

Rate of women in athletics still decreasing

Men dominate the athletic work force, women falling out of athletic careers



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Florence Merdian (class of 1920) was a high-powered woman in athletics at Knox College. Knox's tennis courts are named after Merdian, and for good reason.

She had many important achievements at Knox, including being a varsity letter earner in tennis, winning the interclass tennis championships for four years, being the state singles champion her sophomore year and winning the single and doubles championships of the Little 19 conference her junior year. She also captained the sophomore women's basketball team before she coached the freshmen women's basketball team after graduating.

Merdian played hockey, women's soccer, women's tennis and women's basketball at Knox. She was also the editor-in-chief of *The Knox Student*, president of the women's K Club, secretary of the Panhellenic Association, a member of Mortar Board and Theta Sigma Phi, the national journalism society.

After Knox, she served as an assistant coach in Knox athletics and served as a writer for the Peoria Journal-Star newspaper from the early 1920s until her retirement. She was then inducted into the Knox Hall of Fame in 1987, being recognized for achievements she accomplished before she was legally even allowed to vote.

With the new presidential administration, Americans can also feel justified in these biases because of our president's dialogue that disrespects women. This inequality is often seen in college and professional athletics, where men dominate the coaching positions and other important positions in athletic environments.

Statistics from the NCAA website show that, in 1972, "women coached more than 90% of women's athletics teams. Today, it is less than half." The same article shows that about 20 percent of NCAA athletic directors are female. In 1979, 58.2 percent of women's teams in the NCAA were coached by women. In 2006, it was recorded that 42.4 percent of women's teams were coached by women. In 2014, Theresa Phillips was the first woman to

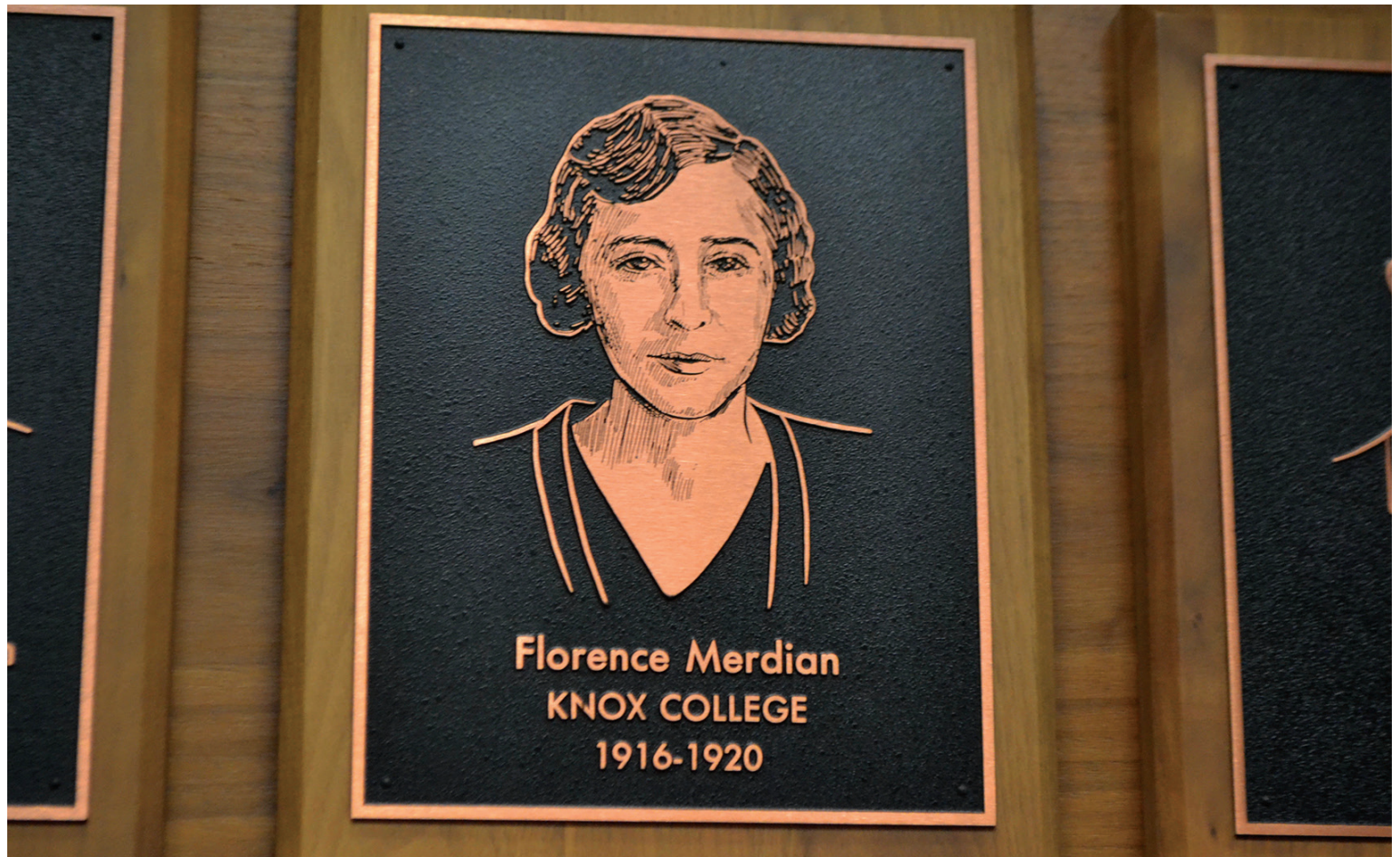


Photo of **Florence Merdian's** (class of 1920) award in the Hall of Fame room located in the athletics complex. Merdian was inducted into the Knox Hall of Fame for her accomplishments before she was even legally allowed to vote. (Katy Coseglia / TKS)

coach a Division I men's basketball team game that she wasn't even hired to coach but took the place of the head coach due to his suspension. With this much inequality, it's no wonder that women feel as if they're in second place.

Knox's athletic department has been spread out more than some collegiate programs, being more open to women in higher positions, but continues to be primarily male-dominant. With our first female athletic director, **Daniella Irlle**, now being hired by Knox, we are seeing progress on campus in terms of equality. With 14 head coaches at Knox (two coaching both men's and women's simultaneously), only four coaches are women. However, having Irlle hired is a step in the right direction.

Assistant Athletic Director and Senior Women's Administrator **Lexie Vernon** says inequality in athletic departments today may ironically be a result of the passage of Title IX back in the 1970s.

"So when Title IX was first around in the early 1970's, women's and men's athletic departments were separate. There's a men's and women's athletic director, separate positions," Vernon said. "So the administrators, coaches and athletes were all women on that side but when Title IX went into effect, during the merging of those athletic depart-

ments, the men took the leadership role. So then I think [with] the trickle down of that, men started leading all sports because of that combination."

Vernon played softball at Lewis University, a small Division II school in the Chicago suburbs. She's been at Knox for eight years now, beginning as the graduate assistant athletic trainer and moving up from there. Vernon says she hasn't experienced any inequality herself because of the opportunities she's been afforded but does acknowledge it exists. Vernon has felt immense support at Knox and is appreciation from the athletics staff and campus as a whole.

"Since I've been here at Knox, as a woman, and leading into being an administrator, I've had nothing but support by the NCAA and our department. I have coworkers that just lift me up because they want a woman to serve in these roles but there's women out there that don't really want to. That's probably where some of that discrimination lies, or that disconnect," Vernon said.

However, Vernon does notice the low participation numbers of women in higher positions in other sports programs.

"When you look at the numbers of women working in athletics and overall participation numbers, there's gotta be something going on. For whatever reason, girls are dropping off in that

junior high and early high school range — they're dropping the participation numbers," Vernon said. "I'm young enough where I'm in an era that I didn't know what Title IX was when I was in high school until I was educated on that. I've always had opportunities, I've always been encouraged to do what I wanted."

According to a study by the Women's Sports Foundation, by age 14 girls are "dropping out of sports at two times the rate of boys." The foundation attributes this drop to lack of access, social stigmas, safety and transport issues and lack of positive role models.

Women coaching women has been something that is important in athletics and Vernon believes it's "not underrated" but there's definitely a drop off in women coaching women. When women are coached by men so frequently, women believe this is the norm. According to the NCAA, around 3 percent of men's teams are coached by women.

As one of our athletic trainers, **Shana Sewick** makes up one of two women on the hired athletic training staff. As a four year varsity letter winner for Blackburn College women's soccer, she has experienced being a female in athletics firsthand.

"I think [the inequality] is changing. Women being pioneers and trailblazers, it's becoming a lot more prevalent. I think

the inequality is lowering in that aspect to where there's more opportunities for women. Obviously there's a difference between wanting a male candidate versus a female candidate but I think that's changing for the better because it needs to be somewhat equal, especially if they're just as qualified and you're looking at gender," Sewick said.

The statistics actually show worsening equality patterns. This isn't necessarily because of lack of opportunity, but a seeming lack of drive to become a high-powered female in athletics. Only 20 percent of athletic directors in the NCAA are women. Even in professional sports, like the WNBA, seven out of 12 coaches are men. When Jenny Boucek was hired to the NBA's Sacramento Kings last year as an assistant, she became the third ever female coach to be hired full time by the NBA, yet no woman has ever become a head coach.

Men dominate sports. This may be due to a lack of effort or lack of confidence by high-powered and athletic women. This may also be due to social norms and the things we are used to seeing. Whatever the reason, women are needed in sports. Whether there are opportunities elsewhere or more appealing career paths, having representation of women in athletics is an important step in the direction of equality.

KNOX SPORTS BRIEFS

Baseball — The Fire split a double header with University of Dubuque at home on April 17. The men won 6-5 in the first game and lost 5-2 in the second. In the first game, senior **Paul Sanders** was 3 for 4, sophomore **Juston Woodard** was 2 for 3 and sophomore **Brendan Powers** picked up two RBI. The Fire will compete again in the Midwest Conference Crossover tournament held in Mauston, WI.

Men's tennis — The Fire faced off against two conference opponents this past Sunday. Knox lost to both Lawrence University 0-9 and St. Norbert College 0-9. Senior **Hank Horowitz** had a close singles match against Norbert, losing 6-2 and 6-4. Junior **Jeffrey Xue** had the same scores as Horowitz against Norbert but weren't victorious. The Fire will travel to Monmouth on April 19 to continue competition.

Track & field — The track and field teams competed at Benedictine University on Friday and Saturday, April 13 and 14. They faced off against 64 other teams from Division II and III and NAIA and NJCAA divisions. Junior **Malik Hamilton** placed eighth in the men's 200m final with a time of 22.53 seconds. They will travel to University of Dubuque on April 21.

Softball — The Fire competed against Cornell College on April 12, losing 8-12 and 0-8 in the conference double header. Freshman **Kenzie Funk**, senior **Emily Stevenson** and freshman **Clare Hensley** all grabbed a pair of hits for the day. Funk and freshman **Casey Hipp** both added an RBI. The women will compete against Beloit College on April 21 at home.

Men's golf — The Fire competed at the Augustana Invitational on Friday, April 13. Knox shot a 329 in the first round; the second round on Saturday was canceled. The men placed 16th out of 19 teams, with junior **Duncan Wheeler** and freshman **Josh Schumacher** scored a 79, the top scores for Knox. Freshman **Luis Liendo** had the second best score, with an 81. The Fire will travel to Illinois College on April 20.