

**Confidence, Strength, and Changing Roles:
The Revolution of Women's Identity Through Sports**
Identity Presentation by Kaitlin C. Liston

Women's rights have progressed by leaps and bounds since the turn of the 20th century. Gender roles are less stagnant and women have begun to receive more equal opportunities. In 1972, the federal government passed Title IX which expressed the idea that "no person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance", thus began the first step towards women's equality in the world of sports. Prior to the passage of Title IX, girls had been excluded from athletics, except "girl sports" such as cheerleading and gymnastics. We live in a different time period now where girls don't play contact sports; in California almost every girl plays AYSO soccer when they're growing up. With this new found opportunity women have become more confident, and instead of being second class citizens, are doing more things for themselves, rather than cheering from the sidelines. Although women's sports and achievements may still be deemed lesser and women are picked to represent popular apparel brands based on their appearance, rather than ability, overall the opportunity to play sports has changed women's lives for the better.

If I told you about every significant event and figure that contributed to the rise of equality in the world of women's sports from 1900 until now we'd be here forever. So, I am going to focus on the key time period of 1970-1975. And as a wise person told me yesterday "we seem to regret a lot of things that happened in the 70s", don't worry this is not one of them. Although I'm going to suggest that maybe letting Mayfield play flag football was not the greatest idea.

Even though women athletes were becoming more widely accepted due to the daredevils of the early 1900s, the aviators of the 1920s, and many Olympic stars, there were still stereotypes. The media led society to believe that women who played sports were more like men. The real concerns of the women of this era are present in the interview of Miss Toni Stone, the only woman in the male baseball league. When Miss Stone arrived for an interview for *Jet* magazine for an article called “The Truth About Women Athletes”, the staff was anxiously waiting because they had heard many rumors about female athletes and how they were barbaric and too manly. They were all relieved when she arrived in a pink dress and had a girly voice instead of the mannish one they were expecting. The article said she was a “lady through and through” and talked about her homemaking and cooking. There was this idea that women could not like sports and be strong and independent, without giving up all of their femininity. Part of this was due to the leftover post WWII pressure from society that pushed women to return to their roles in the domestic sphere after all the soldiers came home. During the war, the women had worked in factories and singlehandedly held up the home front of the war, but as soon as the men got home they began to be criticized for the previous hard work that they had been admired for. One editor of the Ladies Home Journal even said “all the average man asks is that his wife and/ or sweetheart be a sturdy oak when he’s away at war or the office and a clingy vine upon his return”.

Luckily, it was time for some change. The 1960s and 70s were an era of policy shift in women’s sports. In 1971, the leaders of women’s college sports formed the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women, which strove to “plan, govern, and promote the growing number of tournaments for female athletes”. Now that female athletes had the support from colleges and a stronger base from the public, due to American track and field athlete Wilma

Rudolph's three gold medals in the 1960s Olympics, women began to fight for their freedoms in sports outside of school.

In 1972 the world of sports was changed forever. Congress passed Education Amendments which contained Title IX. It was now the law that women could not be discriminated against and forbidden to take part in public sporting events. This was the biggest turning point women athletes have ever had and it spurred even more change and support. Before Title IX two percent of women college students participated in sports and by 2001 forty three percent participated. Thanks to the growth of the women's liberation movement and Title IX, many women were inspired and ready to fight for equality. Many men, however, were still in the mindset that women's sports were a joke. One such man was the "self described chauvinist pig" Bobby Riggs. Riggs was a pretty famous tennis player on a campaign to prove that "men's tennis is superior to women's". During a time where women were fighting hard for their rights, Riggs was broadcasting his belief that women "did not deserve equal rights because they are inferior to men". To prove that he was correct and that women's tennis is inferior, he challenged female tennis player Billy Jean King to a face off. King was not amused and declined the offer. But, this did not stop Riggs. He then challenged Margaret Court, a young Australian tennis player who was the only current female player to have won Australian, French, Wimbledon, and U.S. Open Titles. Court was creamed by Riggs losing 6-2, 6-1, and 6-1. When Billie Jean King found out, she decided that she had no other choice, she knew she had to play Riggs. She didn't want the public to actually believe Riggs claims and did not want to lose support for the newly established women's tennis tour. King prepared and on September 20, 1973 she played Riggs in the match that was called the "Battle of the Sexes". In a game that was telecast around the country, King beat Riggs 6-4, 6-3, and 6-3. Riggs had not won a single set. This momentous game was a huge

turning point in women's goal for equality in sports. King had just proved that women were athletic too. They could compete with men, and better yet, they could beat them.

In 1974 Billie Jean King founded *Womenssports*, the first sports magazine to be all about women athletes and from 1994-1996 one television station even had a television show was all about women's sports current events. It seemed as though female athletes may have finally gotten the equality and support they had been fighting for for so long. Even though media coverage redirects attention from female athlete's accomplishments and abilities to a few pretty athletes, causing them to be portrayed as objects of sexual desire (check a copy of *Sports Illustrated*) and popular apparel brands pick their female athletes based on how attractive they are, not ability, (which is the opposite for men). All in all, the access to athletics has changed the women's lives for the better. Girls and women who play sports are less likely to be in an abusive relationship, have unplanned pregnancies, and to do drugs. Along with affecting decisions, four hours of exercise per week or more can reduce a teenage girl's risk of breast cancer by 60% and by playing sports girls can lower their risk of developing osteoporosis. Sports also affect the emotional well-being of girls. Women and girls who play sports have higher self esteem and confidence, lower levels of depression, a more positive body image, and an overall better psychological well being. Sports are where boys and men have traditionally learned teamwork, goal-setting, to pursue excellence, and hard work which all roll over into the workplace. Now that women have started to make sports part of their lives they are able to bring these qualities into the work place as well.

Half a century ago women were still very much stay-at-home moms, and now there are stay-at-home dads, and women leading companies. Business succeeds with leaders that have strong skills in organizational structure and human relationships, both things that can be learned

through athletics. No wonder 80% of the female executives at Fortune 500 companies played sports when they were growing up. Sports have taught athletes that 'I will' equals 'I can' and the female athletes and daredevils of the early twentieth century have taught this generations girls that as well. This is an era were part of the female identity is to be strong and to do things previously deemed for men. Gender roles are changing and this new confidence has been derived in part due to sport. Sports have enhanced women's role in society and their lives.