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To Win at Sports, You've Got to Get in the Game – and Don't Give Up

By **Brenda S. Thompson**
UCF Forum columnist
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(Photo by marijana1 at Pixabay)

After lacing up my Nike sneakers last Saturday morning, I headed to the nearest neighborhood courts to play my favorite sport: tennis. It was a perfect day to be outside enjoying the fresh air, sunny skies, and cool, breezy temperatures.

I've been a tennis fan for decades, and love to watch matches just as much as play the game, and over the years I'd say I've become a pretty good tennis player. I often wonder, though, how I acquired such a passion for this sport.

Perhaps, it's because in tennis, as well as other sports, there is the need for players to be fit and develop specific skills in order to perform at very high levels. Somehow, working hard to understand the sport and improve my skill level was not a problem for me. And actually (or foolishly) I believe I will ultimately win every tennis match I play.

As a young girl growing up in Richmond, Virginia, during the 1960s and '70s, I did not have all of the opportunities to participate in sports as girls do today. We did not have many tennis courts in my neighborhood, and participation in sports was seen as an activity primarily for boys. As many girls did during that time, I found other outlets and decided to delve into the area of modern dance and performed in front of my high school's marching band as a majorette.

Things started to change in 1972, all because of civil rights legislation Congress passed called Title IX that relates to equality in school sports for girls and boys.

Although those activities were fun and required one to be fit and dedicated to perfecting the routines, for me that was not as exciting as playing a competitive sport. As a result, I tried out for my high school tennis team and made it, never seriously thinking about playing professional tennis, but in hindsight I wish I had given more thought to that idea.

Things started to change in 1972, all because of civil rights legislation Congress passed called Title IX that relates to equality in school sports for girls and boys. After that law was passed, girls started having access to play volleyball, basketball, field hockey, track and field, gymnastics, tennis, soccer and other sports in record numbers.

Today's top female tennis professionals – Serena Williams, Venus Williams, Madison Keyes, Sloane Stephens, Coco Gauff and others – have certainly benefited from Title IX and the successes and efforts of their predecessors: Billie Jean King, Althea Gibson, Tracy Austin, Katrina Adams, Chris Evert, Lindsay Davenport and Chanda Rubin. The current stars travel the world, earn millions of dollars in prize money, are popular athletes, created charities to help others, and make a great living doing something they are good at and really love.

How did these amazing female athletes get into the game and rise to the top of their profession, given the fact that professional athletes are selected from thousands who try out for athletic teams?

They got into the game because they were exposed to the sport at an early age and made a connection with it. Either a coach, parent, friend or someone else encouraged them to learn more about the sport, practice and, perhaps, join a team. In other words, these athletes had mentors, individuals who believed in them and supported them in their efforts.

They stayed in the game because of a burning desire to excel, so they studied the sport, practiced and performed drills to improve their skill level and performance. They were confident in their abilities and surrounded themselves with like-minded people. They

were in the gym, building stronger bodies and taking better care of themselves through proper nutrition and a healthy mental and emotional outlook.

And they did not give up.

Athletes oftentimes must overcome personal struggles, injuries, financial pressures, etc., and any of these challenges can easily derail the best of them.

They won in the game because they were smart, knowledgeable of their sport, strategic and strong, and often possessed great leadership and ethical skills. They were surrounded by individual players and teammates who had similar goals and were not afraid of competition.

As a spectator, I enjoy a wide range of sports, but I absolutely love tennis! Perhaps, it's because tennis is a lot of fun to play and, like other sports, teaches and reinforces lessons in life that promote success.

And just maybe I chose a sport I could win in and possibly play until I'm at least 100 years old.

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