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**PLANNING 101**

## How to Level the Playing Field With Women in Sports

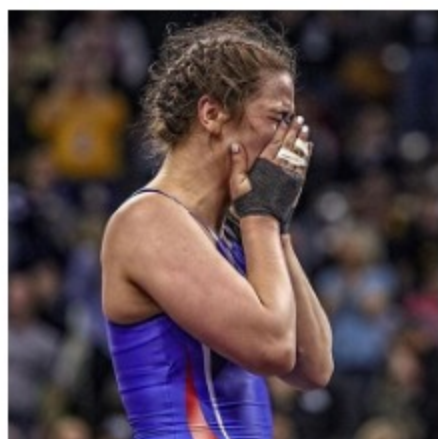
By Dawn Reiss

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Although not new, the inequality between women and men in sports may have reached its tipping point.

Five members of the U.S. women's national soccer team filed a wage-discrimination action suit against U.S. Soccer Federation. Then, in April, sports reporters Sarah Spain and Julie DiCaro created a viral video—search #MoreThanMean—where men were paid to read on camera the horrible things other men say to these reporters on Twitter. Comments range from death threats to talk of rape and beating them.

While there's no magic wand to solve everything, a recent espnW Women + Sports Chicago conference sparked ideas planners, coaches and parents can use to change the conversation about women in sports. Connect Sports was on-site to get the scoop.



**Foster the dream.** Girls want and need role models. Just ask 2016 Olympic wrestler Adeline Gray, who was inspired by Iris Smith, the first African-American world champion female wrestler. Smith proved to Gray there were opportunities in the male-dominated world. Her Instagram post after winning a spot on the USA wrestling team says it all: "I believe fully in the power of people and our society, but we need women to be empowered to do more, and that starts with women having dreams," said Gray, whose only regret is not fully believing in her dream until high school.

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**Give continual positive reinforcement.** Northwestern University lacrosse coach Kelly Amonte Hiller, a powerhouse recruiter, focuses on athletes who buy in to her philosophy of positivity and confidence. “I want to give females a sense of confidence so when they walk on the field and walk off the campus, they feel like they can do anything they want to do,” she said. Consider creating public awareness around it, said U.S. women’s national soccer defender Julie Johnston, citing the #SheBelieves campaign promoting positive affirmations that girls can accomplish their goals and dreams.

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**Set the tone at home.** Hiller says it was her parents, especially her father, who always championed her as an athlete. That’s particularly impressive when you consider her older brother is Tony Amonte, a former captain of the Chicago Blackhawks. “Everyone would talk about my brother, and my dad would always say, ‘He’s not the best athlete in the family. The best athlete in the family is Kelly,’” she said. “I would always remember that because it gave me such great confidence.”

Now as a coach, that’s why one of her cornerstones is positivity. “Female athletes tend to naturally doubt themselves and question what they do,” Hiller said. “The more you can give that positive reinforcement, they can hear that and believe in themselves that they really can achieve anything.”

**Be more transparent within governing bodies.** Sports federations like the United States Olympic Committee or FIFA are charged with growing the sport. How do you create that transparency? Soccer legend Julie Foudy says it’s easy. “Make it a line item on how much they are spending on their youth programs,” said Foudy. “Girls versus boys. It’s so easy to hide numbers in the way they clump everything together. You mandate they have to keep some type of budget that delineates it that way. That transparency is critical to truly know what’s going on.”

**Add inclusionary programming.** “When you say the phrase sports fan, there’s no longer a singular vision,” said Alison Overholt, editor-in-chief of ESPN The Magazine and espnW. “Recognize that the group of sports fans can include a full range of people, women and men, all ethnicities, all ages.” For inspiration, Overholt suggests looking at MLB teams like the Tampa Bay Rays, which installed a petting area for stingrays at Tropicana Field to make the park more family-friendly, and the San Francisco Giants, which added sushi to embrace the foodie culture on the West Coast.

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**Host coed events simultaneously.** Cari Champion, a “SportsCenter” anchor and espnW “Be Honest” podcaster, compares this idea to televisions ratings, like “Friends” and the show airing directly after it both getting high ratings. “Separate but equal doesn’t work,” said Champion. “They have to be equal and together in order to program sports so there’s other interest.” That’s why she says making men and women sporting events coexist makes

sense. The example most experts cite is the USTA US Open, the first grand slam to offer equal prize money in 1973. “We believe in equal pay for equal play,” said Chris Widmaier, USTA’s managing director of corporate communications.

**Embrace differences.** Much to the chagrin of some fellow basketball players, Elena Delle Donne of the WNBA's Chicago Sky has championed lowering the basketball rim to 9 feet. But she is quick to point out most people forget women play with a smaller basketball than men do, and other sports like women's volleyball already play with a lower net. She says doing so will increase the speed and scoring of the game, making it better for everyone.

Matt Libber, vice president of operations and business development for Elite Tournaments in Columbia, Maryland, agrees. "I don't think it's a slight to women. It's catering to what will make the game better," he said. Libber points out how men's and women's lacrosse play two different games, with different rules and equipment, with the men's stick having a pocket to catch the ball and carry it, while the women's stick is flatter with a tight net designed to pass or carry it. "And the women's game has been incredibly successful because of it," Libber said.

**Extend equality to facilities and referees.** "When you're allocating the field, don't give the boys the best fields," Libber says. Do the same with referees. Mix up the top officials for boys' and girls' games. He also suggests holding training for women to increase their prominence on the field. For example, in 2013, Libber brought in women FIFA referees to mentor 27 women referees for a Washington Area Girls Soccer League tournament to increase the pool of women referees. "Doing things like this is very important," he said.