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Ernst & Young Launches Women Athletes Global Leadership Network

Last summer, when we celebrated the 40th anniversary of Title IX and cheered the accomplishments of the 2012 Olympians I asked, “[Is Today’s 2012 London Olympian Tomorrow’s CEO?](#)”

Also, I quietly wondered, “*What’s next?*” What happens to elite female athletes after the Olympic spotlight dims?

If you ask [Donna de Varona](#), two-time Olympian in swimming and two-time gold medalist, she will tell you that shortly after the 1964 Olympics, due to limited opportunities for women, her career ended age 17. At that time, there were no discussions about where women could go in sports, and collegiate scholarships for female athletes were unheard of.

Seeing a need for change, de Varona became a strong advocate for Title IX and passionate about connecting women and sport with the business world. Now, after 40 years of progress, de Varona has a new partner, [Ernst & Young](#), in her quest to mentor athletes. The global leader in assurance, tax, transaction and advisory services announced at the Laureus World Sports Awards’ [Women in Sport press conference](#) that it is launching a [Women Athletes Global Leadership Network](#).

“For years I think all of us have wanted to bridge the gap between women in



RIO DE JANEIRO, BRAZIL - MARCH 11: Laureus Academy Members Tanni Grey - Thompson (Front Row) ,(Back Row L-R) Laureus Academy Members Cathy Freeman, Martina Navratilova, Olympic Medalist Donna De Varona, Laureus Academy Member Nadia Comaneci and Sue Campbell, Chairman of UK Sport with Beth Brooke, Global Vice Chair of Ernst & Young attends the Women In Sport Press Conference at the Windsor Atlantica during the 2013 Laureus World Sports Awards on March 11, 2013 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. (Image credit: Getty Images South America via @daylife)

sport and women in business,” said de Varona who will serve as a key advisor to Ernst & Young’s new program.

This program will build a connection between elite athletes and top women leaders. Additionally, the network will inspire and encourage female athletes across the globe to pursue meaningful careers after retirement, and it will focus on the following three elements:

Building the Leadership Network – The first-of-its-kind initiative will bring together a network of athletes and connect these inspiring women with Ernst & Young’s business network of top women leaders and entrepreneurs around the world (Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe and Oceania). The network will be designed to share lessons learned from career transitions, mentor and open doors, create opportunities and inspire the next generation to maximize its potential.

Highlighting Stories of Inspiration – Ernst & Young plans to leverage the power of Rio 2016 and the emotion of the Olympics by highlighting the success stories of women athletes who have successful post-sport transition into their chosen careers.

Understanding the Impact of Women’s Advancement in Sports and Society – Ernst & Young will commission research about the connections between sports and leadership, as well as the societal and economic effect that women’s access to and participation in sports have on education, health and development around the world.

Participants lending their support to Ernst & Young include leaders such as: **Adriana Behar**, Olympian and Member, Brazil National Olympic Committee; **Deedee Corradini**, President, International Women’s Forum; **Anita DeFrantz**, Olympian and International Olympic Committee Member, Chair of Women and Sports Commission; **Nawal El Moutawakel**, Olympian and Vice President, International Olympic Committee; and **Donna de Varona**, Olympian and former President, Women’s Sports Foundation.

While Ernst & Young is widely known for its accounting services, it is no stranger to the women’s empowerment landscape. According to [Beth Brooke](#), Global Vice Chair, Public Policy of Ernst & Young, Title IX scholarship recipient, and one Forbes’ 100 Most Powerful Women, the firm has been focused on women’s economic empowerment for many years.

Since 2008, Ernst & Young has sponsored the [Entrepreneurial Winning Women Program](#), which is an annual competition and executive leadership program that identifies women entrepreneurs whose businesses show real potential to scale – and then helps them do it. And as an [official supporter of the Rio 2016 Olympic Games](#), Ernst & Young’s marketing activation plan includes an alignment around the Olympic values of inclusiveness and its own values of the advancement of women.

“Coming out of London there was so much momentum around women. It was the first time all of the teams had female athletes and all of the sports were available to both men and women,” Brooke said.

“It reinforced to us that women are an emerging market. The leadership potential that exists in these elite athletes is so consistent with our beliefs in somehow trying to unlock the potential to foster more women’s economic empowerment and leadership.”

It is no secret that there is a direct correlation between women’s participation in sport and their leadership capabilities. Some of the world’s most senior women leaders participated in sports, including former US Secretaries of State **Condoleezza Rice** and **Hillary Clinton**, Brazil President **Dilma Rousseff**, PepsiCo CEO **Indra Nooyi**, and DuPont CEO **Ellen Kullman**. Additionally, a 2002 survey by MassMutual Financial Group and Oppenheimer Funds (*From the Locker Room to the Boardroom: A Survey on Sports in the Lives of Women Business Executives*) revealed 80% of the women executives surveyed played sports growing up.

However, “When you look at the progress around women across all sectors, the progress is slow, and it is one of the frustrations,” said Brooke. “We look as this [leadership network] as a great opportunity to do what is necessary now.”

Ernst & Young recognizes that right now women athletes, just like women in business, need access to mentors and role models. Right now the world is in desperate need of leadership that is collaborative and knows how to leverage the value of diversity. And right now women athletes are uniquely skilled and trained to be global leaders.

Ernst & Young does not pretend to have the all of the answers, but it wants to open the playing field for women’s equal participation in business, sport, society, and the economy. *Don’t you?*

For more information on how Ernst & Young supports women’s advancement and gender equity around the world visit www.ey.com/womenathletesnetwork.

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