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Foundation celebrates first decade

NEW YORK (AP) — Donna de Varona and Billie Jean King shared a dream. Ten years ago, they set about making it come true.

It has, sort of. The Women's Sports Foundation has grown throughout the 1980s and heads into the next decade determined to vigorously deal with the problems faced by accomplished and aspiring female athletes.

"In anything like this, if you just believe it will happen, go for it. You will make a difference," de Varona, an Olympic gold medalist in 1960 and '64, said.

"The Women's Sports Foundation has made a difference. But there is so much more for us to do."

The foundation, which holds its annual awards dinner Tuesday, where four women will be inducted into the WSF Hall of Fame, "took a while to really do something big and it was scary," de Varona said. "We said we had to do a big dinner in New York and start a Hall of Fame. I went to the Plaza Hotel, called everybody I knew and said I had been to their dinners and believed in what they were doing and I wanted them to believe in this.

"It's wonderful how people responded. But the challenge to be better and more far-reaching remains."

The Foundation has had a major impact by lobbying in Washington for more equality for women's sports; in getting more women's events into the Olympics; in gathering together leading women athletes in support of various sports-related causes; and in providing clinics as well as a travel and training program for athletes at different levels.

One of those athletes, 1988 Olympic speed skating champion Bonnie Blair, credits the foundation for "making it acceptable for women to be involved in sports. They are a very big part of movement for women's sports."

Blair and Mary Lou Retton, the 1984 Olympic gymnastics champ, emphasize the WSF's financial aid to women athletes as its biggest contribution of the decade.

"I had a lot of help from my hometown police department," Blair said. "But I know other speed skaters who have gotten help from them. A lot of times, athletes don't find the support elsewhere and that's always a big struggle."

The foundation donated money in Retton's name to Phoebe Mills, the American gymnastics champion and a 1988 Olympian.

"The Women's Sports Foundation has done wonderful things for women in sports," says Retton, "and, financially, whatever it does is very important because athletes in the United States are not government-funded. So many athletes who can't afford to compete, who can't pay for proper coaching and equipment, have been

given an opportunity to keep training and pursue their goal, thanks to the foundation."

De Varona claims the foundation has had an impact in subtle ways, too.

"We want women to be proud of being fit, having the courage to go out and run a marathon," she said. "When I grew up, if you were not Twiggy and didn't weigh two pounds, you were embarrassed to wear a skirt. But the whole boom with being an Olympic athlete has cleared away stereotypes. And the foundation, as the voice for women's sports, has been a factor in that boom."

So, of course, have been the stars, such as Chris Evert, whom de Varona called "The First Lady of Sport."

"Chris Evert really dealt with controversial times with dignity, as a leader with a fantastic image," de Varona said. "If there is any role model you would want your daughter to have, it is Chris. Her helping the foundation, or anyone of her calibre getting involved, is significant."

"We have been able to highlight the outstanding achievements of women athletes and also show another side, like when Martina Navratilova gave us a \$150,000 check for travel and training of aspiring athletes."

"And the athletes who don't have the money give us their time. That's just as valuable."

U.S. lawmakers have found the foundation a valuable asset when seeking information about women's sports.

"Whenever Congress is interested in women in sports, they call us," de Varona said. "We're proud of the way we've worked in Washington with Title IX."

"We represent about 100,000 individual members but we also represent millions more through multi-sport organizations that have a presence with us, such as the USOC and the NCAA."

What's ahead for the Women's Sports Foundation?

"I believe there is going to be more expansion of our programs and involvement," Nancy Lieberman-Cline, the Olympic basketball star, said. "We are just getting started, it's only been last five years we've been getting an abundance of sponsors to back programs. The more major the companies, the more programs we can do. I can only see a lot of growth in the future and more younger athletes getting involved."

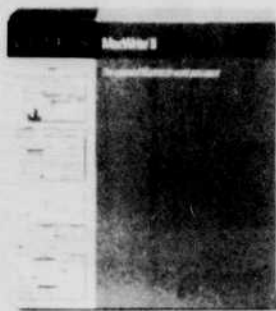
Adds de Varona, "Most important as we look to the 90s, is to offer alternatives to early pregnancy and drugs and leaving school. It's a pity we respond always to a crisis and not before the crisis arrives. The foundation has been trying to respond all along; our position is there are a lot of healthy kids out there who aren't getting help when faced with choices."

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