hockey League. Eventually, the National Football League followed suit, putting an end to a struggle that had started long before

in the courts and in the dank hallways of stadiums and arenas across the land.

As momentous a decision as Ueberroth’s was, I’ll always remember most the action taken by the Padres’ first baseman, Steve Garvey, who followed me out of the locker room the day I was ejected to assure that I would have at least one interview for my report on the game. “I will stay as long as you need,” Garvey said in an attempt to calm the situation. “But you have to get yourself together. You have a job to do.” Two days later, Garvey elaborated: “You had a job to do, and every right to do it.”

Garvey had summed up not only the struggle, but also the continuing reason to wage it. □

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Colorado Silver Bullets pitcher Lee Ann Ketcham opens for her team against the men’s Senior Baseball League Team in Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium in Georgia in September 1994. The Silver Bullets lost 9-6.