

THE LEGACY OF TITLE IX IN SHAPING FEMALE LEADERS

by

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This thesis explores the long-term effects of Title IX on women's leadership development within the sports industry. Using in-depth interviews with then women working in executive or managerial roles across collegiate and professional sports, this research examines how athletic participation influences formation, leadership pathways, and professional advancement. Grounded in the Interaction Theory, the study argues that sports serve as powerful social contexts that shape how women perceive themselves and their potential for leadership.

Key findings reveal that participation in sports fosters resilience, confidence, collaboration, and adaptability – traits essential for navigating traditionally male-dominated professional environments. While Title IX significantly increased access to athletic opportunities, participants described ongoing barriers, including gender bias, limited representation in leadership, and the emotional toll of advocacy. These narratives show that access alone is not enough; cultural change and structural support remain critical. This study contributes to the broader understanding of gender, sport, and leadership, emphasizing that early athletic involvement can be a catalyst for long-term empowerment and professional success.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

I am the youngest of two daughters in my family. From a very young age, my sister and I were thrown into sports. There was never a time when we weren't traveling across the state of Florida for either tennis tournaments, soccer games, cheer competitions, or track meets. While throughout my childhood, I danced, cheered, played soccer, and threw for track and field – it was competing in Olympic Weightlifting that truly shaped me growing up. I was always bigger and stronger than most girls my age, which made me feel a bit awkward and different. In my head, I perceived strength as something so masculine that I felt out of touch with my femininity because of my interest in sports. I used to be embarrassed about my strength because I thought it belittled me as a girl, but through my involvement in sports I learned it's not something to hide. My strength was something to own and to empower myself with. I constantly challenged the boys at recess, not to prove something to them, but to prove something to myself.

Sports were how I connected with my family. I'd sit on the couch watching football with my dad for hours. Watching tennis with my mom, yelling at the screen like we were in the front row of the U.S. Open. Sports became the language we spoke at home and were the way we connected with one another. But outside our house, I saw how often girls were treated as afterthoughts in sports. In high school, I was one of the few girls on our weightlifting team. While there was a separate team for women, we had to compete over a cramped weight room with the boy's football team, a battle we rarely won. Equipment was limited, practice time was tight, and we were constantly reminded that football took priority. Despite routinely sending multiple girls to the annual state weightlifting championships, the football team that could not win a game was given priority over us.

Our coach, who also coached football, barely paid attention to our team. Most days, he sat in his office, leaving me to take over, educating the newer girls to ensure they were not getting hurt due to improper technique. The true epitome of those experiences were our competition uniforms. Instead of girls' weightlifting singlets, the school provided us with old boys' wrestling singlets. Fitting no one and covered with old stains, it symbolized how little the school tried to make us feel like we belonged.

Despite those experiences, I stayed on the girl's weightlifting team all four years. The weight room gave me a sense of ownership over my body and my identity, fighting for my space just like when I challenged boys at recess. I saw the confidence it sparked in other girls, and how even when the system failed us, we showed up for each other. That resilience, born from being overlooked and underestimated, is what continues to drive my commitment to sport and to creating better, more equitable spaces for the next generation of female athletes.

Today, that commitment has only deepened. I have carried my passion for women's athletics into my work, my campus leadership, and my vision for a future career in sports administration. I believe deeply in the power of sports to empower women. Its effects run not just physically, but socially, professionally, and personally. My own experiences have shaped me into someone who advocates strongly for equal access, better resources, and visible leadership opportunities for women in athletics. I do not know who I would have become today without it. This work is personal. It is necessary. And it is far from over.

But my experience is not unique – it is part of a much longer history of exclusion and resilience. Decades earlier, girls who wanted to compete in athletics faced even more explicit barriers. In the 1960s, for example, a high school girl interested in joining a track or soccer team might have discovered her school did not even offer a girl's program at all. In many school

districts across the United States, girls were barred from using the gym, denied access to coaching, and often discouraged from participating in any activity deemed “too strenuous” or “unfeminine”. If a girl wanted to train, she often had to do so alone or unofficially, sometimes running laps during lunch or practicing after hours in borrowed space. These were not outliers; this was the norm.

It was in response to these disparities that Title IX of the Education Act was signed into law by President Richard Nixon in 1972. The law was passed with the purpose of granting equal opportunity in education and sport to women. Title IX specifically states, “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.” (U.S. Department of Justice- Civil Rights Division). While this legislation applied broadly to all areas of education, one of its most transformative effects was on athletics.

Before Title IX, opportunities for women in sports were limited and often nonexistent. Few schools allocated significant funding, resources, or attention to female athletic programs, and even fewer provided pathways for women to advance into leadership or coaching roles. The passage of Title IX began to dismantle those barriers, mandating that schools and universities offer equal access to athletic participation, facilities, and scholarships. However, enforcing these policies were difficult. Major institutions like the NCAA resisted the change and feared that the redistribution of athletic resources would disrupt the dominance and financial gains of men’s programs, specifically football and basketball.

At the time of the passing of Title IX in 1972, fewer than 30,000 women competed in collegiate athletics, and just under 300,000 girls participated in high school sports (National Federation of State High School Associations, 1972). By 2018, those numbers had grown to over

216,000 women in NCAA sports and more than 3.4 million girls in high school athletics (NCAA, 2020; NFHS, 2018). This growth can be directly attributed to Title IX's requirement that schools provide equitable opportunities in sports, which extends to scholarships, facilities, and resources available. Yet the fight for equality has not ended with participation. Structural inequalities persist in media coverage, athletic department hiring, pay equity, and leadership representation. Women continue to be underrepresented in athletic administration and coaching, with many programs still operating under unequal funding models. It is certainly not uncommon for a man to be the head coach of the school's women's sports teams.

The implementation of Title IX initially received large amounts of pushback. A notable moment came in the case of *Grove City College v. Bell* (1984). The U.S. Supreme Court ruled that Title IX only applied to specific programs receiving federal aid, rather than the entire institution. This decision weakened enforcement of Title IX until Congress responded with the Civil Rights Restoration Act of 1987, which explicitly clarified that Title IX applies institution wide. The NCAA specifically, which initially opposed Title IX, filed lawsuits in the 1970s arguing that the law would pose financial harm to men's revenue-generating sports. However, their efforts failed, and over time the NCAA has not only complied with Title IX but even assumed control of women's collegiate championships from the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (AIAW) in 1982. While this act ended the historic organization that had governed women's sports since 1971 (Hult, 1994), the NCAA has since continued their efforts to the growth of women's sports while retaining financial stability in men's sectors.

Title IX laid the groundwork for progress, but the sports industry has only begun to realize the full potential of women's inclusion. Sports do more than foster competition—they develop leadership, confidence, and career networks. For women in the sports industry, access to

athletics can be a springboard to professional opportunities both on and off the field. This thesis explores the long-term impact of Title IX on the lives and careers of women in sports, with particular attention to how athletic participation influences women's advancement in the broader sports business landscape. From historical setbacks to ongoing challenges, the story of Title IX is not just about equality—it's about empowerment, representation, and the future of the sports industry itself.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Title IX- The Early Days

Sports have always been of importance in American society. Recreational sports in the United States drew heavily from British influence. During the colonial era, sports were initially influenced by European traditions yet adapted to the conditions and cultural dynamics of the New World. As the U.S. began to industrialize during the 19th century, sports evolved from informal pastimes to organized activities, which began building of a national identity in sports. Organized sports like baseball and boxing emerged as symbols of American values, specifically individualism and competition, which drew in participants and spectators from various social backgrounds. This shift marked a turning point, as sports became more structured and embedded within the fabric of American life (Gerald R. Gems, 2017).

During the early 1900s, sporting opportunities for women were very limited if existing at all. Women were barred from participation and were often ignored and ridiculed for attempting to compete in sports. The earliest emergence of physical education programs was led by medical doctors at various colleges. Given the instructions to improve health and fitness of their students, those doctors were strictly constricted by orders to keep women's exercise carefully controlled, with a strong emphasis on gracefulness and ladylike movements (Ronald B. Woods, 2021).

When Title IX was introduced in the 1970's, the primary physical activities for girls were cheerleading and square dancing. Regarding high school sports, only 1 in 27 girls even participated. Going to college to play athletics on scholarship was virtually impossible for female athletes. Only two percent of the collegiate level budget was allocated to women in sports (TitleIX.info). Even the rules that were introduced by the federal government regarding athletics

in 1975 were broad and vague. They applied to not only colleges, but also elementary and secondary schools. Although they called for equal opportunities at all levels, ranging from physical education classes to intramural, club, and varsity teams, they still only required that athletic teams and facilities reflect the “interests and abilities” of male and female students (Melnick, 2018).

It was not until the late 1970s that experts began to acknowledge the benefits of sport participation for females. A coach's guide to conditioning and training was published in 1978 stating: “Let it be stated here, unequivocally, that there is no reason, either psychological, physiological, or sociological, to preclude normal, healthy females from participating in strenuous physical activities, nor does such participation accentuate or develop male characteristics. Strenuous activity for the well-trained and well-conditioned female athlete results in good health and accentuates the very qualities that make her a woman” (Klafs and Lyon 1978, 10). This publication was monumental for women’s sports as it not only allowed for women’s participation in sports but also stated the clear benefits that they can have.

Title IX and Leadership

Throughout my thesis, I will address the benefits of female participation in sports, particularly the skills and knowledge that make female athletes more well-suited for leadership positions in certain fields. It is known that it is very rare for a female athlete to make it to the Olympics, which is the ultimate achievement for an athlete. However, women still receive benefits from merely participating in sports at any level. Young women are more likely to succeed in their education, suffer fewer health problems, achieve more in areas dominated by men, and hold better jobs as adults when they participate in sports. (Kotschwar, 2014). There is a gap in research on the effects of sports participation pre-2000’s for women. This likely reflects

how most of these studies largely looked at pre-Title IX sports participation when fewer females played sports. (Stevenson, 2010). There was determined to be an association between exclusive athletic participation among high school students with a 14 and 19 percent higher wages among working women and men but it remained unclear why she saw a positive relationship (Stevenson, 2010). It took further research in the 2010s to explore that relationship.

Moving into the 2000s, more studies began to be published regarding the correlation between athletics and academic performance. These studies showed greater academic success, increased career opportunities, responsible social behaviors, and various health benefits. (National Women's Law Center, 2017). Specifically, young women who play sports are more likely to graduate from high school, have higher grades, and score higher on standardized tests than non-athletes (Lumpkin & Favor, 2012). In 2014, research released by the EY Women Athletes Business Network and ESPN Women found through a research report that the majority of women executives interviewed stated that a sports background can help accelerate a woman's leadership and career potential and has a positive influence on hiring decisions. From a global online survey of 400 women executives, 94% of the respondents participated in sport, and close to 75% agreed that a background in sport can help accelerate a woman's leadership and potential (Chozet, 2014).

Interactionist Theory in Sport

Interactionist Theory is a social theory that focuses on how individuals create meaning through social interaction and how this meaning shapes their behavior, and how they interact in society. This theory emphasizes how society is a product of everyday interactions. It also focuses on how an individual is active in shaping their own social world through their own interactions (Baumeister, Twenge, 2001). If we assume that social order is created by people as they interact

with each other, we can look at sport as a form of culture that is created through social interactions. Interactionist Theory looks at how individuals shape society and are shaped by society through interactions of participating in sports. This social theory promotes the idea of individuals being allowed to interact in sports and define and shape sports to fit their own realities (University of Michigan, 2018).

Despite the legal and institutional advances brought on by Title IX, women remain significantly underrepresented in leadership roles within sports organizations and the broader professional landscape. If we use this framework of Interactionist Theory, it provides insight into how women internalize different societal messages about gender and leadership through social interaction, especially within male dominated fields like athletics.

Symbolic Interactionism in the sports industry can be used to understand the social meanings and gendered stereotypes that are embedded within the culture of sports and how they shape women's self-concepts and leadership aspirations. (Sartore and Cunningham, 2007). According to this theory, individuals develop their identities through their interactions with others and the language, symbols, and behaviors they encounter. This includes whether they see themselves as "leaders" or not. For women in sports, this process can be especially different as traditional ideologies equate leadership with masculinity and assertiveness, which are traits that are historically attributed to men. As a result, women may experience identity conflict and question whether they possess the "appropriate" characteristics to succeed in leadership roles and unconsciously limit themselves (Sartore and Cunningham, 2007).

Importantly, Interactionist Theory also suggests that identity formation depends on access to key social symbols and role models. Key concepts of symbolic interactionism emphasize that individuals often envision and develop identities based on what is socially visible and culturally

reinforced (Baumeister & Twenge, 2001). Within the context of sports, the visibility of women in leadership positions – such as coaches, administrators, or executives – can serve as a symbolic resource that helps others form and validate their own potential for leadership (Sartore & Cunningham, 2007). When women are underrepresented in these roles, the absence of such symbols may limit the perceived attainability of leadership identities for other women. The lack of representation in sports leadership can hinder identity development and career aspirations by reducing the available social models that inform self-concept formation. Additionally, gender stereotypes can reinforce these limitations by shaping expectations about competence and suitability for leadership. Therefore, representation in leadership is not only an issue of equity but also of developmental access to the symbolic cues that enable individuals to construct and pursue leadership roles.

This theoretical lens stresses the importance of early sport participation for women. Sports are seen not just as athletic achievement, but as a foundational experience for building leadership identity and self-efficacy. Playing sports introduces women to competitive environments, goal setting, and teamwork. These are all skills that translate directly to professional success. When women see themselves as athletes, they also begin to see themselves as capable, confident, and worthy of leadership. Girls who play sports are more likely to hold leadership positions later in life, with the 94% of women in executive-level jobs having played sports at some point in their lives (Women's Sports Foundation, 2022).

Participation in athletics also provides women with opportunities to resist and reframe traditional gender roles. By excelling in competitive spaces that are typically dominated by men, female athletes may challenge societal expectations and reshape their own self-perceptions. This allows them to develop a resilient self-concept, which is an internal belief in one's competence,

agency, and leadership potential (Sartore and Cunningham, 2007). This is important in organizational environments where gendered stereotypes continue to influence hiring, promotion, and perceptions of competence (Heilman, 2001). For women with strong sport-based identities, this internalized confidence may serve as a buffer against stereotype threat and the identity stress that shows up from being one of the few women in positions of power.

Symbolic Interactionist Theory notes the importance of not only institutional access, but also social experience and identifying development in achieving gender equity in the workplace. Women's participation in sports plays a central role in this process, allowing them to develop identities that coincide with leadership, resilience, and self-advocacy. To understand the legacy of Title IX, it is critical to explore not only its effect on athletic participation rates, but also how sports serve as a formative social context that empowers women to challenge cultural norms and excel in leadership within sport and beyond.

Research Questions

Based on the existing literature, this study is guided by the following research questions:

- 1) How did the implementation of Title IX reshape opportunities for women in sports, particularly in terms of access and participation?
- 2) How does participation in sport shape women's self-concept, leadership identity, and understanding of gender roles through social interaction?
- 3) What barriers do women continue to face in sports administration, and how do these challenges reflect broader patterns of gender inequality in society?

Chapter 3: Methods

Research Design

This research seeks to answer three core questions: 1) How did the implementation of Title IX reshape opportunities for women in sports, particularly in terms of access and participation? 2) How does participation in sport shape women's self-concept, leadership identity, and understanding of gender roles through social interaction? 3) What barriers do women continue to face in sports administration, and how do these challenges reflect broader patterns of gender inequality in society? These questions guided both the literature review and the development of interview questions, and informed the methodological choices outlined in this section.

This study utilizes a mixed-method approach, integrating qualitative interviews with a review of historical and contemporary literature. This design supports an exploration of both systemic change and individual experience, particularly in relation to Title IX's impact on women in sports. The theoretical lens guiding this research of Interactionist Theory, emphasizes how meaning is created through everyday interactions. This perspective is especially useful for understating how participation in sports shapes women's identities, leadership behaviors, and social positioning within the workplace. Because the goal of this study is to explore lived experience, identity development, and professional growth, qualitative interviews serve as the primary research tool.

Qualitative methods were chosen over large-scale quantitative ones to capture the subjective experiences of women who have navigated both athletic and professional spaces. Through in-depth conversations, this research investigates how early exposure to sport influenced self-concept, career confidence, and resilience in male-dominated industries like

sports administration. This approach allows for an understanding of the symbolic and social meanings women attach to their experiences, consistent with the assumptions of the Interactionist Theory.

Data Collection

To answer the guiding research questions, I conducted structured interviews with ten women currently working in executive or managerial positions in the sports industry. I identified potential participants through LinkedIn and the University of Oregon alumni database by filtering for keywords such as “executive,” “manager,” or “director.” My outreach consisted of personalized messages explaining the purpose of the study, the research questions, expectations for participation, and assurances of confidentiality. Once participants agreed, we scheduled interviews via Zoom at a time convenient to them.

All interviews were conducted remotely and ranged from 30-60 minutes. The conversations followed a structured protocol with flexibility to explore emerging topics. Questions were divided into thematic sections: athletic background, leadership journey, skills developed through sports, workplace experiences, and perceptions of gender bias. For participants who did not participate in sports, the interview focused on their professional observations regarding sports and leadership among women in their field. Each interview was recorded with consent, transcribed, and de-identified by assigning pseudonyms.

A total of ten interviews were completed. Interviewees came from various sectors within the sports industry, including athletic departments, marketing agencies, collegiate athletics, and professional teams. The sample included women of diverse ages, backgrounds, and sport experiences, providing a range of perspectives. The only similarity was the fact all participants were University of Oregon alumni. The interviews were particularly focused on identifying links

between early athletic involvement and later leadership behaviors, as well as the challenges women continue to face in sports administration.

To guide the interviews, I developed a structured interview outline organized around five themes: Leadership Development Through Sports, Career Pathways & Advancements, Challenges & Barriers in Sports Leadership, Title IX's Role in Leadership Development, and Advice for Future Female Leaders. Each section included three to four open ended questions designed to evoke reflection and narrative detail. Depending on time and relevance to the interviewee's background, I selected at least one question from each section, while allowing the conversation to flow naturally. The questions were developed with reference to my research questions and theoretical lens, particularly focusing on how participants construct leadership identities through sport-related experiences. A copy of the interview outline is included in the Appendix.

Data Analysis

Interview data was analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns, insights, and relationships across the ten transcripts. I began the process by reading through each transcript multiple times to gain a comprehensive understanding of each participant's narrative. From there, I conducted open coding by highlighting key words, phrases, and ideas that were repeated or emphasized.

The resulting codes were organized into broader themes through an inductive process, meaning they emerged directly from the data rather than being imposed in advance. As coding progressed, I grouped related codes and refined categories into a final set of six major themes: 1) sports as a foundation for leadership, 2) lessons learned through sport, 3) team vs. individual sports, 4) navigating male-dominated environments, 5) advocacy for women's sports and gender

equity, and 6) nonlinear career paths and industry adaptability. These themes reflected the experiences that participants most frequently and passionately discussed in relation to sport, leadership, and identity.

Data was analyzed manually using Microsoft Word and Excel. I also maintained analytic memos to track early reflections, code combinations, and emerging patterns throughout the process. This method helped ensure clarity and consistency in how themes were interpreted and structured.

To maintain the integrity of each participant's perspective, direct quotes were selected to support each theme. These quotes appear in the Results section to provide authentic examples of how each theme was articulated. The analysis remained closely tied to the theoretical framework of Interactionist Theory, which emphasizes how individuals form meaning and identity through interaction with their social environments, such as teams, coaches, institutions, and broader societal norms.

Throughout the process, I was intentional about capturing both commonalities and variations across responses, recognizing that the diversity in background and sports experience offered valuable depth to the findings. This qualitative approach provided the foundation for the thematic structure used in the Results section and will guide the interpretation discussed in the following chapter.

Justification of Methodological Choices

The mixed-methods design, with qualitative interviews as the focal point, was selected to showcase the lived experiences and internalized meanings behind participation in sports and leadership development. While survey data might offer general trends, it would not capture the richness of identity formation, gender negotiation, or workplace dynamics. Similar studies,

including those by Stevenson (2010) and Chozet (2014), have relied on narrative and qualitative data to understand women's professional trajectories. Furthermore, Interactionist Theory calls for an analysis of how social environments shape self, which makes interviews the most appropriate method for accessing how participants interpret and communicate their experiences.

Limitations and Ethical Considerations

While interviews provided rich data, the study has several limitations. First, the sample size of ten women, though diverse in career and sports backgrounds, is not representative of all women in the sports industry. As such, the findings are intended to be exploratory rather than generalizable. Second, the participants were largely drawn from those active on LinkedIn or alumni networks, potentially skewing the sample toward individuals who are already more visible or successful in their careers.

There is also the risk of social desirability bias, where participants may have presented themselves in favorable light or downplayed challenges to appear resilient or professional. To address this, I emphasized the confidentiality of responses and created an interview atmosphere that encouraged candid discussion. Reflexivity was also important, I maintained a journal to reflect on my own positionality as a former athlete and emerging professional in the sports industry, recognizing how my identity may shape the research process.

Prior to participating each interview was provided with informed consent outlining the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, expected risks and benefits, and data protection measures. Verbal consent was obtained at the beginning of each Zoom interview and participants were reminded that they could withdraw at any time. The informed consent form followed University of Oregon IRB guidelines and clearly stated that data would be used for an undergraduate thesis and stored securely.

Ethical approval was secured to data collection, and all participants provided informed consent. Pseudonyms were used to protect participant identities, and all audio files were stored securely on password-protected devices. Participants were reminded that they could withdraw at any time without consequence.

Chapter 4: Results

This section presents finding from ten interviews with women in leadership roles across the sports industry. The purpose of these interviews was to understand how athletic experiences shape women's professional identity, the challenges they face in male-dominated environments, and the influence of Title IX on leadership opportunities. Participants came from diverse areas of the sports industry, including marketing, legal counsel, communications, consulting, and executive management. Their athletic backgrounds varied from high-level collegiate sports to recreational participation, offering a wide range of perspectives on how sport contributes to leadership development.

All participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities. This section presents data thematically, with each major theme introduced by a clear connection to the research questions, followed by representative quotes and summaries of key finding. Findings are presented without interpretation; analysis will follow in the Discussion section.

Table 1: Pseudonyms of research participants.

Pseudonym	Role	Organization	Sports Background
Rebecca	Communications	Premiere League	Soccer, Track, Basketball
Kylie	Social Media Manager.	Major League Soccer, National Women's Soccer League	Volleyball, Dance
Layla	General Counsel	National Hockey League	Golf
Kara	General Manager	Sports Marketing Company (Independent)	Softball
Elena	Digital Comms	Sporting Goods Retailer	Volleyball, Handball
Morgan	Marketing Manager	Sports Event Promotion	Triathlon
Kim	Consultant	Women's Sports	Hockey, Baseball
Mia	Internal Comms	National Basketball Association	Dance, Volleyball
Maddie	Senior Manager, Player social media	National Football League	Dance
Lana	Creative Strategist	Growth Marketing Agency	Lacrosse

Table 1 shows the current role, organization, and sports played by each participant. I will reference their name which was chosen at random to protect the identity of the participants.

Sports as a Foundation for Leadership

A consistent theme across all interviews was the belief that athletic participation, regardless of level, developed skills crucial for leadership in professional settings. Participants cited resilience, communication, time management, and the ability to navigate group dynamics as lasting benefits of athletic involvement. These skills often carried forward into their roles in sports leadership.

Kara, a former collegiate softball player and now a general manager, noted how her time as an athlete shaped her response to adversity:

“It was really hard. You work hard, and it still doesn’t always work out the way you want. I think people who’ve had the opportunity to fail and still try again are really well positioned in their careers.”

This sentiment was restated by Lana, who played lacrosse at the collegiate level. Now a creative strategist in digital marketing, she connected her athletic background with her leadership style:

“Playing lacrosse taught me to listen as much as I speak. That’s still how I run projects now- I lead from within, and I know how to be part of a team and guide it without dominating it.”

Even participants who didn’t pursue sports competitively shared how participation in dance or recreational sports taught them valuable interpersonal skills. Maddie, who works for the NFL, reflected on how her experience in dance shaped her confidence:

“Being part of a team and performing in front of people gave me the confidence to pursue roles that felt bigger than me. Even if it wasn’t competitive, the mindset it gave me mattered.”

Mia, who works in internal communications for the NBA and danced recreationally, pointed out the influence of sports on emotional maturity:

“You learn leadership when you’re the one being counted on. That experience- having a team depend on you- is really formative. Even at a small scale, it teaches you how to handle pressure.”

Overall, participants made clear their early sports experiences, whether team-based, individual, formal, or recreational, played a crucial role in building the foundational leadership qualities they continue to draw upon in their careers.

Lessons Learned Through Sport

Beyond leadership development, participants reflected on specific life lessons gained from sports that continue to influence their mindset, decision-making, and professional growth. These reflections extended into values like accountability, resilience, humility, and self-discipline.

Rebecca, who now works in international club communications, shared how playing soccer helped her develop perspective:

“Sometimes you win, sometimes you lose, but you always have to show up. That’s something I’ve carried with me into every job.”

Kim, who grew up playing hockey and baseball, emphasized the long-term influence of failure:

“Sports taught me how to lose. That’s something people don’t talk about enough. Losing gracefully, learning from it, and coming back stronger- it’s part of everything I do now.”

Morgan, who competed in Ironman events before joining her company, discussed how endurance sports shaped her mental stamina:

“You hit a wall in mile twenty, and you still have to keep going. That mental barrier is the same thing I face with deadlines, with stress, with juggling too many projects. Sports trained my brain to keep going.”

Layla, now a legal advisor in the National Hockey League, reflected on how her high school golf team taught her individual responsibility:

“You’re alone out there. If you mess up, it’s on you- but you can’t let it spiral. That mindset has helped me in law, especially in high-stakes negotiations.”

Overall, these women attributed their professional ethics, coping strategies, and sense of accountability to early experiences in sport that went beyond technical skills or leadership development.

Team vs. Individual Sports

Participants often described different lessons and leadership takeaways depending on whether their primary athletic experience was team-based or individual. While both experiences fostered confidence and discipline, the context in which those skills were developed shaped their application in professional environments.

Kylie, a former volleyball player, reflected on how team dynamics helped her understand collaboration:

“In volleyball, you can’t succeed without your team. That taught me to delegate and trust others- essential in my job today when managing campaigns with multiple people involved.”

In contrast, Layla, who competed in golf, described the personal accountability she gained from an individual sport:

“There’s no one else to blame in golf. That taught me how to own my mistakes and move forward- something that’s served me especially well in legal negotiations.”

Kim, who played both team and individual sports, noted the balance that they provided:

“Hockey made me a communicator, but my one-on-one training taught me to self-motivate. You need both- to lead others and also lead yourself.”

Morgan, whose background is in endurance events, discussed the solitary but mentally demanding nature of individual competition:

“It’s just you versus yourself. That kind of inner discipline translates to how I manage projects and handle stress- because I know I can push through.”

The contrast between team and individual sports highlighted how varied athletic contexts offer different but complementary leadership developments tools. Shaping not only how these women work but how they manage others.

Navigating Male-Dominated Environments

A recurring theme was the challenge of entering and advancing in male-dominated spaces within the sports industry. Participants described subtle and overt gender dynamics, including the need to assert authority, navigate skepticism, and often by the only woman in the room advocating for change.

Layla, a general counsel for a professional hockey team, described how her presence in boardrooms often came with an unspoken need to prove herself:

“You have to speak louder to be heard. It’s not always obvious, but the dynamic is there. I’ve had to work harder to prove I know what I’m doing- not because of the job, but because of who’s watching.”

Kylie, who leads social media for a professional women’s soccer team, recalled her experience working on both the men’s and women’s sides of the organization. She found that advocating for women’s teams often came with resistance or apathy:

“It felt like creating content for the women’s team was seen as a burden. I was the only one in the room who wanted to prioritize it. The men’s team got whatever they needed. With the women’s team, I had to fight for everything- budget, attention, even basic production help.”

Kim, a consultant with decades of experience in women’s sports, summarized the institutional resistance she has faced:

“You’re often the only woman in the room asking why a female athlete isn’t on the magazine cover. There’s still an assumption that men’s sports are the default, and women’s are the exception. That mindset hasn’t gone away.”

The emotional labor of advocating for equity, on top of fulfilling job responsibilities, was described as exhausting but necessary. Several women expressed a commitment to continue pushing for better representation, even when the institutional culture was slow to change.

Advocacy for Women’s Sports and Gender Equity

Closely linked to navigating male-dominated was a strong theme of advocacy. Many participants expressed deep pride in contributing to the growth of women’s sports and a sense of responsibility to uplift other women in the industry.

Kylie explained her transition from working in men’s professional sports to intentionally choosing a role in women’s sports:

“I realized I didn’t want to work on the men’s side anymore. They’ll be fine. I want to build something here- where it still matters that we show up.”

Kim discussed the shift that she has seen over her career:

“It used to be all resistance. Every suggestion for better coverage or investment in women’s sports had to be justified. Now people are finally listening- but someone still has to ask the hard questions. That hasn’t changed.”

Elena, who works in digital marketing in Europe now but grew up in Brazil, spoke to the lack of similar institutional support abroad:

“There was no Title IX in Brazil growing up. Girls weren’t allowed to play soccer publicly without being harassed. So what you have in the U.S.- it’s not perfect, but it gave women the opportunity to lead in ways we couldn’t imagine”

Participants often cited visibility as a form of advocacy. Whether through media coverage, brand campaigns, or organizational culture, they felt it was their job to help make women's sports more respected and resourced.

Nonlinear Career Paths and Industry Adaptability

Almost all participants described unconventional or non-linear pathways into sports leadership. Rather than following a direct pipeline, they often found themselves pivoting industries, creating new roles, or transitioning from unrelated fields like, PR, education, or coaching.

Rebecca, who now works in communications at a major international club, described a major career shift:

“I worked in tech PR for almost ten years. Sports was always the dream, but I didn't think it was practical. Then COVID hit, and everything changed. I applied for a role I didn't think I'd get- and now I'm here.”

Lana, who now works in creative strategy, emphasized the value of a varied background:

“I started in account management and now lead creative. I used to worry I wasn't 'sports' enough. But actually, my range is what makes me valuable. I've seen those different sides of the industry.”

Kara reflected on the entrepreneurial nature of many women's careers in sports:

“There's no one path. Most women I know in this field had to build their own. Sports gave us the tools, but we had to figure out the rest. That's what makes the community so strong- we've all had to hustle.”

This theme underscored how women in sports often create opportunities, rather than follow established tracks. Flexibility, resilience, and a willingness to take risks were presented as key characteristics of successful leaders in this space.

Summary of Key Findings

The findings from these interviews reveal six interrelated themes. First, athletic participation provided foundational leadership skills that supported participants in their careers. Second, many described specific lessons learned through sport, such as resilience, humility, and mental toughness, that shaped their approach to professional life. Third, participants offered insight into the distinctions between team and individual sports, suggesting that each type fosters different but equally valuable skills. Fourth, women continue to face gendered challenges in the workplace, including the need to assert authority and advocate for equity. Fifth, many of these women have embraced advocacy roles to improve representation and resources in women's sports. Finally, most participants followed nonlinear paths to leadership, relying on initiative, adaptability, and passion to succeed.

These findings provide a grounded understanding of how gender, sport, and leadership intersect in professional contexts and lay the foundation for further analysis in the discussion section.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This research set out to explore how Title IX transformed opportunities for women in sports and how those transformations influenced women's leadership development, identity formation, and professional experiences in the sports industry. Grounded in the Interactionist Theory and supported by ten in-depth interviews, the study illustrated not only the benefits of participation but also the complexities of navigated sport-related careers as women. As such, this discussion section interprets the key findings considering existing literature, theoretical frameworks, and broader social dynamics. It seeks to offer a nuanced understanding of what these results mean and why they matter.

Participation as Identity Formation: Sports as Social Context

One of the most consistent findings across the interviews was the belief that sports played a formative role in shaping leadership identity. From an Interactionist perspective, this finding is critical. The theory holds that people develop self-concepts through social interaction and shared meaning-making. In this study, sports served as a primary site for such interaction – especially for women who may not have had other culturally sanctioned spaces to explore strength, competitiveness, or leadership in their youth. Participants' reflections revealed that early involvement in sport introduced them to social roles – team captain, mentor, performer under pressure – that helped build a long-lasting sense of agency.

Layla's experience in golf, for example, highlights how the structure of individual sport shaped her ability to manage stress and take personal responsibility in high-stakes legal settings. Similarly, Kara's experience in team sports shaped her leadership style around collaboration and resilience. These are not isolated examples. Rather, they point to a larger social process:

participation in sport allowed these women to “try on” leadership in a context where performance and effort – not gender – dictated success.

The symbolic value of sports as a development context cannot be overstated. According to Sartore and Cunningham (2007), participation in sports provides essential symbolic cues for identity construction. For many women, sports were the first space where they felt permitted to assert themselves competitively. These experiences not only influenced how participants saw themselves but also how others treated them – as capable, resilient, and worthy of leadership. This feedback loop helped reinforce a leadership identity that extended into their professional lives. The idea that “you belong on the field” can translate into the belief that “you belong at the table.”

Additionally, the social feedback women receive in sports such as recognition from coaches, encouragement from teammates, and support from families contributes to a sense of worth that can influence future leadership pursuits. These experiences create a memory bank of resilience and self-efficacy that women can draw on when facing professional adversity. In this way, sports operate not just as practice for leadership but as foundational training in perseverance, confidence, and goal setting.

Title IX: Progress and Incomplete Promises

Another key dimension of the findings relates to Title IX itself. Several participants explicitly mentioned the ways in which the legislation paved the way for their participation and, ultimately, their careers. But they also acknowledged its limitations. Despite formal gains in access and participation, participants still described environments where male sports were prioritized, women’s voices marginalized, and leadership pathways unclear.

The interviews suggest that while Title IX succeeded in broadening the entry points into sport, it did not uniformly reshape the culture of sport organizations. Kylie's experience working in both men's and women's professional teams is a clear example of this duality. Though she found a home in women's sports, she also noted the disparities in treatment, visibility, and resources. This theme underscores existing critiques of Title IX's enforcement and impact (Hogshead-Makar & Zimbalist, 2007) and raises questions about what genuine equity looks like in practice.

Elena's perspective as someone who grew up outside of the U.S. adds another layer. Her reflections on the lack of institutional support for girls in Brazil help situate Title IX not as a perfect solution, but as a powerful tool – one that still sets the U.S. apart in terms of women's access to sport, and by extension, leadership. However, her story also reinforces the idea that policy alone is insufficient without cultural change.

There are two priorities moving forward, first is to preserve and strengthen the legal enforcement mechanisms introduced by Title IX, and the other is to dismantle the enduring cultural beliefs that continue to marginalize women's sports. A comprehensive effort that integrates educational outreach, inclusive media representation, and institutional accountability is required to close the gap between the intent of Title IX and women's lived realities in sports. Without this cultural evolution, access may be granted in form, but not function, this leaves the door partially opened, rather than an invitation to belong.

Team vs. Individual Sports: Complementary Leadership Lessons

One of the more nuanced findings in this study relates to the differences between team and individual sports. Participants described distinct benefits from each, suggesting that they type of sport matters in shaping certain leadership behaviors. This aligns with the Interactionist

Theory's focus on context-specific meaning-making. In team sports, leadership often involved collaboration, trust, and communication – skills transferable, participants described learning autonomy, personal accountability, and mental stamina – traits crucial for navigating high-pressure roles and self-directed career paths.

Kim's comments about balancing hockey and one-one-one training speak to the value of developing a multi-faceted leadership toolkit. She credited hockey for her ability to lead teams and credited solo training for teaching her how to motivate herself. These dual competencies are not only valuable – they are increasingly necessary in dynamic, fast-paced industries like sports. The results suggest that encouraging girls to explore multiple types of athletic engagement may help diversify their leadership skills later in life.

This finding also prompts further consideration for how youth and collegiate sports programs might support holistic development. Encouraging multi-sport participation, especially in both individual and team formats, could equip young women with a broader range of competencies. For organizations hiring future leaders, awareness of this diversity in sport background might serve as a predictive indicator of a candidate's adaptive potential and self-regulation, essential skills in today's ever-shifting professional environments.

It is also important to understand that the complementary nature of these sports may provide insights into the design of leadership training programs. By incorporating elements of both team collaboration and individual accountability, such programs can mimic environments where female leaders first learned to thrive. Coaches, educators, and mentors can play a key role in helping athletes recognize and translate these lessons into long-term professional goals.

Gendered Labor and the Emotional Toll of Advocacy

Many participants spoke not only of their own professional challenges but of the emotional labor required to advocate for women's sports. This form of "invisible labor" often goes unnoticed but has profound effects on workplace dynamics and individual well-being. Women found themselves not only doing their jobs but also fighting for the legitimacy of their work, whether by advocating for equal media coverage, negotiating resources, or challenging stereotypes.

This theme reflects broader feminist critiques of organizational life, which highlight how women are often expected to fix gender inequity from within while simultaneously proving their worth (Heilman, 2001). Participants like Kylie and Kim showed a high level of awareness around these dynamics and chose to engage in advocacy work as part of their professional identity. For some, like Kara, this work felt deeply tied to their sense of purpose. Yet the burden of always being the one to "ask the hard questions" is not sustainable without institutional support.

Interactionist Theory helps frame this dynamic as a negotiation of meaning within a social structure. Women are not just navigating their roles—they are actively shaping them, challenging the definitions of what leadership looks like in sport, and expanding the symbolic possibilities for those who come after them. Still, the emotional costs of this work must be acknowledged in any effort to address gender inequity in sports leadership.

These stories should serve as a call for more systemic change. Institutions must recognize advocacy not as extracurricular but as central to innovation and equity. Support mechanisms such as mentorship, affinity networks, leadership pipelines for women, can help share this labor more equitably. Without structural backing, even the most passionate advocate can risk burnout.

Additionally, the sustained emotional labor often undertaken by women in leadership roles can result in what is described as “invisible exhaustion”, a condition where their behind-the-scenes efforts go largely unnoticed yet leave a profound personal toll. To truly support gender equity, this hidden labor must be acknowledged and addressed through organizational policy and compensation. Advancing equity requires not only celebrating advocacy work but embedding it structurally into institutional frameworks where it is valued, resourced, and shared.

The Nonlinear Path to Leadership

Another important insight from this study is the non-traditional and nonlinear career paths of many participants. Rather than progressing through a formal pipeline, most described a patchwork of roles, industries, and experiences that ultimately led them to leadership in sport. This theme counters dominant narratives about career progression, particularly in male-dominated industries that value continuity and predictability.

For women in sport, success often depended on adaptability, networking, and creative problem-solving. Participants like Rebecca and Lana emphasized that their varied backgrounds were not liabilities but assets. This allowed them to bring new perspectives and skillsets to the table. These findings echo those of Chozet (2014), who reported that the majority of women executives attribute part of their leadership development to non-traditional experiences.

This is a significant contribution to the literature, as it challenges the assumption that leadership in sport requires a direct path through coaching or athletic administration. Instead, the women interviewed constructed careers through a blend of strategic choices and opportunity making. This shows a finding that underscores the importance of mentorship, visibility, and systemic flexibility in fostering women’s leadership.

These nonlinear trajectories may also offer a blueprint for reimagining what career success looks like in the sports industry. Rather than penalizing career shifts or lateral moves, institutions could reframe them as evidence of resourcefulness and interdisciplinary insight. Such a shift would align better with how women have historically had to navigate professional landscapes and open more doors for future leaders.

Representation as Symbolic Access

A key implication of this study lies in the concept of representation. As noted in the literature review, symbolic interactionism suggests that social roles and identities are formed not only through personal experience but also through observation of others. The absence of women in sports leadership creates a symbolic void. When women like Layla, Kylie, or Morgan occupy those roles, they not only make change possible, but they also make it imaginable.

This study supports the idea that representation matters not just for those in power but for those watching from the sidelines. Seeing someone who looks like you, talks like you, or shares your background succeed in a high-level position creates a feedback loop of possibility. It affirms that leadership is not only attainable but appropriate. As several participants mentioned, this visibility was a major motivator in their decision to pursue and remain in the industry.

Representation also has ripple effects beyond the individual. When women rise to leadership positions, they often bring more inclusive practices, broader definitions of success, and mentorship opportunities for others. These structural shifts can gradually alter the landscape of sports leadership, making it more reflective of the diverse athletes and communities it serves. Ensuring that women's leadership is visible, supported, and sustained is not just an equity issue, but an issue essential to the growth and legitimacy of the industry.

Representation functions both as a reflection and a guide. It showcases what is achievable while lighting the path for others to follow. The presence of diverse leaders disrupts outdated norms, expands the narrative of who is seen as a leader in sport, and builds momentum across generations. As evidenced in this study, symbolic visibility often lays the groundwork for tangible inclusion.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This thesis began with a central question: How has the implementation of Title IX impacted women's opportunities in sport and their subsequent development as leaders in the sports industry? Using in-depth interviews with ten women in leadership positions and analyzing their narratives through the lens of the Interactionist Theory, the study found compelling evidence that participation in sports plays a formative role in leadership identity, professional development, and social empowerment.

Key findings revealed that sports serve as more than just physical activity; they are critical environments where women develop resilience, communication, self-confidence, and vision. Whether through team collaboration or individual performance, the lessons learned on the field or court became deeply embedded into their approach to leadership. Early exposure to sports also offered women symbolic access to power, which allowed them to imagine themselves as leaders and assert themselves in professional contexts that often remain male-dominated.

The study also found that while Title IX increased access to sport, it did not fully eliminate cultural and institutional barriers. Participants frequently spoke about the continued need to advocate for resources, respect, and representation. This is an ongoing labor that carries emotional and professional weight. These reflections align with broader critiques of Title IX as a partial victory, while it opened the door, much work remains in transforming the room.

Additionally, the study's findings challenge the notion of a singular, linear path to leadership. Instead, women's careers in sport were marked by adaptability, risk-taking, and a strong internal compass – traits often honed through their athletic experiences. This supports the need for more flexible, inclusive career development models that recognize and reward diverse trajectories.

If this research were to continue, several directions present themselves. A larger, more demographically diverse sample could help identify patterns related to race, socioeconomic status, or sexual orientation. Comparative studies could assess how women outside the U.S. experience leadership development in the absence of Title IX-like protections. Continuing with future research could explore how early sport participation influences leadership in other male-dominated industries, such as law, finance, or tech.

Limitations of this study include its small sample size and reliance on participants with relatively successful careers. This may have skewed findings towards more positive interpretations of sports impact. Time constraints limited the ability to incorporate observational or longitudinal data, which could offer deeper insights into how leadership identities evolve over time.

Moving forward, key questions remain: What would it take for women to not just enter the sports industry, but to lead it equitably? How can institutions go beyond compliance and embrace cultural change? And how might sport itself evolve as more women take ownership of its future?

Ultimately, this study underscores a simple but powerful truth: when women are given the opportunity to participate in sport, they gain much more than physical strength – they gain the vision, confidence, and community necessary to lead. As we continue to reflect on the legacy of Title IX, let us not only measure its impact by numbers, but by the lives it has empowered and the futures it has made possible.

Appendix

Research Questions for Interviews

Leadership Development Through Sports

- How did participating in sports help develop your leadership skills?
- Were there any defining moments in your athletic career that shaped the way you lead today?
- What specific qualities or skills- such as teamwork, resilience, or discipline- did you gain through sports that you continue to use in your professional role?
- Do you believe female athletes develop different leadership traits compared to their male counterparts? Why or why not?

Career Pathways & Advancement

- How did your athletic background influence your decision to pursue a career in sports leadership?
- What was your career trajectory like? Did you find that being an athlete opened doors for leadership opportunities?
- Have you seen a strong pipeline from female athletes to leadership roles, or do you think there are still barriers preventing that progression?
- Were there mentors or role models- either in sports or leadership- who influenced your career path?

Challenges & Barriers in Sports Leadership

- What have been some of the biggest challenges you've faced as a woman in sports administration or leadership?

- Have you ever encountered bias or resistance in your career because of your gender? If so, how did you handle it?
- Do you believe women in leadership roles in sports receive the same level of respect and credibility as men? Why or why not?
- How do you think organizations can do a better job of supporting women in leadership roles in the sports industry?

Title IX'S Role in Leadership Development

- In what ways do you think Title IX has contributed to the rise of female leaders in the sports industry?
- Do you feel that Title IX's impact extends beyond just participation numbers and has actively influenced leadership representation?
- What areas do you think still need improvement to ensure that more women transition from athletics to leadership roles?

Advice for Future Female Leaders in Sports

- What advice would you give to young female athletes who aspire to take on leadership positions in sports?
- What steps can current female leaders take to mentor and support the next generation of women in sports administration?
- If you could change one thing about the landscape for women in sports leadership today, what would it be?

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