

Ohio State Begins Year-Long Celebration For 50th Anniversary Of Title IX



The Ohio State athletic department celebrated the 50th anniversary of Title IX — a historic amendment that protects from discrimination based on sex in education and athletics — at the Ty Tucker Tennis Center on Thursday.

University President Kristina M. Johnson, First Lady Veronica Meinhard, synchronized swimming coach Holly Vargo-Brown, former athletic administrator Miechelle Willis and women's basketball star Jacy Sheldon accompanied host and assistant cheer coach Siobhan St. John on a panel to discuss Title IX's impact at Ohio State.

Johnson was a field hockey player at Stanford and helped start the lacrosse program at the school, while Meinhard was an All-American swimmer at Florida. Vargo-Brown was an All-American synchronized swimmer at Ohio State and national-championship-winning coach for the Buckeyes synchronized swimming team. Willis was a standout track athlete at Grambling University and Sheldon is entering her fourth season as an All-Big Ten guard for the Buckeyes.

Here is the complete transcription of the panel, led by St. John:

St. John: President Johnson, I want to start with you here. Can you share your experience being a two-sport athlete and what that experience was like for you at Stanford?

Johnson: "It's just such a pleasure to be on this panel with outstanding women athletes. I just want to first give a shout-out to Gene Smith, our outstanding athletic director, and (assistant athletic director) Janine (Oman) for all you do to give opportunities to women.

"It's funny to look back 50 years ago and think out 'I got so old.' My first year at Stanford was the first woman to go to Stanford on an athletic scholarship. I think about the impact of Title IX and 1972, and I'd have to go back to my high school. In my high school, we didn't have team sports for women. There was no basketball, no volleyball and certainly no synchronized swimming. We did have what was called 'individual sports' like swimming, track and field and tennis. I grew up swimming. I wasn't as talented as Veronica, but if you swam you didn't really walk on and if you didn't play tennis you weren't going to walk on. There weren't many opportunities at all.

"I ended up doing three years of karate and completed my red belt, which was really great. There was an opportunity to be on the team in college (field hockey). There's nothing like you're part of something bigger than yourself. That's what I love about The Ohio State University. It's that we are all a part of something.

"When I went to Stanford, all of a sudden, there were all these team sports. I didn't really know what that was like. But it wasn't as good as it got. I went to my older sister, who was quite a good swimmer. I said, 'Look, I want to go out for a team sport.' She looked at me she goes, 'Okay, don't do swimming because they're just coming back for the Olympics. Don't do tennis because they're coming back from Wimbledon. You like to run. Why don't you try field hockey?' So I went out for the field hockey team. Then I noticed that all the kids who played field hockey in the fall could play lacrosse because they all played lacrosse in spring. I went around and recruited all of them to form the lacrosse team. So that just kept us running all year. And that was really, really terrific.

"Somebody asked me recently how I started the (women's lacrosse team). I said, 'Well, we just got a bunch of kids together and started playing. I told them to bring their sticks back in December, and then we started calling up our friends that we knew at UCLA and Davis and Berkeley. We put together a team neural network. We started traveling, and we'd drive. We'd stay four kids in a room because we didn't have money for that or for food. We kind of winged it. I'm so proud. As for Stanford, today, they actually give scholarships, so it's pretty cool. But that's what it was like back in the day. We had the same coach for field hockey, basketball, swimming and bowling. In 1977, we got our very own coach — our very own coach for field hockey. It was so exciting."

St. John: Veronica, I want to ask you what you saw as a student-athlete. You came from an international background at the University of Florida. What did Title IX do for you? How did that affect you as an international student?

"Thank you for that question. Coming from overseas I was dealing with other issues. I don't know about you guys — the more time I spend with all of you I realize how smart you are and how well-rounded you are. I wasn't really paying attention to federal legislation in Venezuela when I was 17 years old. To me, coming to the United States was not about Title IX. I came because it was an opportunity to chase a dream and this one being intercollegiate athletics.

"We were very focused on Title IX and opportunities in my country. Education was important. It didn't matter if you were an Olympian or a swimmer at the Pan American Games. If you didn't show up for a test, the professor flunked you. Intercollegiate athletics doesn't exist in many countries as it does here. The sheer opportunity to be able to pursue an education and my sport regardless of gender was a huge win for me. I'm very grateful to the University of Florida for recruiting me and giving me that opportunity.

"When I arrived, the opportunities for women were sort of like wallpaper at the university and a lot of credit goes to the school's leadership and athletic directors. The swim team in Florida was that we all would swim together — men and women. It was a combined team. It was all the same. We would always try to beat the guys, and the guys didn't want to be beaten by us. Everybody got faster, and that's sort of how it worked. But there was none of this, the men's team has this, and the women's team has this. We didn't have different opportunities. It was really just all of us together. Our coaches really didn't discriminate or look at it for anybody different. It was equal pain all the way around twice a day.

"I was really thankful now as I got really involved in athletic administration, internships and practicums.

I learned a lot of really interesting things that I had no idea existed and that's how I learned about Title IX. The first women's basketball coach at the University of Florida happened to be one of my faculty members. Just like in high school, you taught and you were the coach as well. There wasn't a thing as you know, you're a coach, and that's your profession. You did other things on campus. The women's team didn't really practice in the same basketball arena where the men practice. They had Norman Hall, the education building, where they fought for time with recreational sports which were mostly men's teams.

"The team actually started getting pretty good. They were competing for conference championships. If you knew this coach well, you would know that she was by the books and straight as an arrow. However, she told me one time that she actually went to Norman Hall and posted a sign on the basketball court doors that said, 'BASKETBALL COURT UNDER REPAIRS FOR TWO WEEKS,' basically so she and her team could use the courts uninterrupted for a set time. Whenever someone would come and leave, they would put the poster up again. That was my first experience with Title IX and the battles that were fought to grant women equal opportunity."

St. John: Jacy, what is your knowledge of Title IX and how does it impact you as a student-athlete here?

Sheldon: "I don't think I truly understood the real meaning of Title IX until I got to college. I remember my first visit to Ohio State. My coaches were showing me around the facilities, and we walked past the men's locker room where the door was propped open. I kind of peeked my head in and it was beautiful. It was beautifully set up, and I remember thinking that's very nice. Then we walked into the women's locker room, and it was almost identical. I remember being shocked and expecting to see a men's locker room that was well put together, and then I expected a women's locker room that would be OK, but probably not as nice. That's when it first clicked for me that Title IX was real and the effects of Title IX are significant.

"I just watched a 30 for 30 series on ESPN. It was about the Dream Team and the 1996 Women's USA basketball team. It's a awesome story. If you haven't seen it, I definitely think you guys should watch it, but they wanted to play 52 away games, and they went undefeated and ended up winning a gold medal at the end of it. It focuses on all of the setbacks that they had to face, and they were still able to go undefeated and make that change.

"They traveled to Siberia for a game and had to travel on a bus for miles with the windows open when it was 20 degrees below zero outside. They'd have to practice in gyms where they had to wear gloves and hats. They stayed in hotels that were full of rat-infested rooms. It's a crazy story, but it emphasizes the importance of what they did, and they actually helped create the WNBA, which impacts me in a big way. It was inspiring. When I sit up here with all these amazing women who had just as much an effect on Title IX and what it's doing for us, it's awesome to be a part of."

St. John: Miechelle, when did you notice significant changes with Title IX?

Willis: "The one thing I've noticed more with the advancement of Title IX is the impact on the secondary school level — the high school level and that talent. The pool of talent that we have at the college level is a reflection of the opportunities that have been provided to the girls at the high school level. The coaching opportunities and having new coaches in the development at that level have had a huge impact on the competitive level at the college level."

St. John: Holly, what would you add? When did you notice the significant changes of Title IX?

Vargo-Brown: "I think for me actually the moment I realized things were moving and having progress was when I came to Ohio State in the fall of 1980. Like many of us, I didn't understand what was happening when I was in high school. I began to hear stories from those who had come before me about what it was before. As a matter of fact, a great story that still is passed around our alumni events is prior to me. The coach at that time was Mary Jo Ruggieri, who was also my coach. The women — all women, including artistic synchronized swimmers and women's swimmers — practiced at the Pomerene Hall pool, which many of you don't even know that Pomerene Hall had a pool in the basement. It was the size of a postage stamp. It was very, very small.

"As the story goes, the former coach fought and fought for space in the pool where the men practiced, which was the old varsity pool. Now we have an even more beautiful facility. One day she got so frustrated, the coach that is, that she took all the athletes out of the pool and marched over to what she thought was the men's swim team practice. It turns out that it was the men's faculty club swim, and the swimsuits were optional. I began to see why things were already changing.

"Like Miechelle, I have seen the path toward change. The facilities here are equal in their opportunities for our male and female athletes. That is fantastic. I continue to see my own local-to-home, I had a conversation with one of my kids about our high school. They notoriously call the boy's teams, 'The Wolves,' and the girl's teams, 'The Lady Wolves.' They recently dropped the 'Lady' part for the girls' teams, signifying the constant growth that we are trying to achieve."

Ohio State kicked off its year-long celebration of the 50th anniversary for Title IX legislation. In addition to the panel, associate athletic director Janine Oman announced the university has created a Women's Athletics Excellence Fund "to support and enhance the experience and development of Ohio State's women student-athletes, coaches and staff" after receiving a \$2.5 million commitment from Anita and Michael Goldberg of RiteRug.