

Despite ERA demise:

Women win sports revolution in sports

by Barbara Miner
Pacific News Service

A marathon-running nun? The sight would have been all but unthinkable a few years back. But not only does Sister Marion Irvine of San Rafael, Ca., don running shoes regularly, she also holds the world's marathon record for women over 50. The magazine *Running Times* has named her Runner of the Year in her age division.

Cheryl Miller, 18, is also breaking new ground. The high school senior from Riverside, Ca., last year became the only woman known to have slam-dunked a basketball during a game. Earlier this year she scored 105 points in one tilt—a feat all the more impressive because a girls' high school game is only 32 minutes long. The most sought-after woman athlete ever, Miller has been called the Kareem Abdul Jabbar of women's basketball.

A decade ago Sister Irvine probably would not have been running marathons, not because she's a nun, but because the American Athletic Union and other sport groups didn't then allow women to run more than 10 miles—it was thought the stress would harm them physically. Today women are entering marathons in record numbers and the International Olympic Committee has included a women's marathon for the 1984 Olympics.

A decade ago colleges would not have been wooing Miller, because the first women's athletic scholarships for women, worth a total of \$7 million.

Marathons and scholarships are only two aspects of the revolution in women's sports. During the last decade, women have demanded and won their place in sports on an unprecedented scale.

"There's been an explosion, no doubt about it," says Jennifer Nupp of the Washington, D.C.-based SPRINT, a lobbying and informational organization dedicated to women's equality in sport.

What's more, the sports crusaders stress, the revolution is here to stay. "Fitness is such a part of the American experience," says Nupp, "that women are not going to give up on that. It's just not going to change."

Eva Auchincloss, executive director of the California-based Women's Sports Foundation (WSF), strongly agrees. "Women's sports will never go back to the way it was in the 1950s," she says. "The momentum is too great."

WSF was founded in 1976 by professional and amateur women athletes and has played an important role. Its magazine, *Women's Sports*, has grown from a 1978 circulation of 30,000 to more than 125,000 today.

The strength of women's sports is evident even in once taboo areas. The first Women's National Weightlifting Championships were held in Iowa last year; the Amateur Hockey Association says thousands of women now play on ice hockey teams; and the U.S. Soccer Federation this year included young women on its Youth All-American team.

SPRINT reports that 10 years ago only 7 per cent of high-school athletes were women; today the figure is over 35 per cent. Colleges show the same trend.

The two most popular sports for high school women are basketball and track. In 1970, according to the National Federation of State High School Associations, only 4,865 high schools offered women's basketball; today over 17,000 do. In track the figure has jumped from 2,992 in 1970 to nearly 14,000.

The revolution isn't limited to school or team activities. Across the country women executives, housewives and grandmothers are jogging, playing tennis and swinging squash rackets as never before.

To take one indication: the publication *Sports Styles* reports that women now buy 43 per cent of all active-wear and athletic shoes. "Ten years ago," says Eva Auchincloss of WSF, "manufacturers didn't even

really make active-wear for women. You had to buy almost everything in the men's or boys' department."

Activists can't pin down any one factor to account for the fantastic rise in women's sports, but several themes emerge. One of the strongest reasons, they say, is that women themselves wanted to become involved. "Schools were more sensitive to having women in sports," says Ruth Berkey, head of women's sports for the National Collegiate Athletic Association, "but the interest was already there on the part of women."

Carol Thompson, head of the National Association for Girls and Women in Sports, also credits President Kennedy's Council on Physical Fitness and the boom it helped generate. And, like others, she says Title IX "obviously comes forward as a reason." (Title IX, a 1972 amendment to the Higher Education Act, prohibits sex discrimination in all educational institutions receiving federal funds.) Women who had found locker room doors closed now had a tool, and women's sports took off. "Title IX broke the barrier," says Thompson.

Christine Grant, women's athletic director at the University of Iowa and the former president of the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women, calls Title IX "the fuse of the entire explosion. It alerted the nation to the fact that we were discriminating against all our young women."

Title IX sparked fierce opposition among those who feared that football teams would become coed or that women would want to share locker rooms with men. The fears were unfounded. Today even the 75-year-old NCAA, which barred women until 1974, is embracing women's sports.

But there are some threatening storm clouds. In Congress the proposed Family Protection Act would allow a local school system to prohibit "the intermingling of sexes in any sports or other school-related

activities." And Sen. Orrin Hatch (R-Utah) has introduced an amendment to restrict Title IX requirements to programs directly receiving federal funds. Since few sports get direct funds, the proposal could have a significant impact if adopted.

One step back has already been taken. The Reagan administration unexpectedly decided in mid-March that Title IX would not apply to schools where guaranteed student loans are the only form of federal aid. As a result, some 300 colleges are now exempt.

However, another gray area was resolved positively when the Supreme Court ruled that Title IX applies to school employees as well as students. The ruling will protect women coaches, who have often enjoyed many fewer advantages than their male counterparts.

Despite such problems, "many parties that were against women's athletics are now coming around," says Nupp of SPRINT, with the NCAA a perfect example. "It's even willing to spend profits from men's sports on women's sports to get them started because they realize the profit-making potential of women's sports."

Above all, women's sports leaders emphasize, the gains of a decade are now too firmly ingrained, too much a part of everyday life for any serious setbacks. "It's a permanent transition," says Auchincloss. "It just won't go away."

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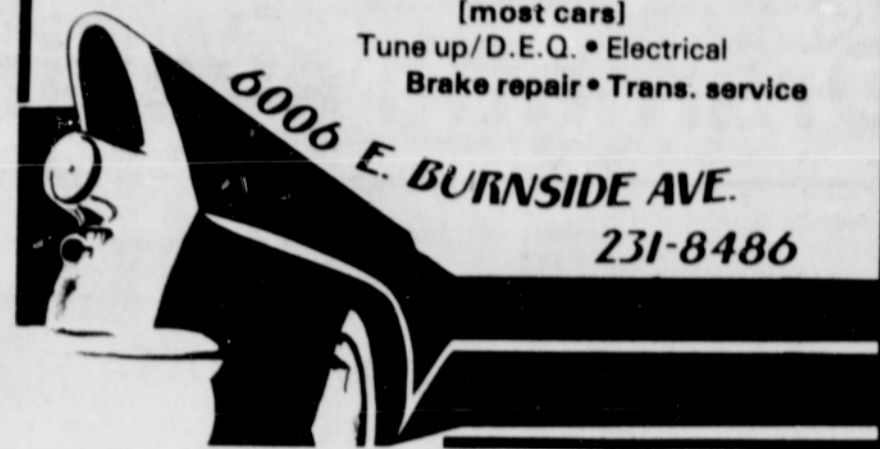
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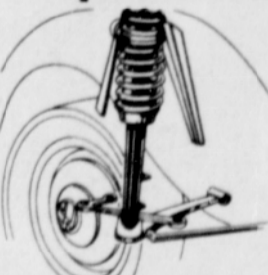
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