



Beth A. Brooke and Donna de Varona

**EDITORS' NOTE** Beth Brooke is also EY's global sponsor of its diversity and inclusiveness efforts. Brooke joined Ernst & Young LLP in 1981 and has since held a number of leadership roles including U.S. National Director of Tax Advisory Services. She has also served as EY Global and Americas Vice Chair for Public Policy, Sustainability and Stakeholder Engagement. Brooke worked in the U.S. Department of the Treasury during the Clinton Administration. She is a Certified Public Accountant and a fellow in the Life Management Institute. Brooke has a B.S. degree and an honorary doctorate degree from Purdue University, where she played women's intercollegiate basketball. She is a member of the inaugural class of the Henry Crown Fellows of The Aspen Institute and serves on its board of trustees, and is a member of The Committee of 200.

Donna de Varona qualified for her first Olympic team in 1960 at the age of 13 and won two gold medals at the 1964 summer Olympics. In 1965, at the age of 17, she became the youngest and one of the first women on network TV as a sports broadcaster. In 1974, she helped establish the Women's Sports Foundation and served as its first President and Chairman. She received an Emmy for her work during the Special Olympics in 1991. De Varona was

# EY WOMEN ATHLETES GLOBAL LEADERSHIP NETWORK

An Interview with Beth A. Brooke, EY Global Vice Chair - Public Policy, and Donna de Varona, President, DAMAR Productions Inc.

*Chair for the 1999 FIFA Women's World Cup, which was hosted in the United States, and served on the board of New York City's Bid Committee for the 2012 Olympic Games. She has been inducted into several Halls of Fame, including the International Swimming Hall of Fame, the U.S. Olympic Hall of Fame, and the Women's Hall of Fame. She was most recently appointed to the United States Department of State's Empowering Women and Girls Through Sports Council. In addition, she is an ambassador for Tony Blair's Beyond Sport initiative. She is also President of DAMAR Productions, a marketing, consulting, and events advisory company.*

**ORGANIZATION BRIEF** EY ([www.ey.com](http://www.ey.com)) is a global leader in assurance, tax, transaction and advisory services. The insights and quality services EY firms deliver help build trust and confidence in the capital markets and in economies the world over. EY firms develop outstanding leaders who team to deliver on their promises to all of their stakeholders. In so doing, EY firms play a critical role in building a better working world for their people, their clients, and their communities.

***"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...I knew something had to be done. ...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."***

**Nawal El Moutawakel, Morocco,  
Vice President of the International  
Olympic Committee**

**What is the value in launching the Women Athletes Global Leadership Network and what is the vision behind it?**

*Brooke:* The pace of progress for women in leadership is accelerating, but glacially. We were looking for an interesting intervention to enhance the strategic pipeline of women leaders. We think that women athletes represent an incredible untapped pool of leadership talent.

Oftentimes, these young leaders get to the end of their careers in sport and have difficulty pivoting to use the leadership and entrepreneurial qualities that they gained through their success in sports, which are also important to success in other sectors like business or politics. Our hope is to establish an intervention that accelerates their ability to make that pivot and, therefore, accelerates advancing women in leadership overall.

**Are the opportunities broadening for elite athletes and what is your vision for getting involved?**

*De Varona:* I'm thrilled to be part of the EY program. When this idea germinated last year, it was during the 40th anniversary of Title IX. In celebration of this 1972 landmark legislation, the National Women's Hall of Fame decided to convene a panel to discuss the impact of this law in opening up tremendous opportunities for girls and women in this country. Since I have been involved with Title IX and am in the Hall, I was asked to participate. We were delighted when Beth was invited to take part as well. I have always noticed that there is a natural bridge connecting men in sports with men in business but, until recently, women in sports have been isolated. Forty-plus years of Title IX has fostered opportunities for women to become leaders in certain sectors but, as Beth said, we exist in silos.

EY has been so good at recognizing and encouraging winning entrepreneurial women that it is a natural fit for the organization to be involved in building out a global network linking women in sport with women in other sectors. Plus, with Beth having been a Title IX recipient and such a leader in the world of business, this concept is a win-win.

I helped start the Women's Sports Foundation and was its first President and Chairman. Through that experience, I observed many successful women athletes struggling to make the transition to business. However, many pioneers are out there who

***“I think the Women Athletes Global Leadership Network is vital to establishing the networking necessary to take elite athletes and give them a bridge to senior level executive women who have been there. It is important for these leading global businesswomen to leave the ladder down and make sure that they are continually reaching out and pulling athletes up.”***

**Michelle Marciniak, United States, Co-Founder & Co-CEO, SHEEX, Inc.**

have been successful in making the transition, such as Morocco's Nawal El Moutawakel, who, as one of the first generation of Title IX recipients, went on to capture an Olympic Gold Medal in the 400-meter hurdles during the 1984 Olympics. She has since become a Vice President of the International Olympic Committee and is being talked about as a future IOC Presidential Candidate.

Other examples include swimmer Jenny Thompson, a multiple gold medalist who is now a doctor, and Dot Richardson, a fast pitch softball player who won a gold medal in the 1996 Atlanta Olympics, became a doctor, and has since started a clinic.

These women are out there celebrating professional successes but their stories often stop being told after they retire from active competition. They all want to give back and be reconnected with sport but, until now, there has not been a way to do it. So there is certainly a need to be met.

**What are the key components of the network?**

*Brooke:* We have three components: the first is developing a new network to bring women athletes from around the world together. We can then expose them to senior women business or government leaders and women entrepreneurs, who are already in our network. They can mentor these women athletes, open doors, and provide other skills and resources to encourage their success. The goal is to create a network that is content rich and people rich to help these athletes.

Second is the commissioning of research on the impact of women's advancement in sport and society. Our first study demonstrated that 96 percent of C-suite women business leaders have sport in their background and over half played at an elite university level.

The third element involves collecting stories of inspiration - inviting people like Donna to

describe how they were able to execute their pivots to their next chapter, highlighting both their successes and challenges, and drawing people's attention to these inspirational messages.

**How critical has it been to bring the right group of advisors in? How receptive have athletes been?**

*De Varona:* I have been invited to speak around the world with athletes of all levels and I haven't had one athlete say they don't want to be involved.

If you're from countries like Saudi Arabia, Egypt or many throughout Africa, you don't have the same opportunity to be as connected as women in the United States - to understand how the international sporting movement works, how to reach out to sports leaders and beyond or how to enlist more than a few mentors. Many women from these countries have given their time to talk about their needs in roundtable discussions and they want in; they just want to connect.

Based on information about what we've done in the U.S. and the progress we've made because of Title IX, many of these individuals have assumed leadership roles. Yet, they don't have enough knowledge or support in helping foster change, so there is a crying need for this network.

Tennis great Martina Navratilova, gymnast Nadia Comăneci, and track star Nawal El Moutawakel are all involved in the network.

*Brooke:* There is such a recognition of the need for this from the athletes and women in leadership. Senior businessmen also get this and they want to help. Everyone who has worked with female athletes knows they have an incredible package of confidence, can get the job done, and they are leaders.

**How broad are the objectives of what you're hoping to achieve?**

*Brooke:* We hope to find more women to fill the strategic pipeline of female leaders and to help those women increase the number of their peers in leadership positions.

But my sense is that simple objective, of course, is too narrow. What we're going to create is an unbelievable strategic asset globally that can do many things by linking those who heretofore haven't been connected: women in sports, business and government, and entrepreneurs.

**Donna, what would it have meant to you to have had access to this when you first started?**

*De Varona:* This is a dream come true for me. When I competed, there was little opportunity for women to continue in sport past age 17, much less find a future in broadcasting or in business.

This lack of opportunity fueled my passion to help start the Women's Sports Foundation. I have seen firsthand what networking has done there and how being a leader in this organization nurtures skills necessary to make important transitions in life.

As examples, two past presidents of the Women's Sports Foundation come to mind: Gold medalist track athlete Benita Fitzgerald and Gold medalist swimmer Nancy Hogshead. Benita has held managerial positions in both the television cable industry as well as in the

sporting world, and Nancy has become a sought-after Title IX expert and lawyer.

Athletes are entrepreneurs. They have to find their coaches, funding and a program that will accept them. They have to blindly make a commitment as there is no guarantee when you start training that there is a gold medal at the finish line.

*Brooke:* I was talking to one of the greatest women soccer players of all time the other day. She said that when she was 34, she came to the abrupt end of her soccer career and everyone assumed she knew what to do next, but she had no clue. She would have killed to have this network in place then.

**What drives EY to support women in such an unwavering manner?**

*Brooke:* The great thing about EY is that there is a fundamental belief here that difference matters. You have to be on a perpetual quest to embrace difference so you enable better decision-making and provide more balanced and effective leadership.

The firm is also very good at innovating. You need consistency but we also love to come at problems from different angles, such as addressing the lack of women in leadership. Connecting the world of sport to the worlds of business and government is a fresh angle. It has been very well received and I could not be more excited.

**Why is there a natural connection between you and Donna?**

*Brooke:* We have both lived the experience of being women athletes. Ninety-six percent of C-suite women have sport in their background, and Donna and I are two of those women who know that our sports experience accelerated our success. If you ask any athletes, they will tell you sport gave them confidence and competitiveness; taught them essential skills; made them great entrepreneurs, team players, and leaders on and off the courts; and contributed to the success they are having in life.

At EY, we recognize that we have an important worldwide platform and we try to use that to make a difference and ultimately help build a better working world.

Using EY's convening power and platform for this end is like a breath of fresh air for the sports world and the business world. ●

***“We can relate and learn from everyone. And the experiences sometimes are the same, and some person may have an idea in another part of the world that might help you. Women can help each other no matter where they are.”***

**Fabiola Pulga Molina, Brazil, Co-Founder and Co-CEO, Fabiola Molina Swimwear**