



We're here for you

OAKLAND
(510) 428-3558

SAN FRANCISCO
(415) 353-2808

SAN RAMON
(925) 979-3430

WALNUT CREEK
(925) 979-3430

LAMORINDA SPORTS

Donna de Varona – Lafayette Native, Olympic Gold Medalist, pre-Title IX athlete and Title IX crusader



Photo provided

By Jon Kingdon

When the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was enacted, it outlawed discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, and national origin. As a supplement to this act, 50 years ago, on June 23, 1972, Title IX was passed as a federal civil law that prohibited sex-based discrimination in any school or other education program that received federal money.

The text of Title IX as written and signed into law by President Richard Nixon was as follows: "No person in the United States shall, based on 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."

Donna de Varona, a Lafayette native, became an internationally known swimmer when she competed in the 1960 Rome Olympics at the age of 13 and followed that up at the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, winning the 400-meter individual relay, setting an Olympic record and a second gold medal in the 4x100 meter freestyle relay that set a world record.

"There weren't any sports

for girls when I was growing up," de Varona said. "Little league organized girls out of the game. I used to play sandlot baseball with my brother but when little league baseball began, I went as the bat girl because I got to be near the game and the guys. Dolls didn't do it for me."

The few sports available to girls were swimming, track and field, gymnastics, and tennis. "Basic swimming was being elevated by coaches who were just donating their time to build a program," de Varona said. "When I was 12, if you were fast enough, you could swim open. That's where I was, very fortunate to be in the right place at the right time, in the right state in the right community."

It was de Varona's father, Dave, a football player, and rower at the University of California, Berkeley who made it clear to de Varona that there was an unequal access to sports. "My father played sports because he could," de Varona said. "However, he always talked about how unfair it was that guys got scholarships and women didn't, so he planted the seeds for me as we would always have these dialogues. You could play tetherball or baseball during recess but interscholastic high

school sports for girls didn't exist."

Without Title IX, it was the parents who were there to ensure that their girls would get some opportunity to participate in sports. "It was Mom and Pop who were the ones that fueled the movement totally," de Varona said. "Since I was so successful at 13, my way was paid for the National Swimming Championships, but it was the parents that supported our movement during that period."

With her coach in Santa Clara, de Varona and her family moved to San Jose after her sophomore year at Acalanes. "Acalanes was a top school and I hated leaving it," de Varona said. "It's such a beautiful area and a lot of my buddies still live there. I was able to train there during my freshman year even though there wasn't a girls' swim team."

So, despite breaking 18 world records, winning 37 national titles and two Olympic gold medals, it became clear to de Varona, in this pre-Title IX era, she needed to find a new career path since there were no women's college swim teams. "I was aware that the guys were going off to college," de Varona said. "I accepted my reality and that's why I made the decision to retire at 17 because even the coaching community knew that it was over for us. There was a lot of stuff that was percolating, and I was living at the apex of feminism, anti-war and civil rights. We were being treated differently and we had limitations that the guys did not have."

De Varona then contacted ABC about a position in their sports department, having developed a relationship with ABC's The Wide World of Sports show in her swimming career: "I asked if they would consider using me as an expert commentator," de Varona said. "They told me to think about it because they did not want to be accused of turning me into a professional. I sat on it for a while and then called them back and said, 'I'm ready.' They flew me back to New York, got me a work permit because I was only 17 and I ended up calling races with Jim McKay at the men's senior national championships at Yale University."

De Varona attacked the

media world with the same commitment that she did in the pool, eventually earning an Emmy, two Gracie's (presented by the Alliance for Women in Media Foundation) and covered 17 winter and summer Olympic games. In 2006, she was inducted into the Museum of Television & Radio's first class of 50 "She Made It" pioneers in media.

"They thought I was too young sometimes and I did not know anything other than swimming, but I was encouraged by Roone Arledge, the president of ABC sports, to get more experience," de Varona said. "I finally landed a job at Eyewitness News, which was the hottest local news station, and I became the first woman to cover the New York area sports. I gained a lot of experience about how to produce a spot and to be really aggressive in getting interviews with the top athletics like Joe Namath and Dr. J."

De Varona did not back down in what was essentially an all-male environment. "I loved being in a man's world and that's why I went into sports broadcasting. I always felt the men had more fun and I loved the team aspect and camaraderie. Make no mistake, I love being a woman, but I loved their lives better and their career paths. I always wanted to live a life of passion and my passion was firmly rooted in sports."

The move back East earned her national exposure. "I'm in New York City and hanging out with Howard Cosell and Jim McKay along with the captains of industry," de Varona said. "We went through the period when New York almost went bankrupt. I was hanging out with the Tisch and Rooney families. That platform gave me such a great trajectory in life and I'm really grateful for it."

When de Varona went to Washington D.C. to lobby for Title IX, ABC was getting calls from football coaches asking them why they were letting her go to Congress and testify. "My retort to my colleagues at ABC was that if Howard Cosell could go and talk about the ills of boxing, why can't I talk about a bill that's opening up the doors for women," de Varona said. "And by the way, this is going to offer more opportunities for coverage with

the added sports in the summer and winter Olympics which ABC needed to fill their airtime."

Though de Varona did not get to meet with Sen. Patsy Mink (D-Hawaii) who co-authored and advocated for the passage of Title IX, she did meet with many key figures responsible for the passage of the legislation. "I did work with Senator Birch Bayh (Indiana) who was part of our coalition and the first President Bush who appointed me to a commission to change how Title IX was applied," de Varona said. "We had the support of Republicans like Senators Ted Stevens (Alaska) and Robert Packwood (Oregon) along with Democrats like Ted Kennedy (Mass.) and Bill Bradley (N.J.). Stevens deserves a ton of recognition for always being our defender and fighting against his own people like Orrin Hatch (Utah)."

Though breaking the initial inertia in upping the athletic teams for girls and women was slow and at times arduous, the work of the politicians, parents, coaches, athletes, and the general public proved successful as evidenced by a comparison of participation numbers by high school girls in 1971 and 2020: Cross Country (1971 - 1,719; 2020 - 219,340); Soccer (1971 - 700; 2020 - 400,000); Softball (1971 - 10,000; 2020 - 362,000); Cross Country (1971 - 1,719; 2020 - 219,345).

"These numbers help with the debate as to what sports does for women and how it empowers our culture," de Varona said. "When I worked at Ernst and Young, the Peterson Institute found a correlation between how countries support their women athletes and its impact on their GNP."

The executive director of the National Collegiate Athletic Association, Walter Byers, spoke out against Title IX claiming that it was going to lead to the "possible doom of intercollegiate sports." Ironically, Byers became an avid supporter of Title IX. "I had a lot of arguments with Walter when I was testifying in Washington," de Varona said. "After he retired, he wrote a whole book, championing that Title IX was the right thing to do."

... continued on Page C2

Classified • Classified • Classified • Classified • Classified • Classified • Classified

Science Tutoring

Science Tutoring by Stanford Grad./ Credentialed Teacher/Prof., 15 yrs exp.: MoragaAcademicConsulting.com

For Rent

ORINDA BERKELEY HILLS.
In-Law unit on quiet acre. View. \$1950. month plus 1/2 electric bill 1BR/1BA with kitchen, laundry. No smoking or pets. No roommates. No subletting. Must be employed. Recent references. 5 min. to Orinda Bart. 10 min. to Berkeley Bart. Call 1-925-997-8648.

Fencing and More

Java Fence (925) 957 1628
Decks, Hog Wire, Arbors, Stairs, Trellis, Deer Fence, Chicken coop, Green house
CCL 880556, Free Est

Rototilling

Ken's Rototilling
• 4 W/D Tractors
• Hillside Weed Cutting
• Mowing • Discing • Rototilling
• **Brush Removal Abatement To Fire Dept Regulations**
Free estimates! **925-938-9836**
licensed, bonded & insured. CA#667491
www.kensrototilling.com

Structural Repairs

Since 1989
Alameda Engineering
DRAINAGE SYSTEMS
RETAINING WALLS
FOUNDATIONS
UNDERPINNING
LANDSLIDE REPAIRS
510-537-6550
General Engineering Contractors
Lic. # 562641
alamedaengineering@comcast.net
alameda-engineering.com

Handyman

Quetzal Handyman
AC Service
NO JOB TOO SMALL
Electrical, plumbing,
concrete, driveways & more...
Please call **Carlos Toledo**
510-689-7490

Rusty Nails Handyman Service
Repair • Restore • Revamp
Call Rusty- (925) 890-1581

House Cleaning

www.totalclean.biz
Serving Lamorinda since 1985.
Insured and bonded 376-1004.

Plumbing

WE HOP TO IT!
(925) 377-6600
LeapFrogPlumbing.com

\$15 per 1/2" classified ad height. Email to: classified@lamorindaweekly.com