

Ohio State President Kristina M. Johnson's Love For Sport Drives Passion For Title IX, NIL And The Buckeyes' Athletic Success



Ohio State University President Kristina M. Johnson is more than a leader of one of the largest public universities in the United States. She also advocates for women in the classroom and feels just as strongly about equal opportunity for women in athletics.

A former field hockey standout at the University of Stanford, Johnson has experienced women's sports as a player and a spectator. Ever since she stepped foot on the California campus, she realized her battles would occur on the turf and in the meeting room as she fought for equality within the Cardinal athletic programs.

On Thursday, Johnson participated in a panel of prominent women within Ohio State athletics, including First Lady Veronica Meinhard, synchronized swimming coach Holly Vargo-Brown, former athletic administrator Miechelle Willis and women's basketball star Jacy Sheldon.

Johnson spoke passionately about equity for women in athletics, telling a crowd gathered in the Ty Tucker Tennis Center that there is still a long way to go for females to reach equal opportunity in youth, high school and college sports. Though it will take time, Johnson said that gaining equality is a fight worth fighting.

For Johnson, that battle has been ongoing for nearly five decades.

At 19 years old, Johnson was a student-athlete at Stanford. She recognized that Stanford struggled to provide equal opportunity in athletics for its females, primarily because of improper funding in the athletic department. Knowing this, Johnson chose to put matters into her own hands.

Johnson hopped on her Suzuki motorcycle (yes, the current president of Ohio State used to ride a Suzuki 185 Enduro) and hit the road. She reached the agency representing Billie Jean King, hoping to orchestrate a match between the Stanford and Russian national tennis teams.

King's agent laughed, but he granted Johnson's request and called King to set up the match. Johnson felt amazed that her plan had worked. She returned to Stanford and told the university she had made

the arrangement, claiming the athletic department was “tongue in cheek” with her. However, the match still occurred, but it wasn’t how Johnson had planned.

“At the end of the day — and this was 1978 — the Russian tennis team couldn’t travel,” Johnson said. “So we had the Golden Gaters come.”

The Golden Gaters were a charter franchise of World Team Tennis based in San Francisco, Calif. The team drew thousands of fans wherever they played, making them the perfect opponent for the Stanford program.

The likes of John McEnroe and Sandy Mayer played in the Maples Pavilion, which Johnson said was sold out, requiring standing-room-only tickets to be sold to spectators. The event made Stanford’s athletic department significant money, helping create opportunities for more women’s sports at the university. Johnson said she brought an important lesson away from the event.

“We cleaned the stadium before and after the event,” Johnson said. “All of these student-athletes got together, and they knew this was something they wanted to do. So that taught me a lesson. If you want to make something happen, you have to work for it, and that’s what we did.”

It’s the mentality that Johnson has adopted throughout her professional career. Of course, working hard for several degrees and becoming a government official and an academic administrator is one thing. Still, Johnson maintained a special fire for her advocacy for women in athletics.

Title IX has always been unique for Johnson. She played college sports during the amendment’s infancy at Stanford and has seen women’s athletics evolve over the last 50 years. Her desire to see even more improvement toward gender equality at the collegiate level has only grown since she became Ohio State’s president in 2020.

In almost three years, Johnson said she’s learned to be a Buckeye. She feels like she holds a significant honor in building relationships with the men and women who participate in athletics at the university she oversees.

“I’ve met all of our teams, and all of our students are phenomenal,” Johnson said. “It’s another opportunity to make a really big university smaller and impactful by having programs where you can have a group of students that have a special and unique opportunity.”

It’s because of the great honor Johnson feels that she has put herself at the forefront of student-athlete-related topics such as name, image and likeness. Her goal is to ensure that Ohio State athletes — regardless of gender — are allowed to benefit from their academic and athletic success through partnerships and sponsorships with local and national companies.

“Name, image and likeness was long overdue,” Johnson said. “It should have happened a long time ago. It is challenging, of course, but we’ll work through that. That’s one of the things that I’m thrilled to be in this position for. With my background and ability to contribute to what will make logical sense in the future, we can preserve what we love.”

Johnson feels optimistic about the future of college athletics, specifically with NIL. She believes the athletic department has a comprehensive plan that allows Ohio State student-athletes to benefit from their likeness without losing heart and passion for their sports, which, after all, made them Buckeyes in

the first place.

When asked if she thinks college sports will end up better because of NIL, Johnson had a straightforward answer.

"I'm optimistic by nature, and some people tell me I am obnoxiously optimistic," Johnson said. "Yes, we will end up on the other side, and it will be in a better place. I won't predict what that place will be, but we're all committed to making sure that it's better for the students, the coaches, the fans and the staff. It has to be better."

Johnson's optimism takes her even further when she recalls Ohio State's steps in Title IX. As the university's president, she also can't help but be proud of the 20 women's programs that continue to break barriers in their respective sports.

"I think Ohio State is in a great position," Johnson said. "We have 17 women's sports running plus three co-ed sports. We have 20 sports, and the large majority are coached by women, which is awesome, too. That's a real sign of our leadership."

She also couldn't withhold her grin when discussing the future of Ohio State sports. With a solid athletic year full of conference championships and national titles, the Buckeyes are in a prime position to keep building in its 36 varsity programs.

"We're going to end up in the top five of the Learfield Cup," Johnson said. "I'm competitive, and I want to be higher (in that competition). I think looking at how we continue to invest in all of our sports — they're all competitive. We had a great year for national championships and so many different conference titles. Veronica and I said that we would invite every team that won a championship to a dinner. Oh my gosh, our house is booked for the next few months. That's pretty exciting."