

Margot Polivy, Champion of Women in College Sports, Dies at 85

A physical education teacher turned lawyer, she helped advocate for and shape regulations that provided more opportunities and resources for student athletes.



Margot Polivy worked on behalf of women's rights groups to ensure that the federal government offered equal opportunities in college athletics. Credit...Manuel Palau
By [Sam Roberts](#) Oct. 16, 2023

Margot Polivy, a high school physical education teacher turned lawyer who tirelessly lobbied the federal government to legally guarantee that college athletic departments offer women equal opportunities to participate in sports, died on Oct. 7 at her home in Washington. She was 85.

Her death was confirmed by her sister, Gail Polivy, who said the cause had not yet been determined.

In the 1970s, representing women's groups on campuses and on Capitol Hill, Ms. Polivy (pronounced PAHL-a-vee) fought the male-dominated National Collegiate Athletic Association and helped transform the ambiguous wording of congressional anti-discrimination mandates, which had made no specific mention of sports, into a Hail Mary pass that profoundly expanded the resources available to female athletes in high school and college.

Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 stated only, "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits

of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.”

But once athletes staked a claim to those benefits, with Title IX interpreted to include nondiscrimination in sports, Ms. Polivy, a lawyer for the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women, partnered with the National Coalition for Women and Girls in Education to insist that the regulations being drafted to implement the legislation fulfill the expectations of the organizations’ supporters.

Margaret Dunkle, whose 1974 analysis documenting discrimination against female college athletes provided the blueprint for the regulations, said of Ms. Polivy in an email, “She was a key player in shaping Title IX’s sports regulations, which opened athletic scholarships for women and set standards to ensure that female teams got the funding and resources needed to excel.”

The women’s groups Ms. Polivy represented prioritized amateur student athletics as a form of physical education. That view stood in contrast to the predominant male model of student sports, which prioritized recruiting, scholarships and winning to generate financial contributions from alumni — and, critics said, encouraged academic laxity.

Instead of drafting a bill that would have appeased athletic directors by exempting revenue-generating sports like football from the regulations, Ms. Polivy, roaming the Capitol deskless, sketched out an alternative — which she wrote on a sheet of paper that rested on the back of Representative Shirley Chisholm, a Brooklyn Democrat. The resulting bill was introduced by Senator Jacob K. Javits, a New York Republican.

Her alternative gave Title IX proponents what they wanted all along, Michael MacCambridge wrote in “The Big Time: How the 1970s Transformed Sports in America” (2023): “that athletic departments would offer a rough equality of opportunity and reasonably similar resources, especially in scholarships.” The bill, he said, “in essence reassured colleges that they wouldn’t have to spend as much on gymnastic equipment as they did on football paraphernalia.”

The women’s rights groups had by then grudgingly accepted some of the economic realities behind collegiate athletic programs. Ms. Polivy accomplished what she did, Mr. MacCambridge wrote, by injecting the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women’s “wide-eyed idealism with a tough-love dose of the realities of the bruising world of politics and the law.”

Margot Polivy was born on April 25, 1938, in the Bronx. Her father, Charles, sold paint and wallpaper. Her mother, Ruth (Klein) Polivy, was a homemaker.

After graduating from Evander Childs High School in the Bronx, Ms. Polivy earned a bachelor’s degree in education from Hunter College in Manhattan. She then taught physical education at Hunter College High School and received a law degree from New York University School of Law in 1964.

She was then hired as an associate counsel by the Federal Communications Commission, where she oversaw the fairness doctrine, which required equal broadcast time for political candidates. She worked for Representative Bella Abzug of New York in Washington from 1971 to 1972 and then started a law firm, which became known as Renouf & Polivy. It was from there that she was recruited by the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women.

Ms. Polivy's sister is her only immediate survivor. Her life partner, Katrina Renouf, died in 2009.

Ms. Polivy "was a tough negotiator and tenacious advocate," Ms. Dunkle said. "At the same time, her New York elbows were tempered by an irreverent and engaging sense of humor that lightened the mood and made getting to yes more likely."

The Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women was ultimately subsumed by the N.C.A.A., which took control of women's sports, and [ceased operation in 1982](#). By the early 1980s, courts were curbing the reach of Title IX.

"But if the passage of time did not produce compliance, it did serve at least some constructive purposes," Ms. Polivy wrote in a [New York Times](#) opinion essay in 1978. "It allowed an emotional adjustment period, during which all the old arguments about the preference of 'normal' girls for passive pursuits have come to be universally recognized for the foolishness they are."