***Break Point: Two Minnesota Athletes and the Road to Title IX***

Sheri Brenden

Reviewed by Alan Zaremba

Northeastern University

*Break Point: Two Minnesota Athletes and the Road to Title IX* (University of Minnesota Press)is a well written, accurately titled, and valuable book. The author, Sheri Brenden, examines a case that involved her sister, Peggy Brenden--a tennis player, and Toni St. Pierre--a cross-country runner and cross-country skier. Both athletes were enrolled in high schools just prior to the passage of Title IX. Neither school had girls’ teams in the athletes’ respective sports. Both Brenden and St. Pierre wanted to compete and the only way to compete would be to play on the existing boys’ teams. Both were skilled athletes and could compete with high school boys. However, the Minnesota State High School League (MSHSL) prohibited girls from playing on boy’s teams. In addition, the MSHSL would penalize opponents that competed with boys’ teams that had girls on them.

The book includes the background of the case; information about the two athletes and their families; the court case proceedings including excerpts from witnesses’ testimonies; information about how the women fared in their high school competitions after they were victorious in court; the MSHSL appeal; and what happened to the women in their years after the court case.

The book will be valuable to a number of audiences.

* Historians and social scientists studying the evolution of women’s struggle to achieve equality in sport.

* Instructors teaching sports communication, management, law, or history courses.
	+ The book could be used not only as a case history, but also to tease out issues brought out during court arguments. For example, the attorney for the young women argued that the athletes were deprived of their right to compete, and consequently the MSHSL rule perpetuated unlawful inequities. The attorneys for the MSHSL contended that allowing women to compete on men’s teams would retard the growth of women’s sports. The judge asserted that the case was only about these two athletes and his finding was not intended to “involve a class action.” The MSHSL countered that a decision to allow these two women to compete would inevitably set a precedent that transcended the Brenden/St. Pierre case. Instructors in various sports courses might use *Break Point* as a springboard for point/counterpoint discussion that could fuel interesting and likely animated debates.
* Those who study gender equality and compare current and past conditions.
	+ Are societies more enlightened in 2023 or, despite the growth of women’s sports, do people still harbor the same attitudes about women and women athletes? Brenden writes incisively that in 1972 “It was as if the phrase ‘female athlete’ were an oxymoron (132). She refers to a 1972 women’s track coach who said, “We try to keep the girls as feminine as possible, and just let them run.” (131) Brenden comments: “Athletic skill, muscle, toughness were not usually included in anyone’s [then] definitions of feminine.” (131) Fifty years later, to what extent have perceptions changed?
* Media scholars who study media framing.
	+ Some of the newspaper headlines Brenden identifies from the case are jarring. “Girls Sports Get Go Ahead; Boy’s Athletics Take Lumps.” (108) “Girls Getting Pretty Darn Good at Track” (131). In addition to these headlines, Brenden describes media reporting and reporters. There are examples throughout the book of media framing.
* Sociologists who examine culture and social change.
	+ *Break Point* reveals how individuals defend even illogical and unlawful rules because these rules support and reinforce convention. Brenden cites a court case in 1971 during which a judge opined “Athletic competition builds character in our boys. We do not need that kind of character in our girls, the women of tomorrow.” (12)
* Any person, not necessarily a researcher, interested in women’s sports and sports in general.

Some other engaging aspects of the book:

Readers (especially those who played, coached, or followed team tennis) will find noteworthy the section that describes Peggy Brenden’s first matches competing against boys. In brief, coaches from opposing teams changed the order of their players to make sure that a tougher player would compete against Brenden. In her initial competition, Peggy was the number three player for her team. Instead of playing the number three player for the opponent, the opposing coach had the number two player, play down, and the number three player play up. The former number three player lost 6-0, 6-0. Brenden, at number three, nearly won, losing 9-7; 7-5 to the opponent’s number two. Brenden’s coach commented, “They stacked their lineup basically because the No. 3 didn’t want to get beat by a girl.” (116) A Minnesota newspaper headlined the article about the match, “Girl Prep Enters Boys Area, Loses.” (119)

There is a section about how the judge in the case decided that the athletes’ attorney was a novice compared to the lawyers for the MSHSL. Because of this, the judge decided to, essentially, assist the athletes’ attorney. The judge commented “…when a young lawyer comes in faced with three lawyers of some experience and his first case in a situation like this, I thought…it called for some judicial intervention to even the scales.” The attorney for the MSHSL was not pleased by the activity of the judge. He commented “I would like to add an objection now to the conduct of the court in the course of the trial…in intervening in this case, in trying a big part of the case on behalf of the plaintiffs, I just think that ought to be on the record.” (101)

It is revealing that the same woman, Dorothy McIntyre, a witness and advocate for the MSHSL during the case who opined that “If we let the girls get on the boys’ teams, then the school districts wouldn’t be motivated to create equivalent systems for the girls” (39) is identified toward the end of the book (150) as someone who, despite the ruling, was able to create very strong women’s competitions.

There are a number of ways I think the book could have been even stronger. It would have been good to include an index. The “Further Reading*”* section was a valuable inclusion but might have been more beneficial had the entries been annotated. I wondered how items were selected or omitted from the list. It was surprising, for example, that *Playing for Equality*, a book cited in the endnotes (that intrigued me sufficiently to request an e-version of the book from my university’s library) was not included. In addition to the “Further Reading” section, the endnotes in *Break Point* are rich with references to interesting articles related to women and sports. I am not a supporter of the current trend to exclude superscripted numbers in texts but include notes at the back of a book. It was good to see that the author included superscripts; these alert the reader. Many readers do not refer to endnotes, but for those of us who do, the notes help identify sources for further review. In *Break Point* there were a number of instances when the content of the note had me exploring the source identified. There were, however, a few instances where the notes were not clear or were puzzling. For example, note 13 on page 147 refers to a cover story in *Sports Illustrated*. The citation, however, refers to a book written by Jaime Schultz. In Schultz’s book, the *Sports Illustrated* quote--from which Brenden excerpted a portion--appears. Why was Schultz’s book, and not the *Sports Illustrated* article used as the source? There may be, and likely is, a good reason—the book is very thoroughly researched—but there were a few times when a citation was confusing at least to this reader.

These are hardly major issues. *Break Point* is a valuable book which, particularly at the end, is very powerful. Sadly, Toni St. Pierre was a cancer victim at age 58, and the author could not interview her for *Break Point*. However, Sheri Brenden was able to relay information about Peggy Brenden. The book concludes with a description of Peggy Brenden’s return to her high school as an adult. It’s likely that readers--particular those aware of the obstacles women and other minorities have encountered in sports--will find these final two paragraphs of *Break Point* stirring and memorable.