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Celebrating Title IX As God's Good Gift

by **Melanie Springer Mock**



Melanie Springer Mock and her son, Sam, running in a local community event.

This October, in Oregon's chilly pre-dawn, I will line up with nearly 10,000 other runners for the start of the Portland Marathon. Over half of the participants will be women, reflecting a trend occurring nationwide: more and more women have taken up long-distance running, with entries for the marathon—the marquee event in running—across the country drawing almost as many women as men.

The Way It Used to Be

A little over forty years ago, Katherine Switzer faced a far different running landscape. Entering the lauded Boston Marathon under the name K.V. Switzer, she was famously tackled by race director Jock Semple four miles into the competition; he reportedly said, "Get the hell out of my race," and tried to grab for her race numbers. Switzer's boyfriend at the time pushed Semple away, and she was able to keep running to the finish line. In 1967, Switzer was the first woman to complete the Boston Marathon despite Semple's attempt to stop her because she was "a girl."

Semple's endeavor to remove Switzer from the marathon, while overly aggressive, only reflected our culture's prevailing ethos about women and sport. The "weaker sex" was not inclined toward athletics, people argued, and it was insane to let women do something that might damage their bodies. Some also believed long distance running would be especially detrimental; it was rumored that a woman competing in the marathon risked having her uterus fall out.

Running as Praise to the Creator

I've been running for nearly thirty years now, and started entering marathons in 2001. In that time, I've felt tired but not weak, sore but not damaged. And, not once has my uterus dropped to the ground. (Not even close.) Instead, running often makes me feel strong, healthy, alive, and grateful: for good health, a capable body, and the opportunity to spend hours outdoors.

When I run marathons, I celebrate an amazing Creator who made every body complex and beautiful and in Her own image, and I celebrate the community around me—women and men—who run with me. Having the chance to be an athlete, thanks in great part to Title IX, has truly allowed me to be all I am meant to be.

Gratitude for Title IX

In 2012, our country will celebrate the fortieth anniversary of Title IX. This ground-breaking legislation was meant to bar gender discrimination in every aspect for schools receiving federal financial aid, although Title IX is best known for its impact on athletics. The law stipulated equal opportunity for all men and women in sports, and helped to forever change our country's playing fields. I am a direct beneficiary of the law, and know first-hand how transformative athletic opportunities can be.

struggled through remedial sections of English and math. Sports kept me at school: if I wanted to practice or compete, I had to attend class.

Coaches and teammates encouraged me in ways I'd not experienced before, building a self-esteem that had been eroded by elementary and middle school teachers who found me too scattered and too angry. And, providentially, my cross country coach—also an English teacher—began speaking into my life in other ways, concurrently nurturing my running ability and fostering in me a nascent love for words, the first person beyond my mother who believed I could write well.

Without the opportunity to play sports, I probably would have floundered in high school, and surely would have squandered the gifts—athletic and otherwise—that God has given me. And so, now fully aware of the ways Title IX shaped my life, I wonder about those women born too early to know its benefits: who might they have become, given equal opportunity to participate in sports?

I also wonder about girls who have been raised in a climate where athletic equity seems almost a given, the young athletes who populate my college classes, and who manifest the same zest for competition I once had. Do they know the gift they've received in a 40-year-old law? Do they appreciate the women and men who made that gift possible? Or do they recognize that things still remain unequal—in the sporting world as in other places?

Evidence of Inequality

For although more and more females compete in high school and college sports (participation levels are now at record numbers), the ways women athletes remain marginalized are legion. Salaries between professional male and female athletes are grossly unequal, in some part because a majority of men *and* women report enjoying watching men's athletic competitions over women's. Very few women appear in the nation's sports pages, and newspaper stories about women athletes are literally marginalized, often relegated to the very margins of a sports section.

In both 2009 and 2010, a *racehorse* placed second in voting results for the Associated Press Female Athlete of the Year (tennis star Serena Williams won first place in 2009, and skier Lindsey Vonn received the award in 2010), an appalling degradation of the many, many accomplished female athletes who were, in fact, human.

When the University of Connecticut's women's basketball team won its 89th game in a row last December, beating an almost 40-year NCAA winning streak record held by the men's UCLA teams, sports fans, commentators, and journalists immediately began discounting the achievement, saying that the UCLA record was a far greater accomplishment, as the men were playing against better athletes, and the UConn women were playing against, in the words of one writer, "little girls."

Small Signs of Hope

At times, still, there are small signs of hope that Title IX is working: in the number of women participating in triathlons, marathons, and adventure races across the country; in the large fan base attending women's basketball games at my own university, where the women draw more fans than do the men; and, this summer, in the support for the United States women's soccer team in the World Cup.

As more and more people find that women's competitions can be as riveting as men's, and that women are indeed capable of amazing athletic accomplishments, perhaps other female athletes will also get their due, their hard work and discipline no longer diminished as somehow less worthy than their male counterparts.

Is Athletics a Worthy Cause?

In a world where women are regularly enslaved, and where rape and genital mutilation and oppression remain rampant, seeking equity in sports may seem a superfluous cause. There are, to be sure, more important issues to which feminists—Christians and otherwise—might wisely devote their energy and resources. But without legislation like Title IX, and without people willing to advocate for female athletes who deserve the same opportunity and recognition as men, young women will not achieve all God intended for them. As athletes, yes, but also as so much more: as reflections of God's glorious image.

On a mid-morning this October, God willing, I plan to finish my 32nd marathon. There will be women who will finish miles ahead of me, and women who will finish miles behind. Together, we represent the beauty, the complexity, the variety of the human form. We also represent the blessing of health and strength and the opportunity to freely compete, an opportunity not available to women in our country only forty years ago—or to women in many other countries now.

By the marathon's end, I'll be tired and sore, for sure, though my uterus will no doubt be intact. I will also be grateful, recognizing the many gifts I've been given— including a bit of legislation, written forty years ago, that leveled the playing field for me and millions of other women, allowing us to become all we were created to be.

And, hopefully, I will be mindful, that although women have traveled a good distance on a journey toward equity in sports, as in other areas, it's still clear that we have many, many more miles to go.

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