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Women sport winning edge

By Tony Hazarian
Of the Emerald

While the men's athletic program has experienced pain and frustration similar to that of the Great Depression in recent years, women's intercollegiate athletics at Oregon flourishes with the vigor of a post-war economic boom.

Since its inception in the early 1970s, the women's athletic program has evolved into one of the nation's most successful.

The cross country and track teams are perennial contenders for the national title while the women's basketball squad has established itself as the top team in the Northwest. The volleyball and gymnastics teams have also gained national prominence in recent years.

But without the passage of Title IX in 1975, the women's athletic programs wouldn't have a chance at any limelight. They weren't even mentioned in the same breath with the men's program until the new law opened the collegiate sports doors for women.

It 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 education program or activity receiving federal financial assistance."

"It (Title IX) was wonderful," says Chris Voelz, director of women's athletics and coach of the volleyball team. "Whether it was used as ammunition or a support program, people used it. But it was never used against women."

Economically and psychologically, the times were right for the mandate, Voelz says. Universities had the funds and men finally accepted women as athletes.

"It was timely, and in my opinion, it was absolutely necessary. But it would have been timely a century ago," Voelz says. "One of the things that you must remember is that we were in a golden age of affluence and it was a logical step. Survival was a given."

"We were very fortunate. Had they waited and been less aggressive and more conservative, we'd be in trouble right now," she says.

But if Title IX was a nationwide appeal for successful women's intercollegiate athletics, why has Oregon's program risen to its present level while other schools have failed?

"Oregon had an excellent athletic program before Title IX because of Becky Sisley (former director of women's athletics)," says Tom Heinonen, head coach of the highly successful track and cross country teams.



CHRIS VOELZ

"One of the first things she did was give the coaches salaries that kept them here," Heinonen says. She also used Title IX funds wisely, bringing "stability and continuity to the program," he adds.

"That's why we have been the lead program in the Northwest for the last five years," he says.

Heinonen became the head coach of the women's cross country team in the fall of 1975, and took the reins of the track team in the spring of 1977. When he arrived, he says, women's "cross country was non-existent and the track program was excellent by the standards of the game."

"The first year I was the head coach I was a grad student and it damn near killed me," Heinonen says. That year Heinonen's cross country team won the

first of six consecutive regional titles and finished seventh at the nationals while the track squad finished second in the region.

Heinonen's cross country teams have finished seventh or better at the national championships in each of his years at the helm, including second place finishes in 1979 and in 1982.

The success of the track program was the result of a series of "steps that added up to acknowledgement of our program," Heinonen says. The first of these steps was the recruiting of track stars Melanie Batiste and Debbie Adams, now an assistant coach with the women's basketball team, in the fall of 1977.

"All we could capitalize on in the beginning was the Oregon tradition," Heinonen says. But in the fall of 1978, Heinonen says he "had the best recruiting class in the country."

The steps continued in 1979, when Heinonen says fans started coming to the meets and noticing the women's high level of competitiveness.

"We got to the point where people began to recognize what a good performance was for a woman athlete. I can remember when Jody Parker hit the tape at a meet in the 3,000 and a buzz went off in the crowd, recognizing she had broken the school record," Heinonen says.

The track team has strung together five consecutive regional championships since 1978, and four consecutive top ten finishes at the national championships, including a tie for third in 1981 and a fourth place finish in last year's NCAA championships.

"We've come from a novelty to a legitimate program," Heinonen says.

The women's basketball program couldn't fall back on tradition — because there was no tradition. In the three seasons from 1974-1976, the team suffered through three losing seasons and a cumulative record of 10-23.

In the 1976-1977 season, Elwin Heiny took over the strug-

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