

Women Start Up Sports' Businesses

Nawal El Moutawakel, Morocco

Vice President of the International Olympic Committee

- Took home a gold medal in the inaugural 400m hurdles at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games
- The first woman from an Islamic nation to win an Olympic medal and the first Moroccan athlete of either sex to win gold
- BS, Physical Education, Iowa State University, 1988

Recruited to ISU women's track team sight unseen with a full scholarship.

Q What was it like for you as a young girl and runner in Morocco?

I come from a family that was open-minded. My mother used to play volleyball and my father did judo. Both of them were educated and worked in a bank. And both wanted to provide an education to their children.

I had five brothers and sisters who ran track and field. Whatever they did, I did. If they climbed a wall, I climbed two walls. If they hit a ball, I hit a ball and I ran. I was never punished by my father for doing something that was only meant for boys.

I started running in the late '70s. One of my coaches said, "I believe you should reorient yourself into low hurdles."

So I started collecting titles in Morocco and in Africa and the Arab world. In 1984, I was the only female athlete to represent Morocco in the Los Angeles Olympic Games. There wasn't even a female doctor in the delegation and that struck me, so from that moment I said, "Things need to change."

Q Why did you decide to get an education in the US, and why is education

so important for young women athletes?

Well, I didn't look for it. It came to me. As I used to compete with my team in Europe, we used to go to many cities during the summer.

There were lots of American coaches trying to find African athletes, and I met this guy who ran the 400 meter at Iowa State University. His name is Sunday Uti. He's from Nigeria, and he asked me if I wanted to study in the US.

Then I started getting a lot of envelopes with proposals to come to study in the States, and as I could not read the English, I had my English professor back home look at them.

He opened the envelopes and said, "You should accept because these people are asking you to come and be educated in the United States." So I signed with Iowa State University not knowing where I was going, because then we did not have the internet.

I knew it was in the Midwest, but did not know I had to carry a heavy coat with me because of the snow. He said, "Just go. You have accomplished everything you need to accomplish here in your country and within your continent. Now, you need to search for excellence somewhere else."

Q How did your family feel about that?

I was so worried that my father would say no, which he did. He said, "I'm so used to my daughter. I want her to stay next to me. The States are too far." So I had my English professor talk to him and my mother.

He said, "You know where she's going is good for her future, good for her education and her athletic career." Somehow my father accepted.

Q What kind of influence did winning the gold medal at the 1984 Olympics Games in Los Angeles have, not just in Morocco, but all over Africa and the Muslim world?

We had to wait more than 80 years for an Arab and Muslim woman to win a gold medal. Lots of women started believing in themselves, saying, "If she did, we can."

I think it opened up wide horizons to so many of them.

In 1984, I was the only one competing in a large delegation of men. Today, our Moroccan delegation includes women in swimming, gymnastics, judo, track and field, taekwondo, cycling, even boxing, you name it. I am so proud to have participated in enlarging the participation of women in physical education and sports in our country and other countries, in Arab states and in Africa. To me, the 400 hurdles was the school of life. It teaches you so many things: discipline, courage, determination and the value of passion.

Q Do you feel that elite athletes should continue their education while still participating in sport?

It's important because it gives you self-confidence. It gives you freedom. You become somebody who can take the lead, somebody who can think, somebody who can decide. It empowers you.

Being educated is something important, period. It's going to help you be a better person tomorrow than what you are today.

It can help you make the right choices in your life, and choose the right path. Sports are very powerful, but education gives you a sense of purpose. If you're educated, you can give direction to your life and to your career, whether in business, family, or anything you choose to do in your life.

Q When you retired, you knew you wanted to help other women, but were there other career options for you?

When I looked around at all those millions of young boys and girls who do not have equal chances to have equal access to sports infrastructure, equipment, or financial support from the government, I knew something had to be done.

I either had to go into politics or enter this world of men where women are systematically excluded, so I started learning. I started imposing myself and going to general assemblies of my club, of my national federation and so forth. Most of the time, I was the only female again.

Then I learned from the others, like Donna de Varona and Anita DeFrantz. It was very important for to me to build a network, important to be empowered in a different way.

It was important for me to bring back home suitcases full of books and ideas to share. I needed to be surrounded by women coaches, women sports leaders, women journalists, women doctors and women physiotherapists.

Then I began speaking, which was good therapy. I started building a network and learning from Anita, learning from Donna, learning from Title IX and learning from my experience back at Iowa State. I started building around me a group of women who were supporting all my ideas to lead and build other programs to empower young women in excluded areas.

Q Can you give us an example of the incredible difference you're making for women?

I had a dream to make an all-women run in Morocco. They don't necessarily have to sprint. They don't necessarily have to run, but they can jog or they can walk.

It was an idea that was accepted by some and rejected by many. The very first year, we had a few hundred women running with me.

The following year it was a few thousand. And 10 years later, it was 30,000 women.

In a Muslim country, in an Arab country and in an African country, I think that was a really strong message to send to the entire planet.

Q What are your responsibilities in your current position as Vice President of the International Olympic Committee?

Serving the Olympic movement is an honor. While my primary goal is to promote equal access to women in sports, I also work to fight against doping and illegal betting, and to help youth have access to sports.

I believe I have a strong role to play as a role model within my country and a role model within this organization where there is strong male domination. I'd like to continue in my capacity at the IOC to serve at my best until I retire.

Q When you won that gold medal in 1984, how did your country and

government respond?

There were hundreds and thousands little Nawals who were born on that day and named after me. There were also many improvements made at the government level towards female athletes.

For instance, during my time, there was no equal financial support given to boys and girls, whereas today, they are given the same treatment for every gold medal won by a girl or a boy. The same amount of money is given to both men and women, African and Arab, at the Olympic and World Championship levels.

This is a huge step that was made then and which is still respected. I'm so proud to have participated in that improvement. I'm so very happy that my 54-second race made a revolution in the system.