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Title IX turns 30, and it brings the gifts

RICK BURTON

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I had just finished blowing out the candles during my private celebration of Title IX's 30th birthday when I looked around to see what presents my daughters had received. The world was certainly different for female athletes three decades removed from 1972, but I said let's cut to the chase: What were we all getting this year?

Then I saw them, three distinct gifts I hoped would make a difference not only for my family but also for our cozy little industry.

The first was a new girls football book by former all-Big Ten basketball player Maureen Holohan called "Catch Shorty." Holohan, for my dollar, is the new Matt Christopher or Clair Bee of children's sport literature, churning out a series of wonderful books for girls and boys that show females the benefits of playing sports. If Christopher wrote "Touchdown for Tommy," "Catch That Pass!" or "Catcher with a Glass Arm" to inspire boys across the 1960, '70s and '80s, then Holohan's Broadway Ballplayers series with "Friday Nights," "Ice Cold" and "Sideline Blues" is just the ticket for girls of the new millennium.

It might also serve as a subtle gift to the NFL and NCAA, which, while they don't need to give away bobblehead dolls to get fans to come into their stadiums, might want to use a girls' football league plot to think about the pigskin's future if boys are the only ones who can get scholarships.

Said another way (and borrowing a rough idea from Women's Sports Foundation executive director Donna Lopiano), it may be time for the NCAA to invest in importing a sport like Australian Rules Football, where the emphasis is not on tackling but rather on running, jumping, marking and kicking. Since footy requires lots of players (who all touch the ball frequently), the idea is easily worth exploring if the true objective is to create comparable athletic scholarship opportunities for women.

Hear me clearly: The villain in the NCAA/Title IX slugfest is not men's football. It's the absence of a football-like sport (a la women's hockey or women's softball) that is slightly different from the men's version but invites the same kind of competitive team-sport thrill. For my dime, Australia's AFL is a brilliant model to emulate.

The second gift was a new surfing movie called "Blue Crush" that features the women's pro surfing tour and shows athletic women making it happen on big waves. No doubt someone will complain there is too much cleavage, too many fashion designers and too many double entendre clichés, but the point is this: Both genders can enjoy outdoor sports like surfing, kayaking, rock climbing and snowboarding.

If the movie doesn't immediately tank, I want to take our youngest and tell her, "Look at those girls kicking butt. You can, too."

The third gift was harder to unwrap but in some ways all the more revealing. It was the discovery that of all the sports leagues out there, only the WUSA (women's professional soccer) has an active athlete, San Diego Spirit midfielder Julie Foudy, on the league's board of directors. She sees the books, knows the numbers, has a say in where the league goes. It's a gift Major League Baseball might want to explore.

Now, I know the challenge to that idea is: 1) Baseball doesn't have a board. 2) Baseball consists of 30 teams fighting each other, unlike WUSA with its single-entity business structure. 3) Baseball teams compete for players; WUSA assigns players to teams.

But here's a counter thought for you.

Have you seen that new TBS television show "Worst Case Scenario"? I haven't, but the concept asks viewers to consider what they would do if, say, their fancy SUV suddenly skidded off the wet bridge into a river. Seems to me baseball is pretty close to its edge (some might say the wheels are already in the water) and thus might want to look at the WUSA's board membership idea before rejecting such a common business practice (i.e., a board of directors) outright.

The WUSA also has a woman, Lynn Morgan, at the top serving as chief executive officer. Like Deborah Yow (athletic director at Maryland), Barbara Hedges (AD at Washington), Val Ackerman (president of the WNBA), Amy Trask (CEO, Oakland Raiders), Linda McMahon (CEO, World Wrestling Entertainment), Morgan has shown the old boys there are new ways to run a league, team or business. Maybe Bud Selig should invite himself over to have some birthday cake with Lynn Morgan.

Anyways, that's it for this year's party. Time to clean up and throw the wrapping paper in the trash. But, all in all, those are pretty good gifts. Wonder what we'll get next year.

Rick Burton is executive director of the Warsaw Sports Marketing Center in the University of Oregon's Lundquist College of Business.

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