

Just like countless other teenagers, sports have always been an integral part of my life. As a competitive diver, I've trained for years to attend high-level club competitions. Since my freshman year of high school, however, I've also been a part of my high school swim and dive team. As a senior, I've realized that the high school team has had a huge impact on myself as a person. Because of the inclusivity that Title IX brings to high school sports, teenage girls like me are able to learn critical leadership skills through sport.

The Winchester Girls Swim and Dive team is unique. In my freshman year, there were seventy girls on the team. We outnumbered other teams three-to-one, and yet, no one was overlooked. The older, more experienced team members took care of the new swimmers, and everyone, regardless of performance in the pool, received encouragement. Sportsmanship was our priority, and it showed. At meets, we cheered until we were hoarse for both Winchester and the opposing team. At team dinners, we sat in one huge circle and laughed over plates of pasta. At school, we shouted hello, gave high fives, and hung out between classes. Our team was, and is, sportsmanship embodied in a group of teenage girls.

It's easy to forget, however, that just a few decades ago this team didn't exist. Before Title IX, women were discouraged from participating in sports, perpetuating the stereotype that they were inferior to men in athletic-- and mental-- ability. Title IX broke barriers when it stated that no one could be discriminated against in state-funded sports, regardless of gender. All of a sudden, the athletic opportunities were endless for young women who had previously had none.

I'm one of those young women. Four years ago, I never would have imagined I'd become a leader. Yet as a senior and co-captain of the swim and dive team, I've learned to organize, delegate, and manage the fifty girls that look to me for guidance. Moreover, I'm comfortable being a leader and I have confidence in my abilities. Most importantly, I've learned that

sportsmanship is essential in being an effective leader and role model. During hard practice sets, I constantly encourage my teammates. I talk to girls who are struggling to juggle school and swimming, and I help them with schoolwork outside of swim practice. I communicate with our coaches to ensure they know exactly how the team feels that day, and I make sure that everyone receives recognition for their hard work.

Title IX allowed girls like me to freely participate in high school sports, teaching them to be confident, sportsmanlike leaders. In a world that still sees inequalities between men and women, young women who participate in high school sports will enter the working world knowing how to confidently organize, manage, and lead others. Thanks to Title IX, high school sports are helping to pave the way to a more equitable world, one athlete at a time.