

Lawyer Insights

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Billie Jean King Would Have Been a Great Lawyer

Excelling in Sports Is Not So Dissimilar to the Practice of Law

By Kathleen J. Wu

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As I write this, the nation is basking in the glow of the U.S. women's soccer team's victory—the team's fourth consecutive World Cup win and the latest confirmation of the U.S. team's complete domination of global women's soccer.

The pace of the final game against the Netherlands stood in stark contrast to the U.S. Open golf tournament in Pebble Beach—which I was lucky enough to attend in June—but the victory celebrations embodied the same jubilation and excitement. It's a sight I've seen again and again, in every conceivable sport, and I never grow tired of it.

One of the things I love about watching sports is what we *don't* see: the years of practice, the missed parties, the endless grit, dedication and sacrifice, and the flat-out hard work that went into the celebratory photo ops.

I think it's because it's so much like being a lawyer.

Hear me out.

Very few lawyers coasted through law school, or the bar exam, or their first few years of practice—regardless of whether they were working in a big law firm, a small boutique, a public defender's office, or any of the other jobs young lawyers flock to. It's grueling work, and to get any good at it requires long hours of practice, missed weekends, and extreme dedication to the mission and to getting better (that is why it's called the *practice* of law).

It's just like excelling at a sport.

One of the most lawyer-like sports is golf. The best lawyering—just like the best golf shot—is done deliberately, and with the benefit of experience. Strategy first, action second.

Focus on the problem in front of you, breathe, think, anticipate, act. Repeat. And then try to do it consistently without getting tight or letting your head wander.

And just as with golf, becoming a better lawyer takes lots of time, patience, and practice. Perhaps more time, patience, and practice than I would like; Being a novice golfer has been a painful reminder of my days as a novice lawyer, when each new project made my palms sweat. I knew I was finally starting to crack the code when I stopped panicking with every new assignment, when I could finally say to myself, "I got this" (even if I wasn't 100% sure that I did).

I'm not yet in "I got this" mode with golf, (other than with my handy driver off a really high-set tee or a forgiving lie in the rough with my hybrid, in both cases though with no one pressuring me to play faster), but I'm enjoying it enough to stick with it and, hopefully, get there someday.

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Before I fell in love with golf, tennis was my sport of choice. That's partly because I loved the game itself (and still do), and partly because my son played it competitively. I watched him juggle rigorous academics and highly competitive tennis, and was so impressed at how the traits and skills he developed while playing—teamwork, focus, and even time management—helped him excel academically and professionally. I have no doubt he will continue to benefit from tennis, regardless of what he chooses to do after law school.

And that's because the same challenges that forge champions on the field are what forge champions off the field. But lawyers have the distinct advantage of not needing to be perfect physical specimens, and our concussion risks are practically non-existent.

Lawyers, like athletes, are also risk-takers. Victory is never guaranteed, either on the field or in the courtroom. And for those of us on the transactional side, no deal is a guaranteed winner. We can never take any client for granted – the competition is simply too tough—and, so, with every deal, we have to show up with our A game no matter what may be happening on the sidelines, in the office, at home, or with other clients on other matters.

One of my favorite group of athletic risk-takers were the tennis players known as the Original 9, led by tennis legend Billie Jean King. Almost 50 years ago, in 1970, the Original 9—tired of being paid a fraction of what their male counterparts were being paid—left the established tennis circuit and started their own tour where they could compete for real money.

They risked their professional careers because they wanted to make a difference, not just for themselves but for the generations of players coming after them. And it paid off.

Their equal pay demands paved the way for better pay for female athletes overall and set the stage for the 1972 passage of Title IX, which increased funding for girls' and women's sports and introduced women to athletic competition at an unprecedented rate. It set up the next generation of players like Chrissy Everett and Martina Navratilova to build upon what the Original 9 did and they did exactly that. They created an unstoppable momentum that gave us Steffi Graff, the Williams sisters, and, most recently, Coco Gauff.

Title IX also opened the doors to increased college and law school attendance by women. We're still trying to make up for the centuries of unapologetic, institutional sex discrimination, but we have Title IX—and players like the Original 9—to thank, at least partly, for the progress we have made.

As the U.S. women's soccer team continues their own battle for equal pay, we can only speculate about where we'll be 50 years from now. If current trends continue, "playing like a girl" will be even fiercer and more profitable.

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