

Testimony of Tara Erickson
Before the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation
On Promotion and Advancement of Women in Sports
February 1, 2006

Good morning Chairman Stevens, Senator Inoyue, and members of the Committee. My name is Tara Erickson, and I am the head coach of the women's soccer team at the University of Oregon. As such, I want to say a special thank you to Senator Smith, who has shown such great support for the University and who has been a strong leader on the issue we're discussing today: Promotion and advancement of women in sports.

Senator Smith you should know that I spent a lot time in your state as a kid, but I grew up in nearby Puyallup, Washington and played soccer in high school. I was fortunate enough to earn a scholarship to the University of Washington and play for Leslie Gallimore, the woman who helped guide my career. I earned a bachelor's degree in communications, but my first love remained soccer. When I graduated, there were more opportunities for me to play professional soccer in Europe than there were in the United States. I still loved playing, and I played in Germany for a year, but I wanted to come home to the Pacific Northwest.

Coach Gallimore at UW convinced me to consider a career in coaching. I earned a position on her staff, and once again Coach Gallimore became my mentor. I went on to my own head coaching job at Portland State, and now I'm at the University of Oregon. As a coach I have been very fortunate to share my love of sport with my teammates. Coaching is a gift, and I do not take this blessing lightly. Players that I have coached have gone on to become productive members of our community, and I hope have also become ambassadors of opportunity and fair play. As a coach, I strive to always give as much on the sidelines as I did as a player. The kids deserve that, as does the institution I represent.

But sometimes fair play and opportunity need an extra push and that's why I am a huge supporter of Title IX. This important civil rights law has helped establish a level of fairness and equity in athletics. The law's impact, however, has extended far beyond the classrooms and the athletic fields. It has created an entire generation of mentors who work with young girls – and young boys. It has nurtured interest in sports to the point where the athletes sitting with me this morning have become the pride of our nation and the envy of the rest of the world. It has created economic opportunities and job security for people like me – soccer may be played today by younger women like the amazing Cat Reddick, but I'm still earning a living working with the game I love so much. Most importantly, it helps parents teach a simple yet powerful lesson to children – a lesson I will soon teach my adorable baby boy, Maklain: when it comes to sports, EVERYONE deserves a chance to play.

We know sports have a positive impact on girls' lives. Studies show that girls who participate in sports are less likely to smoke or use drugs. They perform better in the

classroom. Just this past November our team honored Caitlin Gamble, a midfielder and the first Academic All-American in our program's history. They have fewer health problems later in life. They learn how to work with teammates and can develop a feeling of confidence and a sense of purpose. I'm proud to know that as a coach and a mentor, I can help young women in this way.

I am so very proud to be part of the University of Oregon. The University does a great job making sure the opportunities we provide our male athletes are mirrored by the opportunities we provide our young women. They do more than simply follow the letter of the law; they embrace its spirit. Without Title IX, we don't know if there would be a women's soccer coach at Oregon, or Portland State, or Washington, or anywhere else. I can't imagine what my life would be like without the opportunities I had.

One of the things I enjoy most about my job at the University of Oregon is speaking with women and girls who visit us. Playing college athletics was one of the best experiences of my life, but it's even better for young women today. I love to share the experiences of what sports meant to me as an athlete in high school and at the University of Washington. I can see the excitement in the eyes of young athletes as you realize you're connecting with them. I can see the pride in the faces of their mothers as they think about the first-rate education their daughters can obtain here. Thanks in no small part to the fact that our soccer program was awarded two more scholarships, I feel the joy of knowing that an opportunity awaits that young girl who has worked so hard to get to this point. And I also appreciate that it wasn't always like this. If we lower the threshold for compliance with Title IX, those young women will still have the athleticism but may not have the opportunity. It's that simple.

I cannot begin to tell you how proud I am that the young athletes here this morning are choosing to speak out in support of opportunities for girls and women in sport. It's easy to look at the progress we've made and say we don't need Title IX any more. But we can't look back. We must make sure the generations of mentors don't stop with the incredible athletes – the wonderful young women – here today. Please fight to give young girls the opportunity to excel in anything they choose. Please fight to help them have confidence and purpose. Help them choose to participate. Help them be athletes. Help them be mentors. Help them be strong.

If you keep Title IX strong, you won't be alone. Companies like Nike have helped support women's sports at every level. Specifically, Nike helps raise visibility and awareness of women's sports so the youngsters who play sports have role models to follow and dreams to pursue. In addition to its support for women's professional athletes, the company sponsored its first-annual Nike Women's Marathon in San Francisco in October 2004 in celebration of the 20th anniversary of women's first participation in the Olympic Games marathon.

So I thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to speak with you this morning. I want to thank Senator Smith again for being such a stalwart leader on civil rights issues. I share the pride that we all have in the young women who have joined us. I know the

title of the hearing is the promotion and advancement of women in sports, but you must know that Title IX made this hearing and my testimony possible. And like these amazing women, please fight to keep Title IX strong.