

# Thought Leader Spotlight

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As part of The Azara Group's monthly newsletter, we select a business leader to share insights about leadership, being an influencer, and career development. Our objective is to help support your ability to flourish as a leader and share what makes people thrive in business.

## Judy Sweet

*Title IX Consultant & Speaker*

*Former Membership President of the NCAA*

*Former Director of Athletics – UC San Diego*

**Education:** National University (M.B.A.)  
University of Arizona (M.S., Education)  
University of Wisconsin-Madison (B.S., Education)

**Previously With:** National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA)  
University of California, San Diego

**Interesting Details:** Grew up in Milwaukee, Wisconsin and lives in California; current Co-Chair of the NCAA Gender Equity Task Force; advisory board member of ESPNW and the Women's Sports Foundation Advocacy Committee; Co-Founder of the Alliance of Women Coaches; Wish-granter for the Make A Wish Foundation; inductee into the Wisconsin State Sports Hall of Fame, the University of Wisconsin Athletics Hall of Fame, and the UC San Diego Athletics Hall of Fame.



### 1. What attracted you to your chosen field and profession?

I grew up with two older brothers and several male cousins who were great athletes. They always included me in the games being played, from basketball and football to baseball. This fueled my love of sports and passion for being active. But I grew up in a time when there were limited career choices for women – especially in sports. It was before Title IX was enacted. There weren't any female athletic administrators or many college sports programs for women. So when I was younger, I never considered a career in a sports field. I thought I would be a math teacher because I love teaching and being an educator.

Life has a way of putting you in the right place at the right time. When I was in college, I was set up on a blind date. Since I loved sports, he planted the seed that I should be a Physical Education major. This opened my thinking and shifted my focus. I started out teaching PE at Newcomb College, which is a part of Tulane University. When I was in graduate school, I worked in women's athletics at the University of Arizona. Then I moved to San Diego and taught PE, including modern dance at a high school. The following year, my dream job at UC San Diego opened up. In 1975, I became the first female athletics director of a combined men's and women's intercollegiate athletics program in the United States. In 1998, UCSD received the National Association of Collegiate Directors of Athletics (NACDA) Directors Cup for being the most successful athletics program in NCAA Division III.

**2. What person, opportunity, or game-changing moment had the biggest impact on your career?**

Honestly, it was that blind date. I don't even remember his name, but without his suggestion, I may have been a math teacher! The timing was right for pursuing a career in athletics administration, but not for me to be a college or professional athlete. The passage of Title IX ignited my passion for making sure people aren't denied opportunities because of their race or gender. Today, I'm the Co-chair of the NCAA Gender Equity Task Force. Things have improved over the years in respect to equity in athletics, but now we're at a standstill. People are getting complacent. I want to help people understand what equality means, educate them, and give them a voice. If you're not educated on how to evaluate equity, then you may not recognize or question any disparities, and consequently inequity continues and nothing changes.

**3. What is the biggest challenge you faced professionally? How did you overcome it?**

There have been several. Since I was the first woman to oversee both a men's and women's athletic program, I wasn't embraced by everyone. This was a time when there wasn't even a women's faculty locker room at UC San Diego. I had to use the one for the female students. In the PE department, there were 12 men and me. Some of the men wanted to be the athletics director and didn't want me to be successful. I was frequently undermined, and received a lot of nasty hate mail when my appointment was announced. I was criticized for taking away a man's job.

Striving for equity and sharing the pie with the women wasn't well received. I remember a men's basketball coach whose team had most of the resources. We had to have an honest and difficult conversation since funds needed to be redistributed. Fortunately, he had a daughter. I used this knowledge to strategically make my point on equity – asking him about the importance of providing opportunities for his daughter just like his son. My points resonated much better since he had a daughter.

I also remember when I was a Senior Vice President at the NCAA during the Bush Administration. Politicians were trying to weaken Title IX and I attended all the hearings held by the Commission on Opportunity in Athletics to fight the assault on gender equity in college sports. I was a member of a "Title IX Team" who helped to prepare some of the members of the Commission. Interestingly, not all of the women on the Commission were Title IX supporters. But we worked with those who were. In the end, they didn't weaken Title IX. This was a major accomplishment.

In my career, I've overcome challenges by doing my homework, believing in myself, having thick skin, and knowing what I was doing was the right thing for both male and female student-athletes. Sometimes you also have to be patient, stubborn, and persistent.

**4. What tools or tactics do you rely on in being a more effective leader and team member?**

Listening and watching have been extremely important to me. I value all opinions even if I disagree. I believe in giving people an opportunity to express their thoughts and I encourage diversity of thought. I am a consensus builder, and believe in honesty even if people don't want to hear what you have to say. My goal is to look at the big picture. I'm more focused on the best interests of the group.

**5. Share a story about an interesting or difficult negotiation and how you were able to gain more influence and leverage as a result.**

I remember when I was the Secretary-Treasurer of the NCAA. This was an elected membership position and the second highest position under the NCAA's old structure. I was part of an NCAA committee negotiating the TV rights contract for the Men's Final Four Basketball Championship. This was a time when there weren't huge TV deals like you have today. We were talking with ABC, NBC, and CBS, and looking at annual valuations in the tens of millions of dollars. During our private strategy discussions, one committee member said, "let's put \$1 billion on the table and whomever is willing to pay this will get the TV rights deal to be the NCAA's TV partner." We went for it, put out that price tag, and CBS accepted it. This was a major outcome back in 1990. I learned when negotiating, you shouldn't be afraid to put something out there. Nothing will happen if you don't try. Initially, I flinched at the \$1 billion price, but it was a game changer in the negotiation. This showed me you have to take risks to generate the greatest outcome for what you have to offer.

**6. What do you see as your unique value proposition and how has your personal background prepared you to excel?**

I'm a good listener and consensus builder. Early in my career, I attended NCAA conventions and sat in the back of the room. I would watch, listen, and learn – looking to see who spoke well, if someone's argument carried weight, and who advocated poorly when presenting a great idea. When I was President of the NCAA, I reflected back on when I used to “watch, listen, and learn” in the back of the room. A few weeks ago, I saw the new SEC Commissioner. He pulled a piece of paper from his wallet and showed me that he wrote down “watch, listen, and learn” in 1990 when I said this. This was very touching – especially since I have so much respect for him. These words are helpful for everyone. You don't always have to be in the front of the room to have influence, but how you present ideas and yourself truly matters.

**7. What is your proudest achievement?**

Having impact on gender equity. We came up with the definition for gender equity when I was part of the NCAA's initial gender equity task force – defined as whatever support is given to one gender, should be acceptable to the other gender, and vice versa. You can change gender to race. It's about being aware, inclusive, appreciative, and supportive of all people. I'm proud of this definition. When I was President of the National Association of College Women Athletics Administrators (NACWAA), my theme was women helping other women (W.H.O.W). I always said “being the first female athletics director was a matter of timing, but not being the last was most important.”