

# 'Hero' coach battles to Title IX victory

1

WEST LONG BRANCH, N.J. - To many in women's athletics, Nancy Williams is a hero, not only ranked among the top softball coaches in the nation, but the poster coach for the cause of equality on the field.

All Williams says she wants is parity for her athletes at Shore Regional High School. The opportunity to play night games. More and better-paid coaches. New uniforms and warmups. Cheerleaders and the band for support.

After a year-long battle, Williams anticipates a final win. She's already won the playing conditions she sought for her athletes. Now she's expected to win back her job.

"I just want equal opportunity for our female athletes," she says. "I simply am supporting the rights of women and their equality in athletics."

But there's been nothing simple about Nancy Williams' life in the last year - a year that saw her lose her job as softball coach after 17 years and 300 victories. A year that saw vandals throw an explosive onto her roof.

In January, two months after Williams filed a Title IX complaint saying Shore Regional's girls teams were not treated fairly, the school board failed to renew her softball contract. At the time, she was the sport's winningest coach.

Athletes protested. School board meetings

degenerated into screaming matches. The circulation of the local newspaper doubled because of the interest.

In this oceanside town, you either were for Williams or against her. There was no middle ground.

Nearly 25 years after the passage of Title IX of the Civil Rights Act was supposed to eliminate sex discrimination in schools, Williams is not alone in saying that people who speak out for women's sports often find themselves demoted, shunned, transferred or fired.

"It's like a war," says Williams, 48. "I'm not out to cause trouble. I'm just really concerned about the girls.

"If they think they are scaring me," she adds, "it only makes me want to continue even stronger in support of the women's program."

Williams' complaint, one of 68 filed nationwide in 1996, was among a growing number of challenges that seek to broaden the definition of the act beyond mathematical equations of equality.

Instead, Williams cited other kinds of disparities: the salaries, the support, even access to videotaping equipment for girls teams.

In bringing the Title IX complaint, Williams says she never sought to harm her school. Williams says she loves Shore Re-

gional High; she graduated from there in 1966 and returned there to work.

For 26 years, she's been teaching physical education and drivers education. She's coached softball, field hockey (her team won the New Jersey state championship this fall) and other sports to 1,000 victories.

But after nearly three decades of watching her players get less than their share, she says she was forced to do something.

"What are you saying to a woman when her games are scheduled for 3 p.m. on a school day, with no band, no cheerleaders, no concession stand and the boys are playing Friday night . . . with everything?" says Williams, who earns almost \$70,000 a year from teaching and coaching. "Aren't you saying to those girls that you are second-class?"

In 1971, the year before Title IX was passed, 294,015 girls participated in high school sports. In the 1995-96 season, 2.4 million participated. That means girls represent 39% of all high school athletes.

The act is uniformly credited with getting more girls involved and forcing schools to provide equal athletic opportunities.

What is less clear, however, is what happens when someone complains things still aren't right.

Williams and her lawyer, Charles McAuliffe, believe it was clearly retaliation when Williams' softball coaching contract was not renewed.

Shore Regional Superintendent Leonard Schnappauf and board of education lawyer Lex Tucci deny that and say an agreement with Williams prohibits them from discussing the case further.

"The Title IX suit had nothing to do with her non-reappointment," says Tucci.

Donna Lopiano, executive director of the Women's Sports Foundation, a pro-Title IX group, scoffs at school officials' statements about Williams' dismissal. The organization honored Williams this year as its High School Coach of the Year.

"With her record, would Nancy Williams have been fired if she was a man?" asks Lopiano. "You've got to be kidding."

Williams says she's most upset by what the dispute did to her athletes.

While the team had a good year in her absence, going 21-4, the players were so upset they refused to accept award certificates from the board.

"It was like we weren't important," says senior Holly Waterman, who plays first base. "What we said didn't matter. The board said they had our best interests at heart, but how could that be? The board ruined our trust in adults."

Pitcher Shyella Mack, now a freshman at Quinnipiac (Conn.) College, says the experience ruined her senior year of high school.

"I couldn't believe they took away the best coach ever," says Mack.

Schnappauf says, "Girls in this district have never been deprived."

Williams' critics say she is stubborn and difficult to work with. She says she has been labeled a troublemaker for seeking a fair shake.

Now with the agreement with the school board in place, the issues Williams has raised are now being addressed. The school has about six months to come into total compliance. That includes eliminating a \$20,000 total salary gap in what is paid to girls coaches and what is paid to boys coaches.

The threat of retaliation, she says, often discourages others from initiating a grievance. "It's absurd we had to make an amendment to the constitution to give girls equality in education," says Williams, whose house is being repaired. The explosive blew a gutter off the roof.

What critics say is unusual about the Williams case is that she is able to remain in her position. That wasn't true for Jim Huffman, Rudy Suwara and Mary Zimmerman, all of whom spoke out on Title IX.

"You can pretty much put a red cross on your head," says Huffman, who won \$1.6 million from Cal State-Fullerton when a jury decided he was fired in retaliation for his support. "No one is going to hire you."

"Think about it," says Jared Huffman, his brother and lawyer. "Most schools, even now, are not in compliance. Knowing that, they are going to be extremely reluctant to

hire someone who has a record for suing about Title IX issues."

Rudy Suwara says he lost his job as women's volleyball coach at San Diego State after supporting a Title IX complaint brought by the parents of one of his players. His case was settled. Suwara can't disclose his award, but it is believed to be in the hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Mary Zimmerman won a \$324,000 settlement from San Jose State after the school eliminated her position as women's athletic director.


Zimmerman says the action began after she spoke for gender equity.

"There were many nights I woke up crying," says Zimmerman, the first woman appointed to the NCAA Executive Committee. "If this was just for Mary Zimmerman, I don't know honestly if I would have filed suit. But it was all about taking opportunities away from women. I could not live with myself if I wouldn't have done what I did."

When the Office of Civil Rights opens an investigation, a letter is sent to both the recipient and complainant stating that there "should be no intimidation or harassment."

"Retaliation is completely illegal," says Debbie Brake, senior counsel for the National Women's Law Center. "It's hard to quantify how often it happens, but we do hear stories."

Christine Grant, athletic director at the University of Iowa, says it takes "courage



most of us don't have" to seek gender equity.

"People seldom benefit from their suits," says Grant. "They seldom get recognition for it, they are often blackballed from their profession."



So why bother?

"In the long run, it wasn't me who was hurt," says Williams. "It was the kids. They learned a life lesson about standing up for what you believe in, that sometimes you have to fight and you have to fight by yourself. But if you have a belief in your convictions, good things will happen."



## Questions 1

Name \_\_\_\_\_

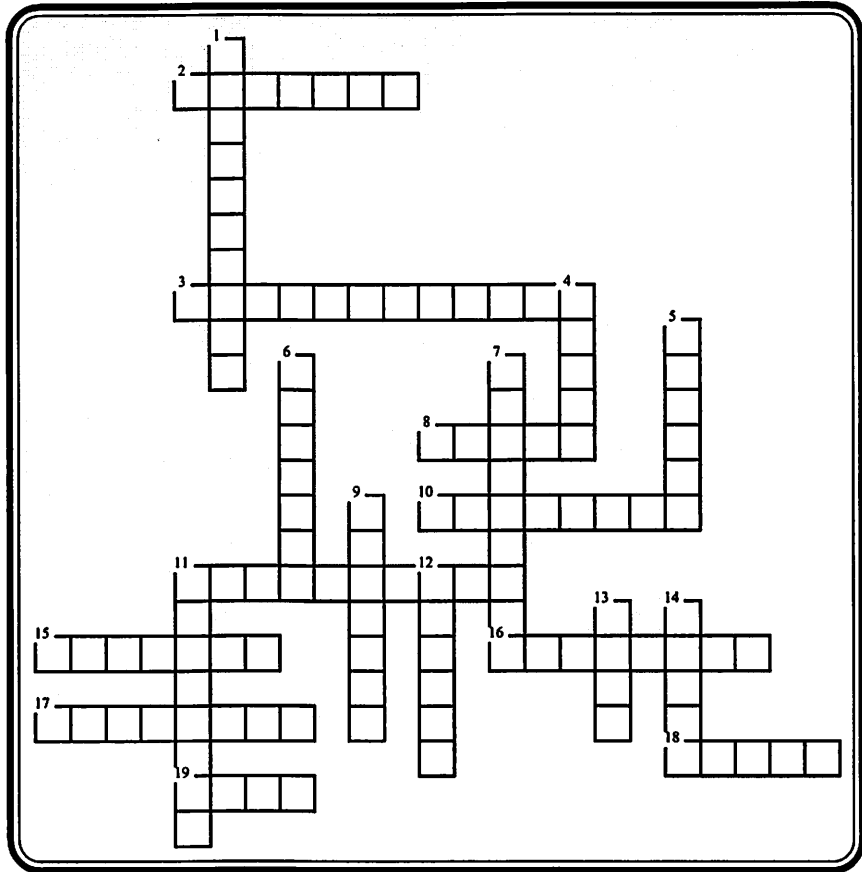
1. Who is Nancy Williams and in what sport was she involved?
  2. List four things Williams wants for her team.
  3. What happened to Nancy Williams after she filed a Title IX complaint?
  4. What is Title IX of the Civil Rights Act?
  5. Why do you think Williams said her girls were “second-class?”
- 
- 

# Sports Crossword 1

Name \_\_\_\_\_

**Across:**

2. They threw an explosive onto Williams' roof
3. The players refused to accept these because Williams was not their coach
8. She is senior counsel for the National Women's Law Center
10. This was one area where boys athletics was treated differently than girls athletics according to Williams
11. He is the Superintendent of the Shore schools
15. People seldom \_\_\_\_\_ from their suits according to Grant
16. For many, Williams is the poster coach for this cause
17. Williams' critics say she is \_\_\_\_\_
18. He is the lawyer for the school board
19. Williams said the kids learned a \_\_\_\_\_ lesson about standing up for what you believe in

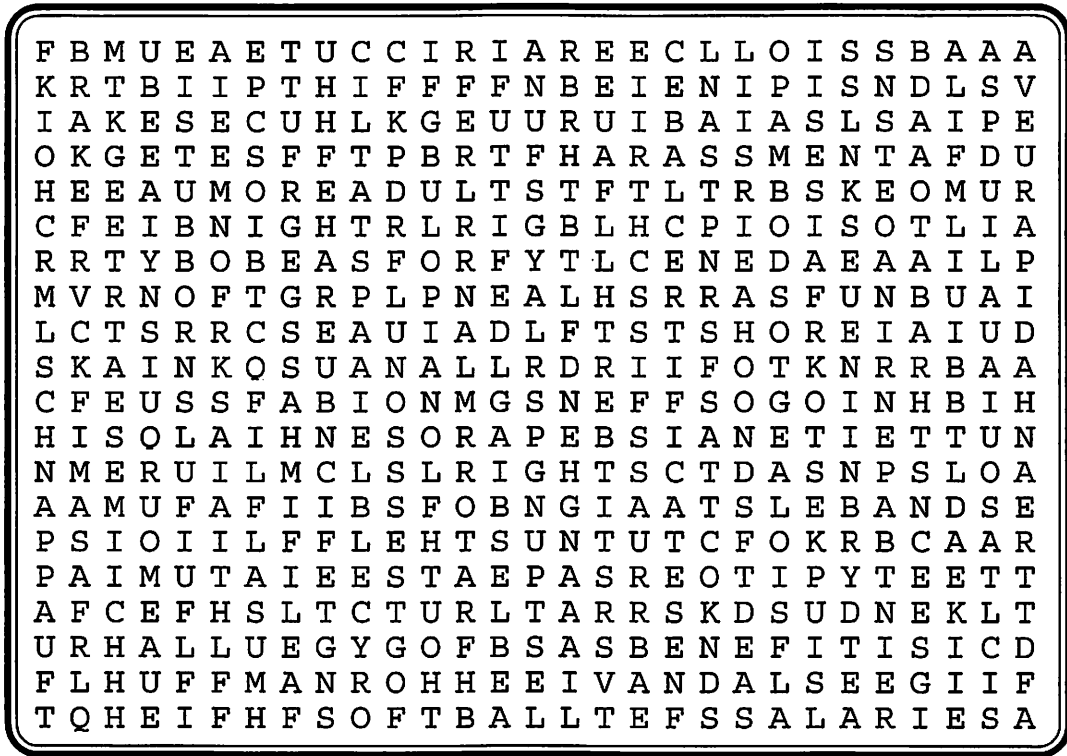


**Down:**

1. When an investigation is opened, the Office of Civil Rights sends a letter stating there should be none
4. The high school Williams attended and coached at
5. The Civil \_\_\_\_\_ Act
6. He sued Cal State-Fullerton and won but lost his job
7. He is Williams' lawyer
9. She is executive director of the Women's Sports Foundation
11. The sport Williams coaches
12. According to one player, the school board ruined her trust in \_\_\_\_\_
13. This school group does not usually play for the girls teams
14. The girls' teams don't usually get to play at this time

# Sports Wordsearch 1

Name \_\_\_\_\_



1. He is Williams' lawyer
2. The players refused to accept these because Williams was not their coach
3. This school group does not usually play for the girls teams
4. She is executive director of the Women's Sports Foundation
5. Williams said the kids learned a \_\_\_\_\_ lesson about standing up for what you believe in
6. He is the lawyer for the school board
7. According to one player, the school board ruined her trust in this group
8. The Civil \_\_\_\_\_ Act
9. He is the Superintendent of the Shore schools
10. Williams' critics say she is \_\_\_\_\_
11. The high school Williams attended and coached at
12. For many, Williams is the poster coach for this cause
13. This was one area where boys athletics was treated differently than girls athletics according to Williams
14. People seldom \_\_\_\_\_ from their suits according to Grant
15. The sport Williams coaches
16. He sued Cal State-Fullerton and won but lost his job
17. The girls' teams don't usually get to play at this time
18. When an investigation is opened, the Office of Civil Rights sends a letter stating there should be none
19. She is senior counsel for the National Women's Law Center
20. They threw an explosive onto Williams' roof