

Female athletes still playing catch-up game

By Sherry Kahan
staff writer

Females are running hard to catch up in Michigan sports.

They've had a push from Title XI, but a backward pull from the National Collegiate Athletic Association.

And they've dealt, and keep dealing, with what one female coach calls "the most ingrained case of sex bias we have in the schools."

Pat Babel, physical education instructor at Northville High School, used those words as she and Helen Connolly, co-athletic director at Pioneer High School in Ann Arbor, addressed a recent meeting of Northwest Wayne County chapter of the National Organization for Women.

"Sports are the most wonderful thing people can experience," said Babel. "Playing is an important part of growing up. It is a way to learn how to get along with others and a safe way to make mistakes."

"But in our culture it has been genderized for a long time. But athletic talent is not genderized. There is as much in girls as boys."

TITLE IX of the education bill of 1972, made things better for female athletes because it mandated that schools which get federal funds have sex equity in their programs, said Babel.

The NCAA has opposed Title IX, expressing fear that they would require "radical transformation of the athletic program of virtually every co-educational institution of higher learning in the U.S."

That was just what women had in mind.

Babel and Connolly reminded their audience the fight is not over in sports for women. In Michigan public high schools, girls have shorter athletic seasons in most sports. This results in lower salaries for coaches.

The speakers also were distressed at the lack of female input into organization that governs public high school sports in this state, the Michigan High School Athletic Association (MHSAA).

CONNOLLY TALKED mainly of a sex discrimination case against this state organization, which decides such issues as length of sport seasons, age of participants, and eligibility.

The complaint was made by members of the League of Parents, Students and Personnel Involved in School Athletic Practices. They alleged that the association discriminated mainly against female students and staff in its rules, practices, decision-making structures and overseeing of the high school sports scene.

The complaint was made to the U.S. Office for Civil Rights and the Michigan Department of Civil Rights. It was also lodged against the state Department of Education and five representative school board districts.

One of those signing the complaint was Marjorie Pieper of Westland, physical education teacher and coach at Highland Park High School. Others were Donald Burkholder, trustee of the South Redford School District; Marian McCracken, teacher in the Farmington school district and Susan Rennels of Farmington Hills. Her daughter attends Farmington schools.

THE COMPLAINT says MHSAA has been unfair in its scheduling of girls playing periods. It points out that only four states other than Michigan have separate seasons for girls and boys in key sports.

It also takes the organization to task for having little representation by women on its council and committees, failure to provide due process procedure for students and coaches, and having no reasonable grievance procedure.

The complaint also charged that the state Board of Education never examined suggestions for change made by the State Task Force on Interscholastic Education.

"MHSAA HAS COME a long way," said Connolly. "It is basically a good organization. I don't want to give you the idea it is all bad. It needs guidelines. It is not representative of athletics in Michigan. We want to work to get women on the governing body."

She explained that MHSAA has scheduled 50 percent of girls' sports in the fall. For female basketball players this results in no action during the winter when college scouts are looking for scholarship material.

"It means the girls have to play on Tuesday and Thursday nights, not on a non-school night," she said. "Football has that right. The girls therefore have to compete against football for the dollar and the spectators."

She indicated too, that because most seasons are shorter for girls, the pay of their coaches is less. "Interestingly, one golf coach for boys was paid more than the girls' coach even though his season was two weeks less," she said.

"I've looked around at different systems that offer boys' and girls' golf, and have not found a boys' golf coach paid less than the girls' coach. I've never found a woman golf coach paid more than the male golf coach."

CONNOLLY EXPLAINED that a crucial part of the lawsuit against MHSAA is the effort to get females elected to posts within this organization that controls so much of high school sports.

"It has a governing body of 18 people," she pointed out. "Fourteen of these people are elected by school principals and superintendents. This council has only two women both picked by the men on the council."

According to the complaint against MHSAA, these women serve short, fixed terms in comparison to the elected males who may stay on until they are not reelected. Thus, says the complaint, a voting system is maintained that in no way offers the possibility of electing a fully representative body of female and minority members.

She said statistics show 98 percent of Michigan's school superintendents and 93 percent of the principals are male. Only 5 to 10 percent of high school athletic director are women. Nominations for the council are mailed to superintendents and principals mainly.

"So there is not much female input into the voting process," she concluded.

BUBEL NOTED the MHSAA, not effect sex equity, "but to avoid future suits."

Taking a look back into girls sports several decades ago, she said that when she began teaching athletics to girls in the 1950s, they were given uniforms dating back to 1942. It took two years for her to get new ones.

"At that time girls were kept out of competition because it was believed they couldn't handle it," she said. "Women coaches were handed this line and believed it."

Connolly cited an athletic handbook of the late 60s which said girls could participate in "three varsity contests per year." It added that they must have a physical examination to be sure they were mentally and emotionally capable of competing.

"If they showed emotion by crying, they should be dropped because it meant they couldn't deal with stress," she pointed out.

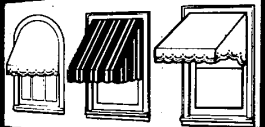
Babel said attendance at girls athletic events is increasing by "leaps and bounds."

'Sports are the most wonderful thing people can experience. Playing is an important part of growing up. It is a way to learn how to get along with others and a safe way to make mistakes. But in our culture it has been genderized for a long time.'

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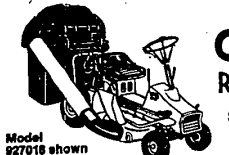
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