



NJSIAA TRAILBLAZER

Keiko Tokuda was one of the most dominant athletes in the history of New Jersey high school sports.

As a tennis player at Clifton, where she graduated in 1998, she became the only four-time singles champion in the history of the NJSIAA Tournament. Not only that, her career record was 86-0, and she lost only two sets along the way, to the same player as a freshman and sophomore. She was inducted into the NJSIAA Hall of Fame in 2018.

Keiko was born in 1980 as a first-generation child to parents who immigrated from Japan a few years earlier. As such, she initially began her career unfamiliar with the concept of Title IX and the struggles that American women had faced competing in athletics. But the more she progressed, including junior tennis travels around the world followed by a stellar college career at Stanford, the more lessons she learned. All of those experiences helped set up an incredibly successful post-tennis career as a business executive in the San Francisco area.

She credits Title IX, the federal law passed in 1972 which guaranteed equal educational and athletic opportunities for women, for help making it all happen.

"I was born in 1980, and I didn't know anything about the historical struggles of women in sports or Title IX," she said. "I played tennis and swam competitively in my early childhood, but never noticed any feeling of being treated differently based on my gender, which is a testament to Title IX's success in providing equal opportunities to men and women. It was in college at Stanford when I first became aware of Title IX's impact. I received a full scholarship, as did seven of my teammates on the women's tennis team. But then I found out that the men's team only received 4.5 scholarships, due to football creating an imbalance in scholarships being offered to men and women that had to be made up in other sports. I also saw a difference in the treatment of men's and women's sports at the school, but I chalked it up to the men's team being a legendary program with alumni like John McEnroe and the Bryan brothers, even though Stanford women's tennis was equally successful in NCAA titles."

As a player, Keiko was known for her toughness and determination as well as her natural ability, traits which have helped her throughout her life well beyond tennis.

During the summer of 1997, just before her senior year at Clifton and at the peak of her international junior career, she was diagnosed with ulcerative colitis. She spent three weeks in the hospital and lost almost 30 pounds. She missed the start of the season that fall, but eventually returned, was able to compete in the state tournament and completed her history-making four-year run as NJSIAA champion. She also graduated 13th in her class.

As a junior player, she was the 1996 18U Clay Court national champion as part of career that took her around the world.

At Stanford, she was a two-year captain and All-America. She played on teams that won NCAA championships in 1999, 2001 and 2002 and finished runner-up in 2000. She graduated with a major in International Relations and minor in Psychology. She played a year on the WTA Tour before deciding to retire in 2002 to pursue the next stage of her career.





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“Tennis opened up a whole world to me,” she said. “I started to travel nationally to tournaments when I was 9 years old, which brought me and my family to places like Florida, Michigan, Illinois and the many stops on the road between those places and New Jersey. Meeting and making friends with people around the country was interesting and broadened my perspective. I started to travel with the U.S. National Team when I was 13, which furthered my education about the world.”

While her travels were extensive, her parents made sure that she never pursued tennis at the expense of her studies, whether she was away from home or back in Clifton practicing.

“While my classmates were in high school, I was playing tennis in Italy, Belgium, France, England and Venezuela and met other kids from countries where war and bombings were common, and came to appreciate the United States, democracy, education and safety in a way that my peers only read about in text books,” she said. “I feel these experiences shaped my view of the world, about inclusivity, privilege, sacrifice and the transcending power of sport.”

Those lessons have also influenced her work as an executive. She has vast experience in the tech industry, working at Google, Eventbrite and various startups. She’s currently Chief of Staff at Zingtree, a technology startup in the Bay Area. Keiko is responsible for partnering with the executive team and employees in executing the strategic and operational priorities of the company. She’s also an Executive Coach for her own coaching business, Dare To Grow, in which she helps people level up their performance and leadership skills, take bold actions to pursue their career ambitions and feel more connected to the meaning and purpose of their work. And in addition to all of that, she recently became a first-time mom.

“As I’ve grown up, I understand the level of commitment and hard work that is needed to be exceptional, and that anything can truly be possible with a winning attitude,” she said. “I have boldly stepped into leadership roles, become a marketing executive and gone toe-to-toe with other executives because I know I have earned my spot and my opinion matters. Fear of the unknown is a real problem that limits people’s potential, and I have always challenged myself to step into that fear, as I did when I traveled at such a young age to unknown countries, to open up to new possibilities. Now as an Executive Coach, I help others to step boldly into their own careers and dreams.”

And having achieved so much, she now realizes that Title IX played an important part in shaping her path.

“I am extremely grateful for Title IX and owe my success to it,” she said. “The fact that I was able to excel in a sport that would allow me these opportunities in my life from such a young age, and then eventually pay for my Stanford education and set me up for a successful professional career, is simply remarkable. I cannot imagine a world where girls and boys, women and men, would not have equal opportunities. As a mother of a young child now, I am excited that he can play sports and pursue anything in life and not have to consider why there are any differences based on gender.”

