

## Pass It On®...

### **A One-time 13-Year-old Olympic Prodigy, Donna de Varona is Still Making Waves.**

*From swimming superstar to women's rights advocate, the co-founder of the Women's Sports Foundation is making sure all girls are given an equal chance in sports.*

Donna de Varona is an American swimming legend who made history as a 13-year-old Olympic prodigy. The youngest athlete at the 1960 Rome Olympics, she went on to win two gold medals at the 1964 Tokyo Olympics at age 17.

De Varona was recognized as the “most outstanding woman athlete of the world” and appeared on the covers of *Sports Illustrated*, *Look* and *Life* magazines. After retiring from swimming, she became the youngest member on ABC's Wide World of Sports at 17 years old, as well as one of the first female sportscasters for a national network. Her insight and confident camera presence earned her an EMMY in television and induction into the Museum of Television & Radio.

Through all of the success, de Verona has been single-minded about making sure girls get a fair chance to compete. She played a key role in the passage of Title IX legislation that promotes gender equality in sports, enacted in 1972.

In the 1970s, the world was waking up to Girl Power. Women were asking for a seat at the table in business, politics and sports. Women's organizations exploded, and fans were taking note of great athletic performances by Chris Evert, Billie Jean King, and Olga Korbet. Folk hero Kathrine Switzer crashed the Boston Marathon before being ushered off the course for being female in 1967 to usher in the era. The fight was on, and like Joan of Arc, de Varona was happy to take up the sword.

Over the years, de Varona served five times on the President's Council on Sports, Fitness & Nutrition and has been appointed to Presidential commissions under presidents Ford, Carter, Reagan, Clinton and Bush. She has been an advisor to Jordanian Prince Feisal's Generations for Peace Foundation and Tony Blair's Beyond Sport initiative and advised Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on empowering girls and women in

sports. She also serves on the executive board of the Special Olympics.

So what drives de Varona? Simply, it is making sure girls get a fair shot at participating in sports.

“The values learned on the playing field – how to set goals, endure, take criticism and risks, become team players, use our beliefs, stay healthy and deal with stress – prepare us for life,” she says.

Learning to compete, to give your best effort and maintain your integrity is what we can all take from de Varona's example. After all, sport is more than a game to young girls, and to everyone. It is the way to become the future leaders of the world we live and play in.

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