

## **Nike Has Put Women Front and Center for 40 Years and Counting**

This month, Nike launches its largest ever women's-focused campaign, #betterforit, which will run through 2015 as a long-term commitment of motivating women to be active, take on new challenges and conquer personal goals. As the brand prepares to launch this rallying cry and campaign to the world, Nike News takes a look and celebrates how Nike Women has elevated and engaged female athletes in meaningful ways over decades.

"Nike has been speaking up for and speaking to female athletes for more than 40 years. When the times called for advocacy, we took a stand for the right for female athletes to compete, from the first Olympic marathon competition for women in 1984 to our long-time position in support of Title IX," said legendary marathoner Joan Benoit Samuelson who has been featured in Nike Women campaigns across the decades. "We also evolved our voice over the years to connect with women one-to-one, sometimes as her inner voice and in other moments as her best friend, always challenging her to push the limits—both in sport and fitness, and in life."

### **Nike Women: The Early Years (The 1970s)**

In the early 1970s, just as Nike forged its identity, women in the world of sports redefined theirs. On June 23, the United States Congress passed Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 — a landmark bill that enforced gender equity in high school and collegiate sports once and for all.

Less than a week later, on June 29, the U.S. Olympic Track and Field Trials started in Eugene, Ore. A handful of former University of Oregon runners cranked out T-shirts and gave away free shoes that featured an unusual new brand that looked like a check mark. Their tiny company was called Blue Ribbon Sports. The shoes were called Nike, named after the Greek Goddess of Victory.

Though it's fair to say that most of Nike's early advertising efforts revolved around marketing to men, Nike ran a series of ads featuring women on the back cover of Runner's World in the 1970's. In 1978, Nike Women launched as a business focus, and Nike debuted its first ad featuring the Lady Waffle Trainer, part of a line designed specifically for women. It marked a significant moment for the brand, stating: "One of a long line of powerful new ideas whose time has come at Nike."

### **Going the Distance with Joan Benoit Samuelson (1980s)**

Until the early 1980s, the longest distance a woman could run in the Olympic Games was 1,500 meters, due to the long-held belief that women weren't physically capable of handling longer runs. The reality, of course, was very different. During the 1970s, the women's marathon record was slashed from 3:07 to 2:27 (while the men's record didn't improve at all) and 250 women from 25 nations entered the 1979 World Championship marathon in Waldniel, West Germany. In 1979, a Norwegian runner became the first

woman to run a marathon under 2:30, finishing the New York City marathon in 2:27:33. In the same year, a group of female runners banded together to create the International Runners Committee (IRC) to fight for the inclusion of long-distance running. Nike became an enthusiastic partner of the IRC, eagerly providing funding and exposure to help push women's running to new levels of acceptance.

On February 23, 1981, the International Olympic Committee voted to include the women's 3000m and marathon in the 1984 Games, ignoring the statute that mandated waiting four years before implementing new sports. Nike celebrated the successes with a pair of ads. One rejoiced, "The Olympics Will Never Be the Same." The second was featured on the back cover of the program for the Women's Olympic Marathon Trials in Olympia, Wash. The ad was short and packed with emotion: "Finally!"

All of this culminated in the summer of 1984, as Joan Benoit Samuelson made history when she won the first women's marathon at the Games in Los Angeles and helped ignite a running movement, which Nike celebrated in print ads after her groundbreaking victory. A Nike athlete since the mid-1970s, Joan Benoit Samuelson was an integral part of footwear testing and development at Nike's facilities in Exeter, N.H. She won her first Boston Marathon in 1979, and went on to win two more at Boston in 1983 and 1985.

### **Nike Aerobics (Late 1980s - early 1990s)**

In the late 1980s, women in larger numbers grew more connected to sport and adopted a lifestyle of fitness. Nike began to address the "everyday" female athlete, creating a greater range of women's footwear and apparel and standing up for her as she carved out more space in her life for sports and fitness.

Nike released a print campaign dubbed the "List" series in 1990. The ads listed numerous pressures put upon modern women and succeeded in making a statement. The tough, direct tone resonated with women, and Nike went on to create more empowering women's campaigns, inspiring the next generation of female athletes.

From 1990 to 1995, the dialogue between Nike and women became more intimate and brave. Nike unleashed powerful and consistent advertising with honest, uplifting messages. In 1991, Nike released an eight-page print magazine insert that started with the words, "You Were Born a Daughter," and took the reader through the growth and development of a woman's life. The ad urged women to be "significant to yourself." The message clicked and the insert began appearing on teenagers' bedroom walls and in locker rooms.

### **Sheryl Swoopes and the rise of female sport heroines (Mid 1990s)**

Nike's partnership with athletes hit a milestone with the release of the Nike Air Swoopes, the first signature shoe developed for a female athlete. The project began in early 1993, after college basketball phenom Sheryl Swoopes led Texas Tech to the NCAA championship, scoring 47 points in the title game. Nike signed her soon thereafter. In October of 1995, Swoopes became only the second athlete, male or female, to have a shoe bear her name. Sheryl was in good company, as the first was none other than

Michael Jordan.

"Nike has believed in the dedication, performance and passion of female athletes from day one. As a professional women's basketball player, the brand empowered me to become a beacon of inspiration for female athletes everywhere. The honor of being featured in campaigns and receiving a signature shoe enabled me to give women hope, and something bigger than any of us could have imagined to strive for."

A collegiate and Olympic champion, Swoopes added to her legacy in women's professional basketball by leading the Houston Comets to the very first WNBA Championship and went on to garner three MVP honors in her 12-year career. At the same time, Nike put a stake in the ground around the importance of sport in the lives of girls, speaking to women but also to the men who would influence the next generation of female athletes.

Nike significantly upped its support for women's soccer and basketball in the early 1990s, signing Mia Hamm and the U.S. National women's (and men's) soccer teams in 1994.

The print ads of the era certainly got women's attention, but this movement shifted into further gear in 1995, when Nike released its most powerful women's ad to date. In the fall of 1995, Nike released a 30-second TV spot entitled, "If You Let Me Play." The spot introduced a new approach to inspire female athletes, emphasizing how sports benefit the lives of girls. Statistics such as "I will be 60 percent less likely to get breast cancer" and "I will be more likely to leave a man who beats me" struck an emotional chord across generations and gender, with girls, mothers and fathers, teachers and coaches alike. The campaign was chosen as one of the best ads of 1995 by readers of USA Today. Twenty years later, "If You Let Me Play" still pops up on blogs and remains one of the top references in any historical examination of women's sports media.

### **The U.S. Women's National Team (1999)**

With 90,000 watching in the stands, the largest audience ever to attend a women's sporting event, the U.S. soccer squad captured the World Cup title — and worldwide attention — in a dramatic penalty shootout versus China. Nike celebrated the athletes at every step of their journey and used the occasion to inspire the next generation of young female athletes. In Nike's "Girl In America" spot Mia Hamm proclaimed, "There is a girl being born in America. Someone will give her a doll. Someone will give her a ball. And someone will give her a chance."

### **Advocacy and Defying Stereotypes in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (2000s)**

Nike stepped up its advocacy around women's sports in the 2000s primarily in defense of Title IX. In 2006, the U.S. Department of Education changed the way schools' Title IX compliance was measured. With the change, schools could use email surveys to determine if they were adequately meeting the athletic needs of women on campus. This decision gave schools an unintended loophole that Nike and others feared could result in incomplete data and eventually lead to the erosion of women's sport programs.

Nike and outside partners worked to form a response. Nike helped coordinate a group of female athletes, including U.S. Women's National team soccer player Cat Reddick Whitehill, to speak at the hearings in defense of Title IX. Nike sent a letter to the Secretary of Education signed by WNBA star Tamika Catchings and ran an ad featuring Mia Hamm in Capitol Hill publications prior to the hearings.

In the early 2000s, Nike also challenged cultural stereotypes and perceptions of female athletes. Building on strong female role models it supports, Nike released "My Body Parts" print ads, which confidently talked about the size and strength of a female athlete's butt and thighs with rhyme and reason: "I have thunder thighs. And that's a compliment because they are strong."

In 2004, at the time of the Athens Games, Nike released "Mi heroe es una chava," (My hero is a girl) to celebrate 400-meter sprinter Ana Guevera, who became the first Mexican female track athlete to win a gold medal in a major international competition in 2003 and won silver in Athens.

In 2006 Nike launched its first campaign with Maria Sharapova. Titled "I Feel Pretty," the spot playfully communicated the message that beneath Maria's beautiful, feminine exterior lives the intense competitive appetite of one of the top athletes in the world. Similarly, in 2007, Nike featured French-Algerian dancer Sofia Boutella in a TV spot, where she defied the stereotype that she is not an athlete.

Nike took on a major social issue in 2007. On April 4, 2007, during Women's March Madness, the Rutgers women's basketball team was the focus of a string of offensive remarks. The uproar rang out across the country, and sparked conversation within Nike about how to respond. It was called the Athlete campaign. The video component involved a bevy of athletes and coaches, including Mia Hamm, Picabo Street, Serena Williams and Gabrielle Reece, voicing their opinions and challenging gender stereotypes. Nike also ran a full-page ad in The New York Times that read, "Thank You Ignorance. Thank you for starting the conversation. Thank you for unintentionally moving women's sport forward."

Nike also began a dialogue with women in Western Europe in 2008 with "Here I Am," a multi-media campaign that showed how girls in sport are stronger on body and mind by highlighting the mental strength of young world-class athletes like Sofia Boutella and Maria Sharapova.

### **Serena Williams' Tennis Dynasty (2004 onwards)**

Few athletes have dominated their sport like Serena Williams has dominated tennis. Despite a series of potentially career-ending injuries and setbacks, Williams has amassed more Grand Slam titles than any active player in the game with 34...and counting. Known for her style and self-expression on the court, as well as her strong training ethic, Williams claimed a leading role in Nike's ATHLETE campaign in 2007, and in Delicious

Training in 2011. She was one of the first athletes to be featured in the Nike+ Training Club app when it re-launched in 2013.

### **Nike Women Today (2010s)**

In December 2010, Nike released its rallying cry for women with “Make Yourself.” The campaign encouraged women to think about who they want to be and how sport can help them find the confidence they need to become their best self.

On June 23, 2012, Nike released a film entitled "Voices" to celebrate women in sport on the 40th anniversary of Title IX. The film features the personal stories of four outstanding female athletes spanning three generations—Joan Benoit Samuelson, Lisa Leslie, Marlen Esparza and Diana Taurasi—who play by their own rules. “Voices” reflects on some of the challenges the athletes have faced on their journeys to greatness, and celebrates the passion, commitment and strength of female athletes everywhere to be the best at what they do. As the film progresses, the voices of these athletes are embraced by young girls, future athletes, who adopt the same “play by your own rules” attitude.

Li Na defied the rules and stereotypes of tennis, becoming the first Asian woman to win a Grand Slam and the highest-ranked Chinese female player ever. In 2014 Nike launched the campaign “Dare to aim higher than the sky” to celebrate her success and inspire a new generation of Chinese athletes. Later in the year, when she announced her retirement, Nike paid tribute to her again with "Be the Bird that Sticks Out” featuring the icon of a phoenix spreading its wings. The campaign captures Li’s pioneering spirit of daring to stand out, and encourages young people to have the courage to follow their dreams.

Now, at the mid-point of the decade, Nike continues to break boundaries and grow with female athletes. The launch of #betterforit builds on Nike’s history of advocating for and championing women athletes at every level, from Grand Slam winners and Global champions to those looking for a new PR or motivation for an extra workout. After all, Nike was named after a woman.