

SportsLetter Interviews

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Amy Love

Amy Love began her career in women's sports at early age. When she was nine, she was banned from playing soccer on a local all-star team because she was a girl. Her family decided to sue the team, and the case was settled in Love's favor.

After graduating from Texas Tech University (and gaining a MBA from Harvard University), Love worked for, among others, Haagen-Dazs, Booz Allen & Hamilton, and Navigation Technologies. In 1997, she started Real Sports, a bi-monthly magazine devoted to women's sports. Since 1997, numerous competitors in the field — including Sports Illustrated Women and Conde Nast Sports for Women — have folded, but Love soldiers on. Real Sports now exists as a subscription-only, monthly e-zine, with an annual print edition entitled "Most Important Moments in Sports"

Love, 38, recently became CEO of Forum for Women Entrepreneurs and Executives, a Palo Alto-based networking and educational organization. We spoke by telephone as she prepared to leave for a conference in France.

— David Davis

SportsLetter: Growing up, what sports did you play?

Amy Love: I played soccer, baseball and basketball. Our family moved around a lot because my father worked for Coca-Cola.

SL: How did your involvement in the lawsuit come about?

AL: This was back in 1974, when I was nine, and we had just moved back from Brazil to Danville, California. I had signed up for the Little League

baseball team and had played on the team with no problems. Then I signed up for the all-star soccer team and made the team. I was the only girl on the team. But when the roster was posted, my name was circled and next to it was the word 'Unacceptable.' We were told that the all-star team was reserved for boys, and that if I was on the team, the team would have to forfeit all its games. When my parents sat me down and explained what was happening, it became this defining, poignant moment. I asked them, 'What does the fact that I'm a girl have to do with my ability to play sports?' And they realized that they didn't have an answer to that. After all, my brother had the opportunity to play whatever sport he wanted. My parents hired lawyers from the Equal Rights Advocates law center and filed a class action lawsuit on my behalf in federal court — *Love v. Steele* (California Youth Soccer Association). We got an injunction that allowed me to play while the lawsuit was proceeding. It was settled in our favor mid-way through the trial, and 12 other girls throughout the state were allowed to play.

SL: What was it like to go through that experience at an early age?

AL: It wasn't easy. We held a big press conference and then had to deal with the media, from Dan Rather on the CBS Evening News to *The Star* tabloid. Some of the media was negative. One headline said, 'Amy Love Ruins Soccer.' My family was under a lot of public scrutiny. We got death threats. At the time, it was made very clear that the lawsuit was about more than Amy Love. We wanted to do what was right for girls so that if they have the skills, they should be able to play at the highest level. That was a fundamental and important direction we took.

SL: How do you view the lawsuit today?

AL: I'm very proud when I see the success of the women's national [soccer] team and hear that many of the women played on boys teams when they were younger. We set the bar to allow really talented female soccer players to play with the best possible players. At the same time, in 1999, the exact same city, Danville, California, voted to disband the girls all-star team because parents didn't feel girls should be so competitive. Two weeks later, the team was reinstated, but it shows that any time you try to provide opportunity for social change, it takes time. It seems as if

progress forward is always followed by retreat. Look at what happened after the 1996 Olympics, which held huge promise and expectations for women's sports. Since 1997, seven women's sports leagues have folded.

SL: When did you decide to start a women's sports magazine?

AL: I first looked into starting a magazine in 1993. I'm a Texas Tech grad, and in the early 1990s Texas Tech had Sheryl Swoops breaking every imaginable basketball record and leading the team to the NCAA title. But there was no media coverage about her. She was virtually ignored. So I wrote a business plan for a magazine, but I felt it wasn't the right time. I wrote another business plan in 1995, right before the 1996 Olympics. I put it on hold again because it was announced that Sports Illustrated Women and Conde Nast Sports for Women would begin publishing.

SL: What was your reaction to those magazines?

AL: I thought the timing was right. In 1996, with the Atlanta Olympics and the success of the national soccer team, women's sports were seen as having huge promise. There was stated corporate and advertising interest to support women's sports. But, clearly, they were not what the marketplace wanted or desired.

SL: Why didn't those magazines succeed?

AL: I can't speak for the competition. You can look at the editorial copy and images and draw your own inferences. The first cover of Sports Illustrated Women showed Sheryl Swoops pregnant, holding the basketball like a waitress. The headlines were: "The Coach Is a Sexual Predator," "Why I Fell for Grant Hill," "Tonya and Nancy."

SL: What did you like about them? What did you dislike about them?

AL: I liked that both SI and Conde Nast were willing to take a risk. They were willing to put their money into play — I've read that Conde Nast invested something like \$70 million and SI about \$30 million. They were helping to create a category, and there is nothing better than competition. I disliked their unwillingness to stay the course long-term. That type of

investment requires time and long-term commitment. You have to be willing to balance the short-term financial realities with the long-term financial opportunity. The NBA and Sports Illustrated had decades to make it; the WNBA and SI Women have not been afforded the same luxury.

SL: What was your approach for Real Sports?

AL: We have had a different approach. Our very first cover showed Tennessee's Michelle Snow dunking a basketball. That's who we are. Our niche is the real representation of today's female athlete. We don't print posed shots because we want to reflect athletes as who they are when they are performing. We are a sports magazine, not a women's magazine. Our audience are fans of women's sports - and the fans are men and women.

SL: When did you change to an online format?

AL: We migrated to a monthly e-zine about a year ago, after the WUSA folded. That left one women's professional sports league - the WNBA - so we made the shift because there is not a critical mass of women's professional team sports to cover.

SL: Why did you change to an online format?

AL: There isn't a broad enough audience to support a print magazine for women's sports. There lacks sufficient advertising support. As a result, we thought the most cost-effective way to keep the brand visible for hard-core fans of women's sports was online. I'm proud of the fact that we have remained consistent and pure with our editorial approach. Even with all the changes in women's sports since 1996, we continue to provide information to fans of women's sports. It's important that we continue our mission because you can't pick up a newspaper or watch the evening sports news and find much coverage of women's sports.

SL: How much content do you publish online?

AL: We run monthly updates from our contributors, with a heavy emphasis on basketball and soccer. Team sports are our core. We also

have an annual printed edition. It's a pretty nice value.

SL: Do you think the U.S. will ever support a print magazine devoted to women's sports?

AL: I hope so. It's why we're still in the game. I believe the pendulum swings in the marketplace, and it's my expectation that Real Sports will eventually re-launch into a national print magazine. That is why we kept the brand going online.

SL: With its recent 30th anniversary, Title IX was in the news. Have high school and college sports programs fulfilled their potential for women?

AL: Some yes, some no. The majority of programs are not in compliance with Title IX in part because there is still a lot of misunderstanding about what the legislation seeks to do. That the commission report had two strong dissenting opinions reflects that there's still a lot of work ahead to level the playing field.

SL: What more needs to be done?

AL: The issue we need to focus on is the issue of compliance. Some schools are following through with the expectations and requirements of the law. Many others are not. That imbalance is creating an un-level playing field among the schools.

SL: Val Ackerman is leaving the WNBA: How did she do on the job?

AL: I think Val did a tremendous job in a very public and scrutinized position. She had to carry the weight of ensuring that a professional women's sports league survive and thrive. I applaud her for her vision and commitment.

SL: What's your assessment about the WNBA to date?

AL: I think the league is learning who its fan base is and who it needs to target to expand that base. I think the league is learning how to carry its message to corporations. Is there room for continued growth? Absolutely.

SL: Would you call it successful?

AL: I think it's successful in that it's a viable professional women's sports league. Certainly, there is room for improvement — for instance, the league needs to decide what are the right cities and locations to place teams. Long-term, the league needs to develop an eco-system that will entice corporate sponsorships and expand the fan base. They need to work to bring the players to life and to build a stronger connection with fans. That will translate into broader media coverage.

SL: The women's professional soccer league folded last year: after all the momentum from the Olympic Games and the World Cups, what went wrong?

AL: I applaud John Hendricks and his investment team for their risk to launch the league. Time continues to be women's sports' worst enemy. It takes time to build awareness and interest and to get into the public psyche. You can't expect miracles to occur, let alone awareness and interest, in just three years.

SL: Do you think the league can be revived?

AL: I'm cautiously optimistic and would love to see it revived.

SL: What has to change?

AL: Whoever takes over needs to line up the right corporate financial runway to develop the league. They must line up the right sponsors, advertisers, and media partners.

SL: During the Olympic Games, there was much controversy over the number of women athletes posing in the nude or semi-clothed, in calendars and magazines. Is this a good or a bad trend?

AL: I think women who have worked all of their lives as athletes realize that they have a small window to be on stage, to break through the clutter and gain attention. Some women have chosen that as their avenue — and that speaks volumes about the pressures to break through.

SL: You publish an annual edition with the “most important story” of the year: What is the most important story of 2004?

AL: Nice try, but I can't let you know that. You have to subscribe.