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The Snell Symposium; Beyond Leveling the Playing Field: Ursinus' Role in Developing Female Coaches

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The Snell Symposium

Beyond leveling the playing field: Ursinus' role in developing female coaches

A funny thing happened after Title IX ushered in a revolution in women's sports. Although opportunities for women to join athletic teams greatly increased, the number of female coaches did not keep pace. Moreover, there are few females directing college athletic departments. Jen Shillingford hopes to reverse that trend. During a cold weekend in January, The Snell Symposium at Ursinus College touched on the hot topic of attracting young women to the field of coaching. The program was a collaboration between Ursinus and the Centennial Conference. Directed by Jen Shillingford, the Snell Professor of Physical Education at Ursinus, the Symposium was dedicated to the memory and legacy of the late coach Eleanor Frost Snell.

"Ironically, it was Title IX that changed the way women were hired and promoted in athletic departments," explained Shillingford, retired Bryn Mawr College athletic director and Ursinus alumna. "What happened in most cases was that at a given institution the men's and women's programs would be merged and the man would be put in charge," she said. As the men hired other men, at one point, the number of coaching positions held by women was as low as 15 percent." (Title IX, which did not specifically mention athletics, was enacted in 1972 to prohibit sex discrimination in educational programs which receive federal funds.)

As for governing bodies, the male-dominated NCAA took over where the Association of Intercollegiate Athletics for Women once reigned. The percentage of women's teams coached by women fell from 90 percent to a low of 15 percent 10 years ago, was 47.4 percent in 1998, and stands at 45.6 percent today. Only 19.4 percent of women's programs are directed by females.

Developed to help increase the number of female coaches and athletic directors, The Snell Symposium included two undergraduate women from each of the Centennial Conference institutions as participants. The keynote speaker was Donna Lopiano, former women's athletic director at the University of Texas, Austin, and current executive director of the Women's Sports Foundation. Other speakers and guests included Christine Grant, women's athletic director at the University of Iowa, and the nation's foremost proponent of Title IX and gender equity; and Charlotte West, retired associate athletic director at southern Illinois University and former president of the Association of Intercollegiate Athletics for women and member of the NCAA Council. Ursinus faculty Carrie Reilly and Laura

Moliken joined other faculty from Centennial Conference schools Bryn Mawr, Dickinson, Haverford, Franklin & Marshall, Gettysburg, Johns Hopkins, Muhlenberg, Swarthmore, Washington and Western Maryland.

The idea for The Snell Symposium, said Shillingford, arose from the numerous studies which show that the number of women coaches has decreased, including the Acosta-Carpenter Study (Brooklyn College), "Women in Intercollegiate Sport." This study tracked participation opportunities for women athletes and status of women coaches and administrators on the college level from 1977-98.

"It was this instrument that first provided data showing a diminished number of women coaches during this 21-year period of time," said Shillingford. "In fact, the study suggests that in 1972, more than 90 percent of women's teams were coached by women while in 2000, 45.6 percent of the coaches of women's teams were females. The Acosta-Carpenter study notes that "this is the lowest representation of females as head coaches of women's teams in history," while participation opportunities for female athletes is at an all-time high.

The curriculum included the topics of team building, game management, team and individual sports, fitness and nutrition, planning a practice, skills teaching, legal issues, gender equity and Title IX and others -- the presentations covered

philosophical issues as well as specific coaching techniques. Lopiano imparted her vision of women coaches. "Women's sports is where it is today because we have established a point of difference, vis-a-vis men's sports," she said. "I would ask you to make sure your players keep that point of difference," she noted. Citing the American Women's Soccer team last summer as an example, she said, "Their success was not just about how good they were, it was also about how good they were to young kids following in their footsteps. You have a responsibility to create heroes and you create heroes by the values that you teach them."

"The most important thing is not that they like you," she said. "The most important thing is that they say two things about you, that you were fair, and that you taught them a great deal."

Motivation was a key factor in the symposium. "If one third of the undergraduate women who attended became involved in coaching of women on some level," Shillingford said, "this would add seven coaches to the coaching field. If one half considered the coaching field, we could add eleven coaches."

In addition to the symposium itself, the Snell project includes work that the attendees will produce on their campuses, and the use of campus mentors.

— By Wendy Greenberg and Sally Widman



Above: Former coach Vonnie Gros shows her Olympic medal to Eleanor Frost Snell.