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Dianne Nolan

Dina Franceschi

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In Search of the "Red Sea": Where Women's Sports Programs Fit into Higher Education and the Jesuit Ideal

Dianne Nolan and Dina Franceschi

Coach Dianne Nolan, Fairfield University's women's basketball coach of over 20 years, reflects on the success of her program, the progress of her sport and the challenges that women's sports face in the future.

Recently I had the opportunity to speak with Coach Dianne Nolan about her experience as head women's basketball coach at Fairfield University. Coach Nolan came to Fairfield twenty-two years ago as the first full-time women's basketball coach and moved the program from Division III to Division II to Division I, in just three seasons. She has had a distinguished career with a win/loss record of 444-314, five MAAC (Mid-Atlantic Athletic Conference) Coach of the Year awards and four appearances in the NCAA tournament, including this year's appearance -- the first time the school has ever been given an "at-large" bid in the tournament. She has done well for her athletes off the court as well as on, boasting a 100% graduation rate and alumni in careers from medicine to law to business. These women gain the life-long benefits of confidence and discipline from playing under her. Here is what Coach Nolan has to say about how athletics fits into the Jesuit educational ideal.

Q: Coach, to what do you attribute your success here at Fairfield?

Nolan: The University's commitment to excellence. Father Kelly and I started here the same year. A plan was put into place and he embraced the plan, providing the resources necessary to make the program successful. The resources I'm talking about include scholarship money, academic support, publicity and any other needs that were a must for growth. A program needs all of those things to attract quality players. After all, it is the players that make a winning

team. I tell them up front that a team wins by being prepared and a team gets prepared by working hard. Over the years we have been able to attract good players by pushing the equal opportunity that Fairfield provides all of its athletes, and the Jesuit education that means something to them. I am always blown away by how many people are aware of what having a Jesuit education means.

Q: What is so attractive to athletes about a Jesuit education?

Nolan: In my years here, I have come to learn and understand the reputation of a Jesuit education that is nationwide. People from extremely varied backgrounds, even non-Catholics, show universal respect for the Jesuit education system. I am always hearing, "They do it right," or "When you leave there, you are educated."

The Jesuits require moral development. There are certain givens -- a morality, a decorum, a way to behave in all aspects of life. As a student you are expected to think, your mind is developed. A compassion and caring and respect for others permeates your total existence. There are expectations of performance and behavior. Here, you are part of a tradition and a history of excellence. Students understand that tradition and step up to it. Each student is part of a select group, and each one is made to feel special. Anyone can see it in the broad, yet rigorous core-curriculum, in the faculty-student relationships, in the

Dianne Nolan is head coach for women's basketball at Fairfield University, Fairfield, Connecticut.

Dina Franceschi is assistant professor of economics at Fairfield University, Fairfield, Connecticut.

fact that doors are always open, in simple things like the cleanliness of campus.

Q: Do you see any direct connection between the Jesuit education ideal and the success of your program compared to others?

Nolan: It has absolutely helped the success of the basketball program. Certain behavior is expected on campus and that translates on the court. We count on it during travel to away games, through team adversity, and during inter-collegiate play. The kids know that "we don't do that at Fairfield." The discipline gives us a consistency and grounding even though each of our players comes from a different place and background. Certain disciplinary problems and issues just don't come up because of the expectation level that is put forth in academics and in behavior. Recruits have been lost because they feel that they won't be able to keep up with the level of expectation, or chose not to come, because it would be too hard to toe that line.

Q: Because of the academic rigors at Fairfield, student athletes often have a hard time balancing their studies with their athletic schedules. How are academics balanced with athletics in your program?

Nolan: First, we are honest in the recruiting process. Arrivals know what is expected of them -- we practice two and a half to three hours per day, yet every class must be attended and all assignments must be in on time. We provide all the resources they might need: tutors, study halls, anything. But the effort must be there. Secondly, we schedule carefully. Practices are scheduled around daily academic schedules. Over the years, I have held practice at every time of the day -- morning, afternoon and evening -- to fit the needs of that specific team. Conference game schedules are not within our power, but out-of-conference games are almost always scheduled for weekends to minimize missed classes or exams. We also consciously plan practice in once-a-day time blocks, so the kids get their conditioning, practice and weights in one visit to the facility. Finally, we have team sanctions for academic violations. We run a five a.m. mile for one missed

class, two miles for a second offense, and the third time we arrange for a meeting with the players and their parents to discuss time management. All of the women are required to turn in academic reports weekly to keep tabs on their time management. If the kids know that they are being held accountable, they get the job done and stay in line.



Photo Courtesy of Fairfield University

That doesn't mean, however, that we never have conflicts with our scheduling or time management issues. For instance, because of a change in the academic schedule last fall semester, one of our tournaments conflicted with a final exam day. A couple of the players missed exams, and they had to take make-up exams. The incident triggered a heated debate on campus about the importance of athletics vs. academics. It was an unfortunate scheduling oversight, but manageable. Student athletes have demands on their time, often with economic strings. Athletic scholarships provide some of these athletes the opportunity to come here for an education. They have pressure to perform athletically while balancing their academic load. It is somewhat similar to professionals who must miss a day of work to go to a conference. It is necessary for professional development, yet

unfortunate when missing an important meeting or class. We try very hard to avoid these occurrences, but they happen. As long as everyone understands each other -- students, faculty, athletics administration -- major conflicts can be avoided.

Q: How does an athletics program fit into the academic institution? Why is the athletic program important for Fairfield?

Nolan: It, like many of the extra-curricular activities on campus, makes the university fuller. It provides a richer experience for all of the students, whether they play ball or merely attend. It also provides two levels of diversity in activity participation and in the student population. Diversity is so important at this level of education.

Here at Fairfield, the athletics programs have contributed to the vision of excellence Father Kelly has for the university. His view of excellence is second to none. He understands the ingredients necessary for success. It also serves as a foundation for school spirit after a student leaves. It provides a constant tie to the events and activities on campus for the alumni.

Q: How important is the recruiting process to your program?

Nolan: It is so important because at a place like Fairfield we recruit the "whole person." We need to know not only about their athletic abilities but also their values, morals, and work ethic, that they are honest and that their personalities will mesh with that of the returning players and the coaching staff. We have NCAA limitations on how many times we can contact each woman, but throughout the course of the year we probably spend at least half of our day on recruiting activities. It is just so important for us to know who we are getting.

We have moved to a nationwide recruiting platform. We have been getting national recognition from our television appearances and the internet. Our win/loss record and the university's clear commitment to the program are our best draws. The women and their families need to see that scholarship monies are

available and that our facilities are modern. Our debut at the Arena at Harbor Yard (in nearby Bridgeport) will be a big boost in terms of exposure. The state-of-the-art facility will move this program to the next level. We will be able to attract highly profiled teams to the venue and will in return gain more visibility for ourselves. The increase in visibility will enable us to attract better players.

The players today are also much more savvy than they have been in the past. They want to know what and where the job placement has been from each institution. Our athletic alumni are one of our best recruiting tools; we have women who have majored in every discipline on campus. And we have alumni that have gone on to successful careers in almost every profession.

Q: Does it surprise you how important other things (than athletics) are to these women athletes in their college selection?

Nolan: Kids are more sophisticated today than when I went to school. More than ever the women are concerned with safety on campus and job placement after college. They want to know what kinds of professions players typically find themselves in, what salaries they command and what kind of prestige or position they might have. It surprises me each and every year.

Q: We often hear of instances where the pressure of college life manifests itself in eating disorders and alcoholism in college-age women. Do the demands of being in the spotlight on campus cause any of your female athletes to struggle with these or any similar diseases?

Nolan: Well, it doesn't happen often here, but it does happen. The occurrence of eating disorders in particular, on all college campuses, is more frequent than we realize. First of all, the media has greatly distorted body-image in America. Inaccurate, idealistic body images are pushed on young women at a very young age. Often it starts well before they enter college. In athletics in particular, the issue is more acute

because we teach body control. That, in part, is what any sport is about. Everyday it is emphasized, in practice and training. We try to keep close tabs on all of our women athletes, so that these control issues do not become distorted.

Q: Although more opportunities have opened up for women in the field of athletics, with the success of the WNBA and more jobs in coaching and broadcasting than ever before, most of these players will not pursue careers in athletics. How does athletics prepare these women for lives after college?

Nolan: College athletics is a further cultivation of a gift from God. The skills learned on the court spill over into the classroom, and then into life. Basketball is a thinking person's game. The women are always being asked to make decisions, figuring out angles, grappling with balance, and group dynamics. We do scouting report analysis weekly, where numbers must be carefully scrutinized and compared from week to week, team to team. I have heard job recruiters say that these women handle themselves better than the average student because of their experience. They are self-starters, motivated, excellent time managers, and always team/group players. They can speak in front of others more easily. If you can make a free throw with 7,000 people screaming at you, then making a presentation in front of twenty-five is not a big deal. So many prospective employers have said to me, "Coach, I will take any one of your women -- they present themselves so well."

Q: More women are going on to have life-long careers these days than in your early days of coaching. Title IX was a new idea when you started your coaching career. How have you seen the playing

field level between the sexes?

Nolan: Title IX is the single most important piece of legislation to affect women on college campuses. It forced equality. Women today expect equality in number of scholarships offered, floor time for practice, pairs of sneakers. This expectation has spilled over into other aspects of their lives. The women choose what academic majors they want to pursue with no thought of a specific major or field being dominated by men. They know that they can get a job at any firm if they work hard and prove themselves. It was so different from when I was a player. We were told to be grateful, thankful for the opportunity to play. Now the women are expecting that opportunity.

Like at every university, the inequities surfaced here in the mid-80s, when Title IX took hold. But the administration saw to it that they were rectified. It just took some time for the budgets and scholarship monies to become equal. Since that time we've never looked back. The move to a new arena is a good case in point. It is so exciting that the women's basketball program is going in step with the men's program to the new Arena. Few programs have shown that kind of equality.

Yet, inequality still surfaces in many ways. For some reason, women's sports simply aren't as accepted as men's. The number of spectators at events is the major indicator. Whether it is public perception, popularity, or overall enthusiasm, I'm not sure. I don't have an answer for it. It is true that men's sports have been around longer, but women's games can be just as exciting. It happens often in every sport on every college campus, and even in the professional leagues. It is a hard issue for me to address with my players when

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they ask why our games aren't as well attended as those of the men's team. I try to stay positive and emphasize that as long as we keep playing hard and winning games, the base of fans will grow. It is certainly an awareness issue; marketing strategies for women's events need to continue to get better and target larger segments of the population. We've made progress, but we still have a long way to go.

Q: Where do you see the sport going from here?
Where is Fairfield's program going?

Nolan: Women's basketball is only going to get more competitive from here, and with that it will get more exciting. The athletic talent we are seeing coming out of high school continues to improve. Women are spending more time and energy on excelling in this sport and the results are dramatic. Today's women are seeing more opportunity from sports. They know that their talent can really pay off in terms of scholarship money or admission opportunity, and they are taking advantage of that. It is an exciting time for the sport. The success and visibility of the WNBA has really helped the sport, and women in athletics, tremendously.

For Fairfield, we are looking to grow. We are always looking to recruit quality student athletes who want to play a national schedule. The move to the Arena at Harbor Yard will help us attract players with the same goals. The university could grow more diverse. That could help our program. We would like to see more activities, more social diversity, and more students from varied backgrounds. It is all interlocked really. We need more publicity, and more fans. You get those by winning games and creating an exciting, entertaining atmosphere. When you win games and get more exposure, the fan base will grow. A sold out arena with "the Red Sea" of fans cheering our team of student athletes to an NCAA victory is our goal.

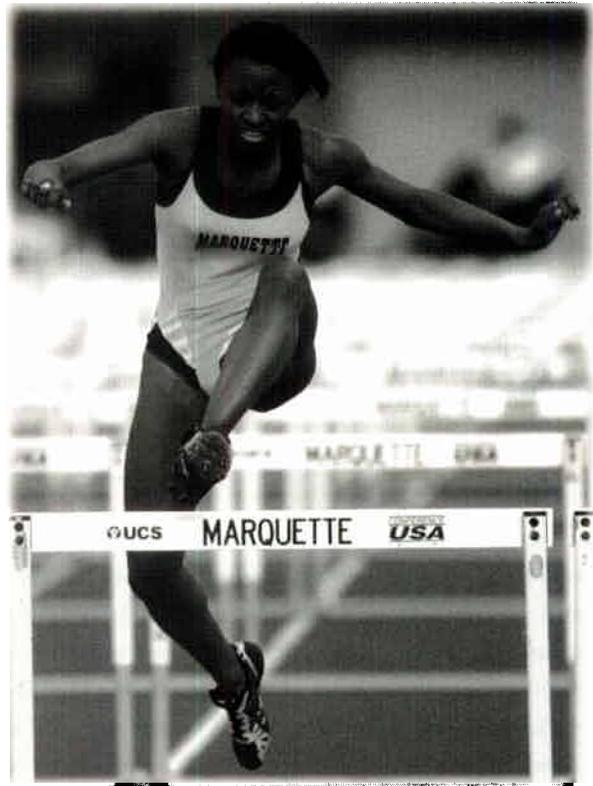


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TODAY'S WOMEN ARE
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