

# Making the Connection: Women, Sports, and Leadership

An Interview with

Beth A. Brooke-Marciniak, Global Vice Chair – Public Policy, EY

**EDITORS' NOTE** Beth Brooke-Marciniak is also the global sponsor of EY's diversity and inclusiveness efforts and a prominent advocate for the benefits of inclusive leadership. She joined EY in 1981 and has held a number of leadership roles including U.S. National Director of Tax Advisory Services and Global and Americas Vice Chair for Public Policy, Sustainability, and Stakeholder Engagement. She worked in the U.S. Department of the Treasury during the Clinton administration where she was responsible for all tax policy matters related to insurance and managed care. She serves on the Board of Trustees for the Aspen Institute, the Women's Advisory Board of the World Economic Forum, Vital Voices, and The Conference Board. Brooke-Marciniak is a Certified Public Accountant and a Fellow, Life Management Institute. She has a bachelor's degree and an honorary Doctorate from Purdue University.



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the exposure to business, and they aren't thinking more broadly. We see the potential to change the trajectory of women in leadership in business with this uniquely talented, untapped pool of natural leaders – elite female athletes.

During the 40th anniversary of Title IX, Olympic swimmer Donna de Varona and I spoke on several panels together and realized the tremendous crossover potential of the worlds of women in business and women in sports – if we could break down the silos and make the right connections.

## Is this effort gaining traction and enhancing opportunity?

Absolutely. Our research findings stunned people – yet they also rang true for many businesswomen. So much so that, several months ago, we launched another round of research with espnW that is continuing to confirm our initial findings that there is a tremendous correlation for women between success in sport and success in business. Also, senior women executives are more prone to want to hire athletes because they get it. It's a virtuous circle.

We're not suggesting causation – that a young girl who plays sports is going to be a leader in business. However, there is a tremendous correlation, and when we think about what those athletes are equipped with – resilience, perseverance, confidence, discipline, and failure not being an option – those things translate naturally into the business environment and make for a very talented business executive or entrepreneur.

One aspect of the Women Athletes Business Network is a very high-touch hands-on mentoring program we run with the International Women's Forum (IWF) that targets a select group of elite female athletes who want to do more. They go through an intense application process, so we know they have the potential to pivot into great successes as leaders outside of their sport.

The IWF includes 6,000 senior leading business women around the world, and the program matches up some of their handpicked senior businesswomen members to help mentor these elite female athletes.

These athletes are gifted in so many ways – confirming that this is the right thing to do – and we're just getting started.

**Do you find that the business community is absorbing this research and starting to implement these programs?**

You bet. Based on the inquiries we are getting, many businesses are starting to pay attention. An increasing number of companies and sports organizations have reached out to us to work with EY on this program. They want access to these mentees because they can give the athletes experiences that can help them explore their talents and passions; they want to help them succeed as leaders.

**There is much talk about having made advances for women, but there seems to be a long way to go. Is the dialogue happening to address these issues?**

We're not where we need to be, which is why we launched EY Women. Fast forward a year ago. The World Economic Forum publishes an annual gender gap report. In 2014, they said it would take 81 years until we get to parity, which is unacceptable. In their most recent research, they now estimate it will take until 2133 for women to achieve gender parity in the workplace. The under-optimization of women is a huge problem for business and for world economies. There is a lot of conversation today emerging around the lack of women leaders in the business of sports as well.

The objective of Women. Fast forward is to accelerate EY's efforts on behalf of women in the workplace and to call upon others to do more with us. We are seeing more business leaders putting gender on their agendas and asking how they can do more to attract, retain, and promote women within their companies. Obviously, with such grim predictions on achievement of workplace parity, we all need to do more.

Still, there is no silver bullet. Business needs to address a number of factors – such as building supportive environments by rooting out conscious and unconscious bias, speeding up culture change with progressive policies, and ensuring women have access to the best jobs and appropriate opportunities to lead. We have to hold ourselves accountable and measure our progress over time.

**How critical is it that parents understand the bigger picture of what skills their daughters can pick up in sports?**

That is one of the most important aspects of our research. As a parent, one should know that for one's daughter there is a tremendous correlation between her success in sport as a child and her future success in life. However, when young girls reach puberty, they receive pressure by societal biases to drop out of sport. Our message to parents is to understand the ability of their daughters to succeed outside of sport later in life, and encourage them to stay in the game and excel. ●

**FIRM BRIEF** EY (ey.com) is a global leader in assurance, tax, transaction, and advisory services. In the Americas, it employs more than 65,000 people across 30 countries and generates US\$12.7 billion in revenues. Globally, EY employs more than 220,000 people and as of 2015 generated US\$28.7 billion in revenues.

**Would you talk about the vision early on for the EY Women Athletes Business Network, and has it become what you expected?**

It has become more than we dreamed, and there is more to come. We are very committed to the need for more women in leadership in business. Fundamentally, we believe in the economic benefit of diverse perspectives.

What we've discovered in our work with women entrepreneurs and women in the C-Suite is a preponderance of former female athletes. We decided to explore this more broadly through research and found that when we look at the most senior women in business, 94 percent of them have played sports, and over half of them have played at a university level.

Many elite athletes have all of the leadership skills that we in business both cherish and need – skills we can't train into people. Unfortunately, most female athletes don't understand how after sport those leadership skills can translate into their lives as leaders in business. They have been inspired and role-modeled to be coaches or broadcasters, but they haven't had