

Women & Sport: Female athletes have made strides on reproductive freedom in the workplace

6-7 minutes

The symbolism couldn't be clearer.

One week ago the United States celebrated 50 years since Title IX became the law of the land — ushering in a new era for girls and women who played sports in the 1970s. It was a monumental milestone, and this year in its wake the conversation had shifted to finding ways to keep the momentum going.

But one day after that anniversary, momentum slowed when the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* and what had been for nearly 50 years a woman's constitutional right to an abortion

Reproductive freedom and women's sports go hand in hand.

Every day, the women's sports landscape is growing — with more investment, more participation, more media coverage. But that landscape is also evolving in ways that spill into broader society. One example we don't talk about enough is how women's sports are shaping the way pregnancy and reproductive health care are handled in the workplace. In many ways, women's professional athletes are setting the example.

Last year, the WNBA reached a historic partnership with the reproductive health company Modern Fertility that provides athletes free access to fertility testing service, among other things. [In an interview with Bloomberg](#), Los Angeles Sparks' Nneka Ogwumike, president of the WNBA Players Association, said: "Some players feel as though they can't plan a family until after they're done playing because we use our bodies as our livelihood."

The league in many ways was already [an established leader in women's sports](#) after its collective bargaining agreement in 2020 secured raises and paid parental leave for players. This new partnership boosted the league's commitment to its players.

Other leagues soon followed. In October, the women's pro soccer team Racing Louisville FC became the first team in the NWSL to provide players with such services as egg freezing, embryo freezing and long-term storage through a partnership with the Kentucky Fertility Institute. In discussing the partnership, Brynn Sebring, then the team's director of player experience, [told The Athletic](#): "I've seen athletes get to points in their careers where they have to decide if they want to continue playing, or if they want to start a family. Especially with women's soccer players, who generally are not paid very high salaries, and (since) fertility preservation treatments are very expensive."

In other words, both in the WNBA and NWSL, two of the oldest women's sports leagues in America, the system is being reimagined to offer athletes the ability to be a working parent in a profession that taxes their bodies to the ultimate extreme. In the late 1970s, when Title IX and *Roe v. Wade* were still new concepts, professional female athletes were typically making a difficult choice between starting a family or continuing their playing careers. That's changing, and that's huge.

Just this month, Modern Fertility, the same company that partnered with the WNBA, [announced a campaign that would feature athletes](#) – expanding the conversation about reproductive health to everyday life. The campaign includes some of the biggest names in sports, such as USWNT World Cup champion Sydney Leroux, a mother of two. For the campaign, she expressed in a video how, when she was pregnant with her daughter and second child, critics wrote her off. They couldn't have been more wrong. Leroux is now part of a growing class of pro soccer players proving that motherhood and competition is possible.

The conversation about reproductive health is multidimensional. One of the conversations around Wimbledon this year centers on the fact that tennis players can only wear white. It's a rule that was adopted in the 1800s to avoid noticeable sweat stains on colored clothing. But the rule pays no mind to the fact that wearing white while on your period [can be stressful for athletes](#). In many ways, talking about menstruation remains taboo in sports — but athletes are beginning to call that out.

Though the conversations are evolving, they aren't entirely new. In 2019, Allyson Felix, now the most decorated U.S. track and field athlete, spoke out against her sponsor, Nike, when the company refused to pay her while on maternity leave. She shared her "pregnancy story" [in a New York Times essay](#). Her advocacy led to Nike announcing a new maternity policy for all of its sponsored athletes. Her fight didn't end there.

The Olympian last year [launched her own company called Saysh](#). The company has a return policy that offers people whose shoe sizes go up during pregnancy the chance to get a new pair of sneakers for free. And just this week Felix, who announced this year's season will be her last, kicked off an initiative with her sponsor Athleta and the nonprofit group &Mother to provide free child care to athletes, coaches and staff at the U.S. Track and Field championships.

When asked about Roe's overturn this week, Felix [put it succinctly](#): "I think any time women's rights get taken away, it's a sad day. ... I'll always fight for women, always fight for them to have the ability to make their own decisions and that's something I always stand behind."



In more ways than one, athletes are impacting the conversation around reproductive rights and reproductive health care. But many experts and women worry that these efforts are now under threat with the Supreme Court decision to overturn Roe. They worry the ruling [could affect fertility treatments](#), access to birth control and [other forms of health care](#).

So, it's no surprise that athletes across various sports, and even leagues like the NBA, WNBA and NWSL have spoken out against the Supreme Court's overturn. Limiting access to these forms of medical care could stall or reverse the years of progress that athletes have made.

Women & Sport is a new NorthJersey.com column devoted to female athletes from the rec league level to those in college and the pros. If you've got a tip on an athlete from North Jersey who should be noted in the column, no matter how young they are or how old, please drop me a line at anzidei@northjersey.com.

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