

That Last Male Bastion

This is an era of women crossing new thresholds.

One ran for vice president.

Others became astronauts.

Another is a Supreme Court justice.

Now women even have crossed that no-no threshold into the men's locker room.

That may not have the drama of a flight into space. But the right of women reporters to enter the INNER space of men's sports locker rooms has an impact on society to match the venture of females into OUTER space.

It also once had legal implica-

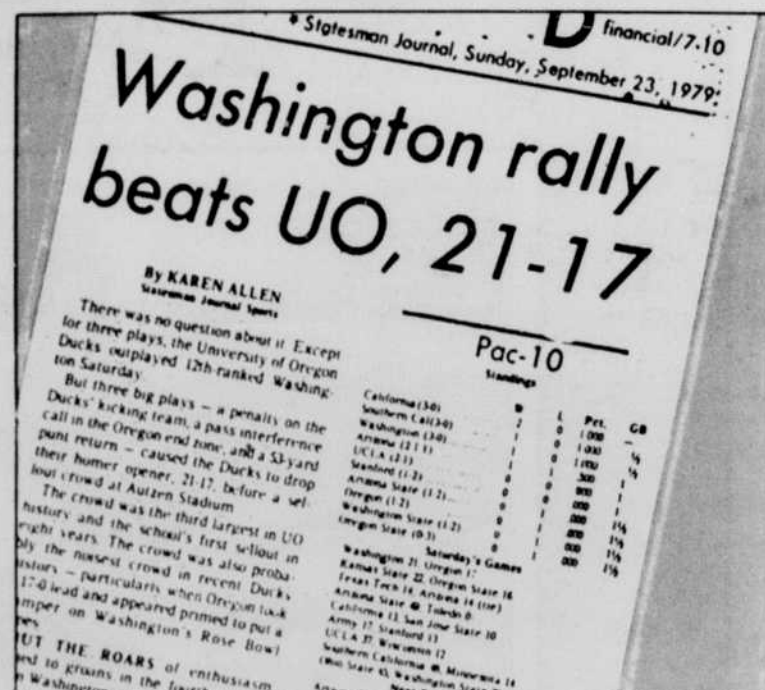
tions for me. It almost got me sued.

I was sports information director at the University in 1979 when I got a call from attorneys for a newspaper covering the Oregon games, the Oregon Statesman-Journal in Salem.

"You will," said the caller, "allow our paper's reporter to enter your team dressing room after each game. If you don't, you and the University of Oregon will be taken to court."

The paper's reporter was a capable writer who also happened to be a young woman, Karen Allen. Allen is tiny in stature. She barely comes waist-high to a 6-foot-5 tight end. But she knows the game. Her paper had a valid point when it insisted she get the same opportunity for post-game interviews that went to male reporters.

The complaint challenged long-held mores of society — especially of male sporting society. It asked that Karen be given access to the post-game dressing room while the players were disrobing. If not, the paper would sue, charging sex



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discrimination and a denial of the freedom of the press.

Allen was not comfortable with the controversy. It put her on a collision course with the coaches of the team she was covering. It made her life uncomfortable with the chauvinists among male reporters of competing papers.

At first, the Statesman-Journal's request was resisted by Oregon football coach Rich Brooks, who felt he had to protect the privacy of his players.

Brooks had a justifiable concern about that privacy because of the limited locker room facilities at Oregon. When Autzen Stadium had been built in 1967 for \$1 million, some corners had to be cut. Among them was meeting rooms at the facility. There were none.

By contrast to Brooks's concerns, the players hardly could have cared less. Most of them — disrobing after the heat of battle — were oblivious to a woman in the dressing room. I never saw players searching desperately for the protection of a fig leaf. I saw more of them jokingly flaunt their nudity than try to hide it.

Brooks finally agreed to a compromise. His players were instructed not to begin undressing until I blew a whistle, 10 minutes after reporters were admitted for dressing room interviews. At the whistle, all

reporters, male and female, had to leave the dressing room.

The first time it was tried was a disaster. Oregon, which at one point had led the Washington Huskies 17-0, saw its arch rival win 21-17 on a long touchdown run near the end of the game.

I never saw a more depressed team. You could hear a whisper in the dressing room. No one disrobed. The players, stunned by what had happened on the gridiron, stood at their lockers like zombies. A few reporters just managed to start interviews when it came time for me to blow the whistle.

Since then, it has not been a comfortable time in the Oregon dressing room whenever a woman reporter covers a game. But the University did not get taken to court, I did not get sued and Allen finally did manage to escape the stress.

She moved to the East Coast to join U.S.A. Today — as a national sports reporter.

Women continue to distinguish themselves as sportswriters. Cathy Henkel of The Register-Guard is an outstanding local example. But until Autzen gets its dome — or at least some related facilities — the specter of the woman in the men's dressing room will continue to hover over Oregon football.

— GEORGE BERES

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