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Equal opportunity knocks

National Girls and Women in Sports Day celebrates 25th year

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*As National Girls and Women in Sports Day celebrates its 25th year on Feb. 2, we look back at the NCAA decision to incorporate women’s athletics 30 years ago. NGWSD, started as a single event to honor the late Olympic volleyball player Flo Hyman, celebrates the participation and achievement of girls and women in sports and consists of numerous nationwide events.*

**Michelle Hosick, NCAA.com**

On Jan. 13, 1981, the low temperature in Miami was 32 degrees, a record that still stands. The ballroom of the historic Fontainebleau Hotel that housed the NCAA’s 75th annual Convention had no heat, and attendees recall a wind-tunnel effect that forced presenters into overcoats and left staff members shivering.

But the debate in the Grand Ballroom was more than warm. The central question of the day: Should women be incorporated into the NCAA?

It’s been 30 years since the NCAA membership answered, “Yes.”

It wasn’t an easy road to travel. The decision was essentially a death knell for the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women. That organization governed women’s athletics programs and sponsored championships for women throughout the 1970s, after the NCAA declined to do so. After the passage of Title IX in 1972 and subsequent policy interpretations, however, the NCAA membership became keenly interested in bringing their men’s and women’s programs under the same umbrella.

**“There was lively debate, heated arguments. But you just had to be there.”**  
**-- James Frank**

The 1981 Convention actions on the question known as the governance plan are seen alternately as the best thing that ever happened to women’s athletics or a takeover from which women’s athletics never fully recovered.

For the women who led the AIAW and believed in its ideals, the 1981 NCAA Convention was traumatic.

“We were fighting for our lives,” said Christine Grant, a former AIAW president and longtime advocate for women in athletics. “And we lost. It was a very difficult and emotional situation.”

But for those who believed the NCAA offered female student-athletes better opportunities for competition, the ’81 Convention was validation for what they believed was the best path for both the NCAA and women’s athletics.

“We were absolutely thrilled because we believed with all our hearts that it was the right thing for college women,” said Barbara Hedges, then an administrator at Southern California. “We were very excited.”

**Takeover or makeover?**

Those polarized attitudes characterized the entire debate over women’s athletics in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The AIAW conducted women’s championships and served as the national governing body for women’s athletics programs beginning in 1971. With the passage of Title IX, NCAA institutions began to realize that keeping women’s programs separate but equal could leave them open to legal challenges and pose other problems. And some people within the NCAA believed that bringing women into the fold was just the right thing to do.

For women like UCLA administrator Judie Holland, the decision to align with the NCAA put them at odds with good friends and colleagues in the AIAW. A former AIAW president, Holland said she never questioned her commitment to bringing women’s athletics into the NCAA. She believed in the opportunities such change would bring.

“I had concerns that when there are two separate governing bodies, the chance that different rules would be passed based on sex was real and could be a problem,” Holland said. “It was pretty awkward for me, as a former AIAW president, that most people within the AIAW did not see the same problem. But I put that aside. I felt I just couldn’t hide behind my involvement with the AIAW. It was too important to me.”

To lead the integration of women into the organization, the NCAA chose James Frank, then president of Lincoln (Mo.) and later the first black membership president of the Association. Frank, who as secretary-treasurer chaired the governance subcommittee, worked to draw up the governance plan that would define how and when women would become a part of the NCAA.

“It had to do with basic rights for minorities. Women, white or black, considered themselves minorities,” Frank said. “Being a minority, I could relate to some of the things they were thinking about. I related it to what minorities had suffered in this country. I thought of this movement as the right thing to do. I believed in it.”

His resolve was necessary. Frank toured the country with other members of the committee to pitch the plan for integration to the NCAA membership and the public. He encountered occasionally hostile crowds, often led by passionate members of the AIAW who believed the NCAA’s proposal was a takeover that would ruin women’s athletics.

Donna Lopiano, then president of the AIAW, said her organization firmly believed that the NCAA was “using its financial monopoly in men’s sports to acquire women’s sports. And that wasn’t coming with any promises to women about fair representation and their role in the NCAA.”

**The right opportunity**

By the time the 1981 Convention opened in the Miami chill, the table was set for a showdown between those who believed the NCAA offered the best opportunities for women’s athletics and those who believed the AIAW presented the best chance for women to maintain control over their own destinies. The year before, the membership had voted to sponsor women’s championships in Divisions II and III. On the docket in 1981 were the sponsorship of women’s championships in Division I and the governance plan built and supported by Frank’s group.

By all accounts, the scene on the Convention floor was tense. Conducted long before federation and before Division I moved to a representative structure, the 1981 Convention found all three divisions in the same ballroom, delegates haggling over parliamentary maneuvers and lobbying for votes at the last minute. Frank said the scene on the floor was hard to describe.

**“It was an entirely different feeling on the NCAA Convention floor. It was us against them.”**  
**-- Charlotte West**

“There was a lively debate, heated arguments. But you just had to be there. At every NCAA Convention there was a lot of maneuvering. You had to be up on parliamentary procedure,” Frank said.

Indeed, Lopiano, then the women’s athletics director at Texas, attempted to have the agenda reordered to vote on a measure postponing the adoption of women’s championships in Divisions II and III first and asking for collaboration between the AIAW and the NCAA as an alternative to the governance plan. After some discussion, the motion was defeated. Then the real debate began.

Charlotte West, an AIAW supporter and administrator at Southern Illinois, said she was “uncomfortable” throughout the debate. Grant had perhaps one of the most emotional speeches of the Convention, pleading with the delegates for “simple fairness” and “adherence to the concept that those to be governed have a right to directly determine by whom they are governed.”

“This is an opportunity for you to send a message to the leadership of this organization, and to the hundreds of women who cannot speak for themselves, that you will not take the women against their will,” she said.

Grant and fellow AIAW loyalists reported hearing pockets of booing in the crowd while they spoke and finding ugly caricatures of themselves scribbled on slips of scratch paper. (Frank and others deny hearing boos, saying the conduct in their immediate area was professional.)

“We all like people to get along, and goodness knows we had very different points of view in the AIAW,” West said. “We’d get up and argue, and you might vote one way and I’d vote another, but we were still very close colleagues. It was an entirely different feeling on the NCAA Convention floor. It was us against them.”

Even some of the women who supported the NCAA’s sponsorship of women’s athletics acknowledge that the debate was “pretty bad.”

In addition, the nature of the issue created unusual alliances that further confused the environment.

Frank Broyles, then the athletics director at Arkansas, argued in support of the AIAW, calling the NCAA’s actions to bring women’s athletics into the fold “a blitzkrieg” and “a power play” like none he had ever seen before. Grant and Lopiano acknowledged that Broyles likely took their side because he knew recruiting expenditures for women would rise dramatically, but Grant said she didn’t care.

“He wasn’t doing it for the right reasons, but that was all right,” Grant said. “We adopted him at that Convention. He was dead right.”

The elements of the governance plan were adopted one by one, leaving Grant and the AIAW supporters progressively more disheartened. Then the vote to sponsor Division I women’s championships was called.

After much debate, the AIAW seemed to prevail. The first vote on sponsorship of Division I women’s championships was a tie, 124-124. An official recount found the tally to be 128-127 against sponsoring women’s championships in Division I.

For Holland, the initial tie vote was “not good.” She said that she and other like-minded delegates immediately began looking for someone who had voted on the prevailing side to ask for reconsideration.

“It was so emotional,” she said. “We had to go outside and regroup. I remember going out into the lobby, and all the media was interviewing the other side: They had won. Of course, they were ecstatic. All we could do was keep our eyes on what we thought was the right thing to do, so we concocted this little strategy.”

They knew of an institution that had voted against the NCAA’s sponsorship of Division I women’s championships – but the faculty athletics representative supported the NCAA position.

“We waited until the person who had influenced that vote left the room, and we asked (the faculty rep) to reconsider, which he did. And the reconsideration passed quite easily,” Holland said. “That, to me, was stunning.”

Indeed, the final vote was 137-117.

“It was dramatic,” said Ruth Berkey, then the NCAA’s director of women’s championships. “It was pretty euphoric for those people who were excited about the opportunity and pretty devastating for those people who were opposed to it.”

Everyone, no matter how they voted, knew it was a landmark moment.

“We all knew we were a part of history, one way or another,” Hedges said.

**Implementing the plan**

For Berkey, the real work began after the Convention concluded. The first Division I women’s championship, cross country, would be run that fall in Wichita, Kan. Berkey hired several staff members and set about establishing a location for the other upcoming women’s championships, determining bracket sizes and basic rules.

The cross country event was conducted in conjunction with the men’s championship. Berkey said the men’s committee had already scheduled its next meeting at, of all places, the Playboy Club in Lake Geneva, Wis. The women gamely met with them there.

“It was definitely an interesting meeting,” Berkey said. “The men on the cross country committee were very supportive. They were enthusiastic. The women were excited. I was really nervous, wanting to make sure everything went correctly and everybody was happy. It went extremely well.”

From that first championship event in Wichita (won by John Vasvary’s Virginia squad), Berkey went on to oversee field hockey (Connecticut over Massachusetts) and women’s volleyball (Southern California over UCLA) championships that fall.

**The fallout**

For the women in the AIAW, the months − and in some cases years − after the 1981 Convention were bleak. The organization sued the NCAA and lost. Many of the women who were most outspoken in favor of separate organizations felt they were blackballed from filling the new slots created for women on NCAA committees.

Grant said she withdrew to Iowa to nurse her wounds, throwing herself completely into the administration of her program in Iowa City. When the Supreme Court limited Title IX’s jurisdiction within athletics in the Grove City case (it was later reinstated in 1988 by the Civil Rights Restoration Act), Grant likened the feeling to being hit by a two-by-four.

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“The whole decade of the ’80s was pretty much a downer,” Grant said. “We just seemed to be losing one thing after another.”

West associated her memories of that time with injustice and a lack of fairness. For example, she said that the NCAA promised options, such as that women’s athletics programs would be allowed to choose which organization’s championships to attend. In reality, West said there was no choice. If a team was selected to an NCAA championship, it would go because that was where the best competition chose to go and because expenses were paid. The AIAW couldn’t afford to do that. Even West’s own women’s swimming coach pleaded to attend the NCAA event over the AIAW’s.

“That’s where they earned the right to go,” West said. “It was hard, but for the athletes, they’d worked hard all year long, and they wanted to be No. 1 in the country. That was happening all over in all different sports. Some schools felt like they didn’t have a decision. They got to the NCAAs and they got their way paid. They go to the AIAW, and it’s going to cost.”

Eventually, even many of the AIAW leaders became involved in NCAA committees. West quickly resigned herself to being a part of the NCAA and resolved to make the most of the opportunity. In 1984, she filled a vacant position on the organization’s top committee, the NCAA Council, (“I went into the lion’s den,” she said) and served the NCAA almost constantly until her retirement from Southern Illinois in 1998. She worked side-by-side with many of the people she bitterly opposed at the 1981 Convention, finding common ground and changing attitudes.

“It was really interesting,” West said. “Then-Executive Director Walter Byers had been our public enemy No. 1. As I worked with him on the Council, I grew to respect him in a lot of ways.”

West appreciated Byers’ intelligence and organization and his ability to work with women’s athletics once the decision was made to bring them under the NCAA umbrella.

Eventually, Grant became involved again, as well. She began with a stint on a special self-study advisory committee and later served on numerous other bodies (including the Academics/Eligibility Compliance Cabinet and the Division I Women’s Rowing Committee). In 2007, seven years after she retired from Iowa, Grant accepted the NCAA’s Ford Award, which recognizes individuals who have provided significant leadership in higher education and intercollegiate athletics throughout their careers.

The months after the vote were not always kind to the women who supported the NCAA. Holland said she endured comments from AIAW supporters that she was “bought off” for her support with a spot on the Council. She ignored the remarks and continued to believe that the change was the best outcome for female student-athletes. At the same time, Holland said she had to “wear blinders” and “grow rhinoceros skin” to work with male committee members who resented the involvement of women. In addition to the Council, Holland also served on the Division I Steering Committee and the Governmental Affairs Committee in the years after the vote.

West said she once found herself in the unique position of being defended by Byers in a committee meeting after the men in the room began squabbling over something West had clearly explained the day before.

“Walter said, ‘You guys ought to listen; Charlotte was trying to tell us this yesterday,’ ” West recalled. “It was a time of changing attitudes. Maybe we made the men look a little bit broader than football and basketball.”

**The evolution**

Much has changed in the 30 years since the NCAA began sponsoring women’s championships – and some problematic issues have remained.

Grant and others credit former NCAA President Myles Brand with being a visible and powerful advocate for gender equity in college sports.

“The NCAA under Myles Brand became the strongest proponent of Title IX. Isn’t that strange?” Grant said. “I never dreamed that would happen. Myles Brand made an enormous difference. He was the first person we turned to when Title IX was in trouble. He never let us down, not ever.”

She cited Brand’s strong and vocal opposition to a 2006 Title IX clarification by George W. Bush’s administration. Grant and other advocates for women in athletics viewed the clarification as a weakening of the law, and Brand’s forceful opposition contributed to its disfavor with most NCAA institutions.

But some concerns raised at the time of the debate remain, probably the greatest of which involves female representation in governance. Lopiano said that a commitment to fill one-third of all committee positions with women remains unchanged 30 years later.

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**-- Ruth Berkey**

“I think progress could have been made much quicker had there been a genuine affinity on the part of the NCAA as opposed to a takeover,” Lopiano said. “The NCAA’s takeover of women’s sports was intended to remove a thorn in their side as opposed to a genuine commitment to growing women’s sports. I would have liked to see women be given the opportunity to steer their own course. … I think the NCAA takeover slowed down the development of women’s sports probably by a good five to 10 years.”

Lopiano credited the NCAA with improved gender-equity advocacy in the last decade, along with the incorporation of some AIAW philosophies into the NCAA rule book. But she said the changes were too long in coming.

Even Berkey and Frank, strong proponents of the NCAA’s move to include women’s athletics, agree that representation hasn’t played out favorably. Frank, who was elected NCAA president at the 1981 Convention, particularly noted the decline of women coaches in high-profile sports like basketball and volleyball. Before the NCAA stepped in, women’s teams were almost exclusively coached by women.

But Berkey noted that where some doors have closed, others have opened.

“There’s probably been some loss of opportunities for women, but there have also been some women who have been in charge of total programs,” Berkey said. “I don’t think they’d have that opportunity if women’s athletics had not been brought into the NCAA.”

Grant said much of the blame for representation can be traced to institutional hiring practices. Women most often are not appointed to senior leadership posts, often leaving them without the experience and position required to serve on some of the most influential committees, councils and cabinets.

“The problem lies with the lack of diversity in our individual institutions, the lack of women and minorities in top positions. We’ve got to do a better job there, and we will be a stronger organization because of it,” Grant said. “Back when the NCAA was taking over the AIAW, it was almost predominantly white men. That has changed somewhat in 30 years, but it needs to change much more.”

The NCAA has changed in other ways since 1981, Grant said. She credited the influence of women with making the organization more student-athlete friendly and for running top-quality championships for women.

Those who backed the NCAA in 1981 believe that their faith in the Association 30 years ago has justified their support. With a single organization overseeing rules and championships for both genders, they believe progress was made more quickly.

“It was one of the best things that ever happened to women’s athletics,” Berkey said. “It was the beginning of a great future for women in sports.”