

Speech for Mayville State University Athletic Hall of Fame & 50th Anniversary of Title IX

By Donna Mark - Jan. 29, 2022

Good Morning. It's a pleasure to be here.

Congratulations to Laura, Heidi, and Jennifer for entering into Mayville State University Athletic Hall of Fame and thank you for your contribution to the women's athletic program at MSU.

When Beth asked me to say a few words about the early days of women's athletics here at MSU and about my experiences with Title IX, I was thrilled. She said I had about 5 minutes- I thought, "Oh good, that won't be hard," but then I thought how am I going to get 50+ years of girls growth in sports and the impact that Title IX had on me and the girls I coached. We'll see.

First of all, what is Title IX?

Title IX, part of the Educational Amendments passed by Congress in 1972, became law in 1975. The law reads:

"No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any educational program or activity receiving federal financial assistance."

I attended MSU from 1967-1970. I was a cheerleader, but I also played volleyball, basketball, and softball, and dabbled in gymnastics, tennis, and flag football, actually whatever was available for me to try. 50 +years ago there were no organized sports for girls or women at Mayville State College. We had the WRA, Women's Recreation Association. This consisted of Physical Education play days. We would travel to other campuses on a Saturday and play anything from badminton, table tennis to shuffle board and volleyball. We did, however, have extramural games of volleyball, basketball, and softball with University of North Dakota, North Dakota State University, and Concordia Moorhead. We traveled there and they traveled to Mayville. Our practices for these sports were limited to mainly go and play. We practiced serves and spikes in volleyball and shooting in basketball, but hardly any other fundamentals or strategies. I remember one basketball game. We had a male coach subbing for Mrs. Kolsrud. He called a time out and told us to play zone defense. We all looked at each other and were confused. What's a Zone? We only knew player-to-player defense. You see, there wasn't high school girls basketball at this time in which we would have learned any of this.

Gym space was limited, so practices were few. We played and practiced in the small gym or on the stage. Our uniforms were our PE outfits that we bought at the bookstore – stiff polyester tops and bottoms. We put on pinnies with numbers on during games. We played in empty gyms or with very few people watching.

Playing sports was so fun and exciting, but limited. I wanted more.

I graduated with a PE major and got my first teaching job in at Apollo High School in St Cloud, MN in 1970. I coached and taught in St. Cloud for 34 years and started the girls basketball and track and field teams. However, when I started teaching, there were no sports for girls in high schools. I wanted to change that. I wanted to give girls a chance to play high school sports that I never had. The school district allowed us to have extramural basketball games with the city schools. We would travel two miles to St. Cloud Tech, and one mile to St. Cloud Cathedral. This was our GAA (Girls Athletic Association) program.

The girls were looking at the sports for boys and wondering “why can’t we do the same? Why can’t we have more games? Why can’t we travel? Why? Why? Why?”

When Title IX came about in 1972, it opened more doors.

My school, Apollo High School, hosted the first Minnesota girls track & field meet in 1972 and I got to form a team. We had 50-60 excited girls out for track.

At this time, girls basketball got to have ten games, but it was in the fall. Volleyball was in the winter. Our seasons were short nine weeks, while the boys had 18 games and 15 weeks. The girls didn’t have region or state tournaments.

Coaches of girls teams wanted more, so we kept pushing to have what the boys had.

In 1976, four years after Title IX, the girls in Minnesota had the first state basketball tourney. Girls basketball was now a winter sport. My teams played in four state tournaments. We were state champions in 1982, runners-up in 1976 and 1995. What a thrill for girls. And a dream come true.

It was a long, hard battle to get equal practice time, equal gym space, equal number of games, equal uniforms, equal coaches pay. The long battle included fights with the school board and several men coaches. They didn’t want to give up anything, but they didn’t have to - just share. One particular male coach threatened to quit if girls got equal gym time.

With the help of the St. Cloud Education Association, I filed a Title IX grievance for equal pay with the school district. The coaches of girls sports had to keep records of the hours we practiced, the number of people in the crowd, the number of games we played, the number of girls that we had on each team. I had a thick file of grievance forms, schedules, complaints – called my Baloney and Sausage file. It was a bunch of baloney that my colleagues and I had to prove we were worthy of having sports for girls and coaching them. At the grievance hearing one school board member pointed his finger at me and said, “Donna Mark, if women get equal pay, they will lose their jobs because the men will take over the coaching positions.”

Change did come. More sports were added. Gym space was shared, uniforms were nice, the number of games increased, the crowds came, and coaches' pay increased.

As a basketball coach in Minnesota, there was still more work to do. As president of the Minnesota Girls Basketball Coaches Association in 1983, my colleagues and I started the All Star game for girls and the Miss Basketball of Minnesota Award. Girls were finally catching up.

In 1999, a staff writer for the Minneapolis Star Tribune interviewed me about Title IX and the fight I put up for the right of girls and women to have equal sports opportunities. The article appeared in the Women's Sport section. It was titled "A War Worth Fighting." The reporter also interviewed my daughter, Molly, who had an outstanding sports career at Apollo and was playing basketball at the College of St. Bens. They asked Molly about me, her mom, fighting for sports and Title IX. Molly knew nothing about it. Like many young girls today, they know nothing about the fight for the right to play. They just get to play! And we get to celebrate Title IX!

I've had hundreds of victories in my career as a player and coach, but the greatest victory of all was winning the fight to let girls play sports. I was able to watch my two daughters excel in sports, and I now enjoy watching my granddaughters. What a thrill. It was truly a **War Worth Fighting!**