



Wrestling with Equality

By Dr. Maura Cullen

Two high school wrestlers had a dream; each wanted to be state champion. Each worked extremely hard, beating opponents and earning their way to the Iowa high school wrestling championship. So why did one of them forfeit their match to the other?

Cassy Herkelman and Joel Northrup were set to square off when Northrup forfeited the match. He refused to wrestle Herkelman because she was a girl. As a result, Cassy Herkelman went down in history as the first girl to win an Iowa state wrestling champion match. Her opponent, Joel Northrup, explained his decision this way:

"Wrestling is a combat sport and it can get violent at times," Northrup said in a statement released by his high school. "As a matter of conscience and my faith I do not believe that it is appropriate for a boy to engage a girl in this manner. It is unfortunate that I have been placed in a situation not seen in most other high school sports in Iowa."

So the question is this; should girls and boys be allowed to compete against one another if there is not an equivocal team in that sport? Personally, I struggle with this situation. When I was in high school there was not a boy's volleyball team so a 6'4" boy joined our girl's team. I didn't like it. Our opponents dismissed our success as having an unfair advantage, and they were right. With a boy who towers over the competition with his strength and height, I personally felt like it wasn't a fair fight. Our accomplishments were minimized.

There was no boy's volleyball team so if he wanted to play his only alternative was to join the girl's team. After all, fair is fair. If girls are permitted to play on boy's teams than boys should be permitted to play with the girls, right? In theory that is fair, in practice, however, it just doesn't work out.

I believe whole-heartedly in Title Nine and for equality between the sexes. That said, in the situation involving the wrestlers, boys are placed in a lose-lose scenario. If they lose to a girl they will never live it down and their peers will most likely humiliate them. If they win, their victory is minimized because they beat a girl. Big deal, they are expected to win. Yes, the sexism inherent in both of these reasons is not lost on me.

From the girls perspective they are placed in a difficult situation as well. They may be ostracized by their male teammates and have derogatory and sexist remarks hurled at them by classmates and opposing fans. Should they not be permitted to pursue their passion to compete because there is not a girl's wrestling team?

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To address the original question, should girls be allowed to compete against boys in sports if there is not a team for girls? My vote is yes, providing there is not a comparable girl's team. Current budget limitations suggest it is unlikely that high schools will be in a position to create more sports teams as they struggle to fund existing programs. Is it an ideal situation? No. But it sure beats the alternative of preventing equal participation and access for boys and girls.

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