

GIRL'S RECORD MAKES A POINT ON SPORTS

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One night not too long ago, Katelyn Leonard raised a ruckus at the Swampscott High School gym when she sent a 3-point shot through the hoop, surpassing 1,000 points scored and becoming the first young woman in Swampscott High history to do so.

The capacity crowd cheered, stamped its feet and whistled during a standing ovation. Her shot had broken a 41-point tie with Winthrop and play was interrupted as Superintendent Jacqueline Blanchard awarded Leonard a Big Blue basketball painted blue, with 1,000 marked in white.

After the game, the crowd gave her flowers and gifts, wrapped her in hugs, planted kisses on her cheeks. Everyone—parents and players, spectators and students—was elated, feeling a part of her singular thrill.

Among those in the bleachers that night was 32-year-old Janet Miller, a former Swampscott High basketball player, a forward on the 1986 national championship Salem State basketball team and currently the only woman playing in the Boston Men's Baseball League. Perhaps more than anyone else in that audience, she felt both the joy and the pain that Leonard's entry into Swampscott's athletic history embodied—a departure from the past, and a promise.

It's been 25 years since Title IX was passed, part of the Education Act of 1972 that promised equity and equal access to female athletes like Miller, who, in the past three months, has been inducted into the Salem State College and the Swampscott High School halls of fame. During that quarter century, so much has changed—in the locker rooms, on the playing fields, at the gyms—that we may not have noticed its significance.

In 1970, only one girl in 27 played sports. Today, one in three plays. The change is as dramatic as it is heartening. Just ask Miller, a talented all-around athlete who knew what it felt like to go against the grain, as the first girl to play Swampscott Little League majors or as one of the first women to play with the elite men's Cape Cod League All-Stars in a televised exhibition game against the Colorado Silver Bullets, the women's pro baseball team. In her one time at bat she hit a double to right, and she remembered thinking about the Little League coach who once passed her over for a less talented boy, arguing that she'd be ``taking a spot on the team from a boy who might make baseball his career."

``I thought, screw you. There was a future for a girl in baseball," Miller recalled.

This week, Miller is boarding a plane to Fort Myers, Fla., for a trip to City of Palms Park, where she will be showing off her fielding and hitting skills trying out for a spot with the Colorado Silver Bullets. The tryouts are Feb. 8 and 9 in the same ballfield where the Red Sox practice. ``I'm going to follow my dream. If I don't make it, I don't make it. But it's not because I didn't try," says Miller.

All across the nation, there are girls who are trying. And they are better off for it. They are more physically fit, psychologically stronger, more self-confident and less vulnerable to abusive relationships. And slowly, but surely, the barriers that kept girls off teams and away from the gym are eroding.

Almost without our noticing, there is a new paradigm that suggests girls can compete, play hard, sweat and be victorious. And they can do all this without jeopardizing their standing as girls, without threat to their femininity. They can be heroes on the court, leaders in the field, victors in the gym. They can high-five and dribble low. They are players.

``When Jackie Blanchard spoke, her words really, really touched me. She said that this is a great day in Katelyn's career and a great day in women's sports," Miller said.

On a recent Friday night at the Swampscott Middle School, in a girls' intramural basketball game, one of the standouts was Jackie Popeo, a sixth grader who learned lay ups and how to steal the ball in pickup games with boys. One couldn't help notice that all the sixth grade boys she plays hoop with, and against, were cheering for her as boisterously as they cheer each other on.

This is a great time for girls' sports. It's a time when a 12-year-old girl can announce, ``I'm going out to shoot hoops," and not raise any eyebrows.

It's a time when girls can show off their strength and agility without being seen as a threat to the boys or men watching. It's a time when a girl can dream of a college athletic scholarship and actually have a chance of receiving one. And while admittedly, it's not as taut a muscle as it could be, it is clear that after 25 years of legalized access, we have gone from girls playing sports being an aberration to it being an expectation.