



NJSIAA TRAILBLAZER

Val Ackerman is one of the top women executives in sports, and her journey began as an athlete and salutatorian at Hopewell Valley High School in Pennington. She graduated there in 1977 as one of its first beneficiaries from the passage of Title IX, the federal legislation that created educational and athletic opportunities for women, five years earlier. She is currently the commissioner of the Big East Conference, a position she has held since the league reconfigured and started virtually from scratch upon her hire during the summer of 2013. Through her leadership and expertise, the Big East has thrived and grown, after its future had been very much in doubt prior to her arrival. She is one of the few executives who has held leadership positions in both men's and women's sports at the collegiate, professional, national team, and international levels.

Her story is rooted in her days at Hopewell Valley, where her father, Randy, had been a legendary athlete, and later a Division 1 basketball official and its athletic director while Val was a student. While at Hopewell Valley, she won nine letters: four in basketball, three in field hockey, and two in track and field. While a standout in each, her best sport was basketball, where she scored a school-record 1,466 points and was a three-time All-Mercer County selection, even though she didn't play organized basketball until her first game, and the team competed in borrowed field hockey uniforms.

"My dad was a was a high school athletic director who loved sports," Val said. "Even though there were few opportunities for me to play on teams when I grew up, Dad taught my brother and me how to play lots of sports. Through athletics, he also brought out the competitive edge, discipline, and leadership traits in me that I've used throughout my life. Thanks to his guidance, I learned early that I loved playing and competing in sports and I wanted to be a lawyer."

Her next stop was the University of Virginia, where she won four basketball letters, was a three-year captain, and two-time Academic All-American prior to her graduation in 1981. She was the program's first 1,000 point scorer. She graduated with high distinction and received the award given to the individual with the highest GPA among UVA women athletes. In 1999, she was inducted into the GTE Academic All-America Hall of Fame and in 2002 was named to the Atlantic Coast Conference 50th Anniversary team. After playing a year of pro ball in France, she earned a law degree from UCLA and worked for two years as a corporate and banking associate at a New York City firm.

In 1988, she was hired as a staff attorney by the National Basketball Association, later was named special assistant to commissioner David Stern and was then promoted to vice-president of business affairs. Along the way, was also appointed to the Board of Directors of USA Basketball. From 1995-96, she was integral in the creation of the USA Basketball Women's National Team program.

When the WNBA was formed in 1996, she was appointed its first President. She helmed the league for eight years, becoming the first woman to successfully launch and operate a women's team sports league. She was also part of the second induction class of the NJSIAA Hall of Fame in 1997. In 2005, she was named to Sports Business Journal's "20 Most Influential Women in Sports Business" list.

That same year, she was named the first female president of USA Basketball for a three-year term. In 2006, she was also named the United States delegate to the Central Board of the International Basketball Federation. She's continued to serve on a variety of committees related to both basketball and public service. In 2011, she was inducted into the Women's Basketball Hall of Fame, and in 2012, the Women's Sports Foundation named her a "40 for 40" honoree as part of its celebration of the 40th Anniversary of Title IX. She was inducted into the Naismith Memorial Hall of Fame in Springfield, Mass. in 2021.

"My life's path would have been very different it weren't for Title IX," she said. "I probably wouldn't have been able to attend UVA if it weren't for my basketball scholarship nor would the doors of law schools have been open for me to attend. I'd like to think that I would have landed my job at the NBA, but it's doubtful that there would be a WNBA without this law. The WNBA and USA Basketball have been direct beneficiaries of Title IX. Today there is a large pool of girls and women who are playing ball in high schools and colleges. They are getting the kind of coaching and playing experiences they need to enable them to play and succeed at Olympic and professional levels."

