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ACHIEVING A GOAL

A writer shares the struggle of producing a female driven novel within the male-dominated genre of sports literature.

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TEAMWORK & TENACITY, TITLE IX:

A Women's Sports Novel That Almost Wasn't

It started with a conversation. As my friend Val and I drove into Boston one January night to watch a college game, we started talking about sports stories. Our mutual friend, Sue, head coach for Florida State University's women's basketball, had brought her team to play Boston College, and in between cheering the jump shots and sweet plays, the conversation Val and I began in the car continued: Where were all the good women's novels about sports? How come only young adult literature features female athletes, if at all? Why didn't someone write the kind of novel we'd always wanted to read?



“It took us four years, one small development grant and a lot more conversations before we finally produced the type of novel we wanted to read: a story of two teams and coaches, Title IX and the women who became champions—and friends—through it all..”

– JO KADLECEK

Because Val and I worked at the same small liberal arts college—she as professor and chair of the kinesiology department and I as journalist in residence—we found ourselves talking often after Sue’s game about the power of sport to shape our personal and community stories, and the lack of good fiction with women athletes at the center.

Both of us had grown up playing every sport available to us—thanks in part to a law called Title IX that passed when we were kids—and we loved each opportunity. But we also loved books, so we hunted down every sports story we could find. There weren’t many. We both went on to compete as college athletes before also becoming college coaches, though Val was far more successful than I was in the athletic world. She was born to coach and to train coaches. She oozes enthusiasm for all things sports-related. I, well, I write.

Eventually, Val and I became convinced that we had to do something about the dearth of women’s sports fiction. So we began to plot. We gathered Title IX stories from friends and colleagues, scheduled meetings and created the storyline that, as of September 30, 2015, has now officially become our published novel, *When Girls Became Lions*.

It took us four years, one small development grant and a lot more conversations before we finally produced the type of novel we wanted to read: a story of two teams and coaches, Title IX and the women who became champions—and friends—through it all.

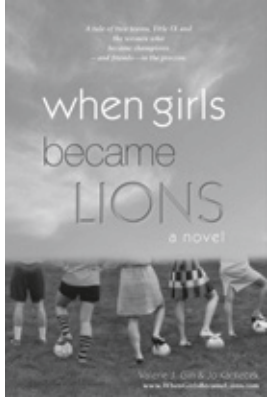
The process of writing a novel you know you *need* to write—yet without a contract as I had always done before—was exhilarating. And scary. And surprising. Week after week, we’d meet in my living room, talk out the storyline and characters while Val would type notes. Then she’d email me the notes, I’d craft the chapter, send it back to her and we’d review it for our next living room meeting.

All the while, we knew we were on to something—even if family and job responsibilities competed for our time. We felt the story was compelling since it was about a ragtag group of unlikely soccer champs who never got their due but stayed friends their whole lives. It was

timely considering how popular women’s sports—soccer in particular—was becoming. And most of all, it was personal. More than once, I was surprised to find myself crying as we talked through anecdotes or as I wrote particular scenes. Yes, this was a story that resonated deeply for us both each time we met—and more so as we talked about the idea with others. Even women who had never been athletes ‘got it,’ and encouraged us to keep going.

Why indeed is the sports literature genre so male-dominated?, they’d ask. Why *couldn’t* a novel celebrate women’s friendships against the backdrop of sport history? And especially, they would push, why *couldn’t* it explore the impact Title IX had when it was enacted and has ever since, so that today’s athletes might understand what those pioneers endured?





“When Girls Became Lions is a story for everyone from soccer dads and college coaches to pro athletes, high school competitors, former athletes-turned-business women and the many folks who support them.”
— JO KADLECEK

So we kept at it. Because of Val’s scholarship and professional networks as an international sports ethicist, we landed some great endorsements even before we’d finished our second or third drafts. Because I’d written and published five novels and two memoirs through niche houses before, I outlined a solid proposal and strategized about how to pitch it. I approached a handful of NYC editors and agents at writer’s conferences, including ASJA’s. And the response was always the same: Great idea! I love it. I want to see it.

And we’d send it. Then we’d wait. And we’d follow up with very nice emails, until finally we’d receive helpful and positive feedback from each, even with suggestions for tweaking it, but always with the woeful confession: “We can’t figure out how to market it. Is it a sports novel? Or women’s fiction? Is it historical? Or contemporary? Is it too esoteric or could it be accessible for general audiences?”

Of course, we said yes to all of the above. We knew it was a unique contribution to both women’s fiction and the male-dominated sports genre. But we also knew that their comments and suggestions—no matter the outcome—would be helpful in our revisions, that nothing was wasted. Even if they said no.

And they did. “Sorry, but it’s just too tricky to figure out where it goes in the book store.”

Understood. Publishing is a business after all. But by the time another agent and publisher said they’d consider reading it, we’d grown impatient. With the women’s world soccer cup in Canada around the corner, we made the daunting but increasingly respectable decision to self-publish.

We simply knew *When Girls Became Lions* needed to get into the hands of folks like us—athletes, women, book-lovers, advocates, future leaders, professors and writers.

Of course, we could never have done this 10 or even five years ago, in large part because I’ve since moved from the Boston area to the other side of the world to help my husband’s elderly parents. Nonetheless, technology can be our friend, so Val and I still

meet regularly to talk about the book—only now it’s through Skype. Because my schedule is more flexible, I’ve had time to build our website and social media presence, while Val has recruited former colleagues and students to copyedit, design, publish and even pose for the cover photo.

On September 9, we launched WhengirlsBecameLions.com and the pre-order announcement on our personal Facebook pages. The books are being shipped as I write this, and the marketing has officially begun. Orders are coming in through our PayPal account via our website and retail sites. And our hunch is being confirmed: *When Girls Became Lions* is a story for everyone from soccer dads and college coaches to pro athletes, high school competitors, former athletes-turned-businesswomen and the many folks who support them. And because it touches on a lot of other issues they care about, such as equality, friendship, racism, family and competition, it offers a more nuanced story than they might have expected.

In other words, the novel is beginning to connect. Dozens have bought copies for friends, liked our Facebook page and retweeted our tweets. Even more humbling, they’re telling us how much they want others to know about this new novel that places women athletes at the center of the story.

Finally.

Now, I can’t wait to read the next new novel in women’s sports fiction. Because we’re hoping more than anything that the real goal of our novel—a whole new genre—is met for book lovers who, once upon a time, also happened to kick soccer balls.

