

Celebrating the female Olympians

The U.S. female Olympians owe a debt to Title IX and Richard Nixon



Illustration on Nixon's support of Title IX and the subsequent growth of women's sports by Alexander Hunter/The Washington Times more >

By Barbara Hackman Franklin - - Thursday, September 1, 2016

ANALYSIS/OPINION:

Over half of the 121 medals that U.S. Olympians have brought home from Rio de Janeiro belong to women. Their 61 total medals has set the record for the most medals won by women athletes during the Olympic Games; in London's 2012 Games, which were the first Olympics to have women athletes compete in all events, they won 58. From swimming to gymnastics to air rifle shooting, women earned 27 of the 46 total U.S. gold medals.

A wide range of analysts and media outlets, from NBC commentators to NPR, The New York Times and the CEO of the U.S. Olympic Committee, have credited these women's many successes at least in part to Title IX.

A portion of the U.S. Education Amendments of 1972, Title IX states in part: "No person ... 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.”

The historical ramifications of this law are telling. At the Munich Olympics in 1972, the year President Richard M. Nixon signed Title IX into law, America’s 84 women competitors (compared to 316 men) won 23 of our 94 medals, or 24 percent.

President Nixon, whom I served as a staff assistant, doesn’t get the credit he’s due for his substantive efforts to advance the role of women — not only in athletics, but also in all the rest of American society.

Though his administration’s efforts on behalf of women’s equality began long before then, Mr. Nixon’s commitment in this regard was underscored by his signing of Title IX into law 44 years ago on June 23, 1972.

“Many younger people may not realize,” Henry Kissinger, one of the highest-profile figures in the Nixon administration, has said, “what a significant cultural change in women’s rights began with Nixon.”

When Mr. Nixon instituted efforts to advance women in the federal government, he in effect helped to change society’s views and conversation about the role of women, especially in the workplace. At the time — in the early 1970s — women in the workforce were still primarily teachers, nurses or secretaries.

Because of the administration’s efforts, the numbers of women in policymaking jobs tripled in the first year alone. There were many breakthroughs, with women in jobs they had never held before. Women were becoming lawyers, scientists, commissioners, generals and admirals, and that paved the way for many more breakthroughs in the years that followed, including athletics.

In April 1971, Mr. Nixon directed each of his Cabinet secretaries and agency heads to give him action plans for the advancement and training of women throughout the administration. He wanted those plans back in a month and wanted to know who the point man would be in each department and agency for carrying it out so that he could be held accountable.

I was subsequently brought onto the White House staff to recruit women for policymaking jobs, build a talent bank of women and monitor the progress of the departments and agencies on their action plans.

Mr. Nixon followed the progress of these efforts personally, and when a Cabinet secretary did a good job, the president wrote a note of commendation. When a secretary missed a target, he wrote a different kind of note. Everyone knew the president was monitoring the progress, and that understandably got people’s attention.

Led by the president himself, advances in the federal government set an example for the private sector. As a result, new opportunities opened up for women in academia, business, the arts and, of course, sports.

Title IX specifically came about in no small part because of the way Mr. Nixon's efforts to broaden women's opportunities in society changed the conversation about what women could and should do.

Indeed, Title IX has exceeded expectations and has done more to guarantee equality for women in education than anyone at that time would have dreamed. Especially in the realm of athletics, what flowed from Title IX has been wonderful for women and for our society.

In 1972, the year Title IX was enacted, there were about 310,000 girls and women in America playing high school and college sports. Today, there are more than 3.4 million.

If Olympic honors were awarded posthumously, President Nixon would deserve an honorable mention for having made it all possible. Just ask any of the women returning from Rio this week.

- *Barbara Hackman Franklin was a staff assistant to President Nixon and later served as Secretary of Commerce under President George H.W. Bush.*

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