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# How Title IX Sneakily Revolutionized Women's Sports

By Jake Simpson

*Supporters of the groundbreaking legislation did all they could to conceal its potential impact.*



AP Images

When Title IX was signed into law 40 years ago this weekend, most people had no idea what an impact it would have on women's sports in America. And that's exactly what the architects of the bill wanted. That is the remarkable story told in a new documentary, *Sporting Chance*, which will air Saturday on ESPN2: In order to make Title IX the law of the land, its supporters had to keep the public ignorant of its potential for lasting social change.

Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, a 36-word clause largely overlooked by the very lawmakers who passed the bill, requires equal access for women in all facets of education, most notably athletics. The section reads:

"No person in the United States shall, on the basis of 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."

Simply put, the law means that public schools and universities must offer equal academic and athletic opportunities to men and women. To the generation coming of age today, this sounds about as radical

as "equal rights for gay and lesbian people" and "providing men and women with easy access to contraceptives." But to a host of former lawmakers interviewed in the documentary, it was a seemingly impossible goal that took determination and a healthy dose of cunning by former Oregon congresswoman Edith Green.

As told through compelling first-person narratives in *Sporting Chance*, Green and Indiana senator Birch Bayh first floated the idea of Title IX in congressional hearings on equal rights for women in 1970. The measure was eventually added to the 1972 education reform bill, but it was generally thought to affect hiring and employment practices at federally funded schools.

That was how Green wanted it. As the bill made its way through Congress and landed on Richard Nixon's desk, the 10-term congresswoman muzzled most public support for the bill out of fear that its true scope would be publicized.

Bernice Sandler, who helped draft Title IX with Green and Bayh, recalled in the film how Green was aghast when Sandler and others said they planned to lobby for the bill.

She said: "I don't want you to lobby. Because if you lobby, people will ask questions about this bill, and they will find out what it would really do." ... And she was absolutely right. It was quite a big break that no one was watching.

The full impact of Title IX did not become clear until 1975, when the government published final rules that gave colleges and universities three years to comply with the gender equality provision of the act. But its impact is clear today. Fewer than 300,000 girls played high school sports in 1974—today, the ranks have swelled to more than 3.1 million.

It's ironic that Title IX passed with most people unaware of its impact, because many of the people who benefit from it today are just as ignorant of its importance.

"We have to educate a generation that's continuing to benefit from it," said three-time Olympic track and field gold medalist Jackie Joyner-Kersey, one of the speakers at the *Sporting Chance* premiere in New York on Monday. "A lot of people don't even know what Title IX is. And we can't let that happen. It's important that this generation be a voice to not let Title IX die."

Joyner-Kersey's opinion was echoed by past and present female greats at the premiere. Among those who agreed was the youngest star in attendance, 20-year old gymnast and 2008 Olympic gold medalist Shawn Johnson, who echoed Joyner-Kersey's concerns that Title IX's staggering success has made its very existence rote to a new generation of female athletes.

"A lot of people have heard of it, but I think it's something we really take for granted these days because [women playing sports] is so normal," Johnson said.

Johnson said she only became aware of the law's history and significance when she became an Olympic athlete.

"I don't think it's something that's really taught as you're growing up," she said.

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**How Title IX Hurts Female Athletes**

Title IX ignorance among younger athletes is not entirely surprising because of the law's overwhelming success. Today, equal participation in sports is such a universal and unremarkable part of American life that anyone under 30 can hardly conceive of a school system that gave girls a single athletic option: cheerleading.

For the first 10 years of her life, Joyner-Kersey was among the cheerleaders, forced to limit her preternatural athletic talents to tumbles and human pyramids. Only after Title IX became law did she have an opportunity to join her high school track team, and sports fans know how that turned out.

Joyner-Kersey said the burden will soon fall on younger stars like Johnson to defend the law from being repealed or amended, a job that starts with knowing more about Title IX than its name.

"The athletes of today who will eventually be the voices must deal with the law of Title IX," she said. "When they start talking to you not about fast you ran, but about Title IX, I don't want them going: 'What's Title IX?'"

Title IX is still in its infancy at 40 and must be protected as well as celebrated, tennis great Billie Jean King said at the premiere. But the older generations of female athletic pioneers could take heart in stories like that of Alexandra Binney. A junior volleyball player at Wellesley College, Binney said athletics have made her a more confident and tenacious person and offered heartfelt praise for those who came before her.

"I would never have been here without those women—I would never have been a collegiate athlete," she said.

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