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Invisible Seasons: Title IX and the Fight for Equity in College Sports

By Kelly Belanger. Published 2016 by Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, NY. (363 pages).

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“*Invisible Seasons*” by Kelly Belanger details the story of the Michigan State University women’s basketball team and their fight with the school’s Board of Trustees for equal rights under Title IX of the Education Amendments Act of 1972. A former member of the team herself, Belanger paints an extensive, thorough picture of the “microhistory” of the experiences at Michigan State which reflected relevantly across the country in the 1970s. Historical contexts of *Invisible Seasons* allows the reader to witness the fight for equity from a first-hand source.

Belanger points to the financial threats posed by the implementation of Title IX as the catalyst for the fight presented by the NCAA and athletic departments. The inaction by the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (AIAW) and the economic boon surrounding Magic Johnson’s tenure at Michigan State frame the unfairness, and eventual unlawfulness faced by MSU women’s basketball, providing the reader with a comprehensive viewpoint from the front lines of the equity fight in women’s college athletics. While the book focuses primarily on Michigan State women’s basketball, it also includes examples simultaneously occurring around the country at other universities and athletic departments, including the University of Texas, Temple, and Yale, thus allowing the reader to fully understand the magnitude of Title IX’s impact.

In *Part One: Do Women Want the Rose Bowl?*, the severe inequities in men’s and women’s sport are discussed, presenting the support of women’s athletics in the 1970s as a burden on revenue-producing men’s programs. The interpretation of, and rhetoric surrounding, Title IX was conflicting among lawmakers, administrators, and most notably, the NCAA and the AIAW. Debates over equity spurred NCAA pushback as discrepancies in spending and exceptional limitations on opportunities for women in higher education came to light. The NCAA’s strong opposition to Title IX included their seeking of exemption for high-revenue sports. Notably, Belanger described then-U.S. President Ford’s influential ties to college football as a former player at the University of Michigan, stating “the NCAA itself had made a point of reminding President Ford that he belonged to a brotherhood of football athletes,” thus exhibiting the power and prominence of men’s college sport in politics (p. 67).

Part Two: Grassroots of Change opens with the 1975 season's hiring of a new MSU women's basketball coach, growing tensions within the athletic department, and Dr. Nell Jackson's administrative role to fortify women's sports with little improvements in resources. The 1977 season saw increased invisibility of women's basketball, as Magic Johnson's national impact captured the spotlight, leaving the women "with equally high hopes of reaching their full potential as athletes, including (for some) hopes of playing professionally" (p. 95). The arrival and impact of MSU's newly hired Title IX coordinator, women's rights activist Mary Pollock from the University of Illinois, empowered women's basketball player Kathleen DeBoer to speak out on the inequalities and unfairness. When Pollock informed coaches at MSU about Title IX's regulations in 1977, women's cross country coach Mark Pittman emerged as a critical figure, as his taking the inequalities seriously propelled him to begin recording a chronology of notes on Title IX-relevant events. The documents proved elemental during future meetings and court hearings.

Part Three: Students Take Action began with MSU's success on the court leading to a more credible argument for equity by providing examples of daily inequality at MSU, including dust-covered gym floors, taping broken and ripped shoes, and squeezing into station wagons to travel ten or more hours to away games. A lack of national communication prevented MSU players from knowledge of nationwide fights, as women in athletic departments across the country were speaking out against similar issues. National rhetoric recognized the necessity for action with integration and connection rather than aggression, and urged female leaders to "capitalize on traditional feminine characteristics that men would find appealing and unthreatening" (p. 175).

As Title IX coordinator, Pollock's access to documents and financial reports produced proof the university was hiding funds spent on men's athletics. Pittman's chronology continued to grow, and when MSU women's basketball officially filed a complaint in March of 1978, DeBoer and Pollock used the media as a tool to induce pressure on the athletic department. Still, limitations of case law available to enforce Title IX and the Fourteenth Amendment impeded MSU women's basketball's complaints and accusations from gaining traction and producing reparation. Thus, the fight for equity continued.

Part Four: Escalation focuses on the decisive summer of 1978, as attorney Jean Ledworth King's involvement increased the case's traction nearing the July 21 national deadline to comply with Title IX. Pollock was fired by the MSU administration in June, igniting the flame under DeBoer, Mankowski, Pittman, Alexander, and other women's players including Deb Traxinger and Carol Hutchins, as they decided to propel their complaint beyond campus. In meeting with the MSU Board of Trustees, the women's basketball team suggested MSU athletics continued to exclude men's basketball, hockey, and football programs from financial analyses, blamed their inaction on delay in reports from affirmative action and legal audits, and denied any responsibility to comply due to confusion of the law.

The case, *Hutchins vs. Board of Trustees of Michigan State University*, evolved into a class action lawsuit filed in federal court representing players from 1976-1979, and was not settled until 1988. However, small victories including equal food and lodging to the men's team were acquired, as King's use of the Fourteenth Amendment in conjunction with Title IX made national news headlines and influenced cases nationally.

Throughout *Invisible Seasons*, Belanger challenges the reader, athletics staff members, coaches, and athletes themselves to become more aware of Title IX's intricacies and rhetoric, as acceptance of the current reality of inequality being "just the way it is" perpetuates the denial of

female athletes' receiving equitable rights. Nevertheless, the fight of the MSU women's basketball team paved the way for vastly improved opportunities currently enjoyed by today's female college athletes.

The facts presented by *Invisible Seasons*, along with the author's proximity to the events taking place, strengthens the narrative, but also presents the context through a sympathetic lens. A "Timeline of Title IX's First Decades" is included in the book for further reference, providing an extensive list of chronological events and detailed key moments in the fight for equality. *Invisible Seasons* would benefit any class or curriculum involving women in sport, history of Title IX, or sport law, as it allows readers to witness the struggle and triumph of female athletes through a pivotal chapter of women's sport history.