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Celebrating 50 Years of Title IX

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In 1972, Title IX was created to give women the same opportunities as men when it comes to participating in educational programs and activities. As we marked the 50th anniversary of Title IX in 2022, we chatted with some of our own former college athletes about their experience with team sports, what they learned from those experiences, and what life lessons have stuck with them that they have applied to their career.

Our discussion included Kristine Roberts, shareholder in the Memphis office and former Princeton University rugby player; Katy Furr, shareholder in our Atlanta office and former lacrosse player at Clemson University; Sarah Casey, counsel in our New Orleans office and former Millsaps College basketball, volleyball, and softball player; and Erin Gomez, associate in our Chattanooga office and former cross-country athlete at Maryville College.

Q: What are a few life lessons or skills playing sports taught you?

Erin: My cross-country experience taught me to focus on what I could control and how I prepare myself for competition. In my very first race ever at Maryville, I had to race against Division 1 athletes on a very challenging course. I ended up finishing last and it made me contemplate if I should even go back to practice and continue. However, that race taught me that I can't control who my competitors might be or what the track may look like, but what I can do is focus on my own preparation and my own mental process to be able to finish the race for myself.

Sarah: It got me into the mindset of believing that when you show up every day and put in the work, it really matters. Going from being a big star on my high school basketball team to a college team, there was quite a bit of a learning curve for me, and I rode the bench a lot those first few years. Even then, I continued to show up every day and put in the work, and eventually by my junior year, I was a starter, and by my senior year, I even led the team in several stats.

I also learned I could do just about anything, however hard or painful, for a finite period of time. Whether that be lunges, sprints, or playing in a game where you are clearly outmatched, I can push myself and give it my all. That lesson has stuck with me through challenging phases in my life such as law school, childbirth, and now raising a toddler – you might be outmatched, but you can do it.

Katy: As attorneys, we can often be very Type A and hard on ourselves. What sports teaches us is to remind ourselves to have some grace and realize that not every game is going to go perfectly, not every hearing is going to go how you envision it. Even if it goes down in flames, it's OK – tomorrow is a new day.

Q: What are some skills you learned from your sports background that help you approach team and collaborative projects?

Katy: The first thing that sticks out to me is communication. Whether we were on the field or getting directions from our coach, understanding what your directive is in a clear and precise manner is helpful. In teams, clearly communicating instructions to the folks who may support you or work with you is incredibly important. You

should also raise your hand if there's miscommunication or if you don't understand something. Not everyone learns and listens the same way; I coach my daughter's lacrosse team and I've had to learn to alter my coaching style based on the individual player so I am communicating and giving them instructions in the way they best receive it.

Erin: Cross-country was a little different because your teammates were your competitors on race day. For me, the best part about being a part of a team was not the competition, but everything before the competition - holding each other accountable, running together on Saturday mornings, commiserating over our injuries, that sense of support we had for each other was incredible. We may not necessarily be in the courtroom together every day but being able to support each other and hold each other accountable are the real values on the teams that I work with.

Kristine: Rugby can often appear to be a chaotic game – it's always in motion – the ball is moving backward and forward constantly. It was really important to communicate to your teammate who had the ball, by saying "With you, with you," so they knew you were there close by if they needed to pass the ball to you. With our colleagues, I think it's the same sentiment in letting them know you have their back when they need help, when they need advice, or just need someone to talk to.

Q: Like in sports, we don't always win. And as much as we'd like to win every case or matter, that's not realistic. How did sports teach you to lose graciously and persevere? How does sports help you learn from mistakes?

Erin: In looking at the leaderboard, you could say I did a lot of "losing." For that reason, my feeling of loss is a little different. I was not as focused on placing but rather on if I beat my personal record each time, if I finished the race, or how I felt during the race and my endurance. Those are the personal losses I almost always attributed to my lack of preparation – whether that be not eating well, getting enough sleep, or skipping those Saturday practice runs. I always felt like there was something I could learn from a loss and do better next time.

I am a litigator, so it is very similar as there are times where we are going to lose because we can't control the facts, we can't control our clients, or we can't control the court. But those times don't always feel like losses to me unless I feel I could have done something better beforehand to prepare. The end result for me is never winning or losing but more, preventing the personal feeling of loss and learning from the times I know I can do better.

Katy: It's just the right thing to do to lose graciously. You don't want to be the one getting upset and running out of the court room badmouthing opposing counsel. The legal community is small, and you are likely going to run into these folks again, so just remember that professionalism matters. Your reputation is something that is going to stay with you – it's part of your brand. If you need to take a minute and deal with your frustration privately, take that minute and then come back ready to shake the other person's hand.

Kristine: For more-experienced attorneys, I also think it's important to share with your junior colleagues about those times that things didn't go well or times where you lost a case. It's all about being part of team to help each other get better. Being candid about past mistakes and experiences can really help us all.

Q: What can sports teach us about leadership? What have you learned about your own leadership skills through sports?

Sarah: Sports was really the first forum where I was considered a "leader" in my role as captain. As a young athlete, you may not get the opportunity to be the leader you want to be at the time. You learn quickly that

being the leader can often be a hard and thankless job. You know you must lead by example, building people up while also holding them accountable, and that can be really hard to do with your peers.

One of the things I discovered early on in my role as a leader was that you didn't necessarily have to be a specific type of leader. When my college volleyball team voted me co-captain, my coach was initially shocked by the team's decision. To her, I was a bit quieter, I was not the one who led the team chant, or the one to get loud in someone's face. However, the team knew I was dependable, that I was going to show up every day and be there for them and give them that quiet vote of confidence in their ear. I learned that you don't have to be what you would envision as the typical sports leader to be successful.

Katy: One of things it taught me is to be vocal. No one is going to pass you the ball on the field if you are not asking for it. Sometimes to get a seat at the table, you must raise your hand and tell people what you want. You also must be willing to accept feedback. As athletes, some days your coach is going to tell you that what you are doing is just not working for you and the team. You must be gracious enough in those moments to really listen. And it's the same in our leadership positions here at Baker Donelson – you must be willing to listen to your colleagues and try something different if something isn't working.

Erin: We didn't really have a designated captain, but there was an upperclassman on our team who we all considered the "team mom" and our team leader. She wasn't the fastest the girl on the team – she was often in the back of the pack. However, what made her a leader in our eyes was that she was always there. She never missed practice, she would always go with you on the weekend if you needed someone to run with, and she would listen to you and give you support and advice.

The takeaway for me is that you don't have to be the "superstar" to be a leader. It was those behind-the-scenes moments of supporting teammates and being there for them that made her feel like a leader to me. And that's what I hope I can do as a leader in my own practice – not necessarily be the one having the all-star argument or winning every case by myself, but rather being able to support an entire team by being there, doing what I say I am going to do, listening, and showing up for them.

Q: *Thinking about the best coaches you've had – what made them great? How have you tried to emulate that great coach?*

Sarah: I had a number of coaches with different coaching methods. I feel like the best coaches often walk a very fine line between showing their confidence in what you can do but also inspiring you to push yourself and do more. You must have a coach who not only cares a great deal about the team but also cares a great deal about you as person and is willing to communicate that to you. Sports can be an incredible avenue in helping shape young people, and if you have a great coach, it can make all the difference in the world.

Kristine: When I think about my experience with past coaches and leaders here at Baker Donelson who have conveyed that they genuinely care about me and my development, the ones who I consider great "coaches" were those that recognized how to inspire and motivate people based on the individual. Having the flexibility to meet people where they are, push them to do better and inspire confidence is key.

Q: *How does your experience help you play "coach" and mentor others?*

Katy: I try to remember to have patience – and it's something I embrace that I lack sometimes. Not everything is going to be done as quickly and efficiently as I want it to be in my mind. I think about that when I am coaching my daughter's lacrosse team, when I am at home, and when I am at work. I even used to keep a note on my computer with the mantra "Slow Down" to remind me each day to practice patience.

Sarah: I would echo patience is key. I also try not ask anyone to do something that I am not willing to do myself. That is also a remnant of coaching and sports.

Q: *What does Title IX mean to you?*

Sarah: Overall, I am incredibly grateful for Title IX and the opportunities it provided me. My mom tried to put me in dance, which I did not take to, but fortunately, I discovered sports and then there was no more ballet shoes for me. If I would have had to stay with dance, I don't think I would have been very successful with it, and it would not have been something I would have wanted to do long-term. Without Title IX, I would not have had the opportunity for an outlet for extracurricular activities like sports.

Erin: I was not even trying to join a sports team and it made it easy for me to become a part of college athletics. I am incredibly grateful for that because it opened so many doors for me and showed me that if there's something you are not quite sure you can do, if you put the work in, there are people that will support you doing it and you can do it.

Kristine: When I think about what I learned from sports – the experience, the teamwork, the confidence building, it was a tremendous learning experience that I still carry with me today.