

Eye to Eye

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# IN THE LOCKER ROOM

*I grew up in a time where girls were not encouraged  
to love or play sports.*

—Christine Brennan<sup>1</sup>

AUGUST 23, 1980

CHRISTINE BRENNAN had just graduated earlier that spring from Northwestern University with a degree in journalism. All her academic courses and experiences prepared her for this moment. She knew the questions to ask, and the people to pose them to.

Her years as a spectator taught her the game of football. Time spent in the stands following her hometown University of Toledo Rockets or the Northwestern Wildcats helped her learn the ins and outs of the game. She knew about special teams, hurry-up offenses, and illegal procedures. She had knowledge, instinct, and confidence.

That confidence came from her parents, who taught her that it didn't matter that she was a girl. She could do anything she set her mind to.

Now she was a twenty-two-year-old intern with the *Miami Herald*. The sports editor assigned her a story. She was to write a **sidebar** about the visiting football team, the Minnesota Vikings. On this hot night in

Miami, Florida, she wore a conservative skirt and blouse. She took an 8½ x 11-inch spiral notebook, instead of a smaller notepad, and a pen.

She was about to make history.

Locker rooms are smelly, often dirty spaces. They are not places you would want to go—unless you wanted to get the immediate reactions from the players and coaches. A locker room is the only place a journalist can ask questions about the contest while emotions are running high, right after a game.

Locker rooms for men's professional sports teams had been considered male-only territory up to this point. *No women allowed.* It didn't matter if you were a sports journalist who just happened to be a woman.

But if a reporter wanted to get the full story, sweat and all, it was where one had to go.

Christine wanted to get the full story. She was going to go into that locker room. *No matter what.*

Just two years before, she would not have been allowed in. There were rules against women being allowed in a men's locker room. But in 1978 a federal judge ruled that male and female reporters should have equal access to both men's and women's locker rooms.

It took several years for the world of professional sports to officially begin to follow this federal rule.

Between 1978 and 1985, since there was no official policy across the board for all National Football League (NFL) teams, it was up to the individual team whether to allow female reporters into the locker room.

So, it was that, in 1980, Christine, the young intern, had every legal right to access the locker room. Yet the world of professional football hadn't fully publicly accepted the decision. Christine was entering territory without defined boundaries. Each NFL team was still making up its own rules as to whether female journalists would be allowed into the locker rooms where the male athletes went immediately after the football games.

The *Miami Herald's* sports department executive editor, Paul Anger, contacted the Minnesota Vikings to make sure it was okay for Christine to go into the locker room after the game.

On this night, the word was out. The locker room for the visiting Minnesota Vikings would be open. And Christine had every intention of going in.

Christine prepared herself for this opportunity. She did her research. She drew upon that confidence her parents encouraged. And she called home to get advice about reporting the story from the locker room from her biggest fan, her father.

“Just keep eye contact at all times, honey,” he said.<sup>2</sup>

“This was the first time for me to go into a locker room, and it was the first time for the Vikings to let a female reporter into the locker room. It was quite a moment,” she said.<sup>3</sup>

The young reporter was nearly six feet tall. Her height served her well in being able to look directly into big football players’ eyes.

The visiting team, the Vikings, beat the Miami Dolphins, 17–10. Reporters gathered in a room outside the locker room to interview the Vikings coach, Bud Grant. Christine was one of them. Slowly the reporters headed into the locker room. Soon it was just Christine and the coach left outside the athletes’ changing quarters. After asking him a few questions, she turned toward the locker room.

“You really want to go in there?” Grant asked her.

“Well, I don’t want to go in, but I have to go in there to do my job,” she said.

“All right then,” Grant replied. “Do whatever you have to do.”<sup>4</sup>

And so she did, pushing open the door and pushing back restrictions on allowing women in men’s locker rooms.

When she stepped into the locker room, she was not prepared for a major challenge she faced.

Since she was the last reporter to enter, most of the players had already taken off their football jerseys. Each jersey has the player’s name and number. Christine didn’t know who the players were without their shirts on.

It was a preseason game. The names of players were not on the lockers either. Christine had a flip card—a sheet given out by the press box with the players’ names and numbers—but it wasn’t

much help. She wasn't sure how to find the players she wanted to get quotes from.

To add to her dilemma, she heard jeers and hollers from players she could not see in distant corners of the locker room.

They yelled things like, "We don't go in the women's bathroom! What are you doing in here?"<sup>5</sup>

"I was not going to be stopped from doing my job and getting these quotes," Christine recalled.<sup>6</sup>

She was caught between not knowing what to do and not wanting to give up. And she knew better than to look around too much. "I was well aware that this was such a big moment. People would be watching me," she said.

Tom Hannon, a fourth-year safety who used to play for Michigan State, helped her out. Christine knew who he was from years of attending many University of Michigan games while growing up. Michigan State is a huge rival of the University of Michigan Wolverines.

"Who do you need?" he asked.

Hannon pointed her in the direction of the players she wanted to interview. Tommy Kramer, the quarterback, was nearby, putting on a tie. Mark Mullaney, the defensive lineman, was pointed out to her as well. So was another lineman—one parading around without his clothes on.

Christine interviewed Kramer and Mullaney. Then she spoke with the other lineman who seemed to be intent on making her uncomfortable by not bothering to cover up with a towel. Her notebook came in handy. The large 8½ x 11-inch notebook, held a certain way, shielded her eyes from seeing anything of the athlete other than his face and bare chest.

She got her questions answered in just ten minutes. In some ways, it seemed like an eternity. Christine dashed back into the now emptied Orange Bowl and up to the press box with her notes.

She cranked out her story on the Texas Instruments computer as fast as she could. Her **deadline** was only thirty minutes away. She sent her story just in time.

## LET THEM WEAR TOWELS

THE DOCUMENTARY *Let Them Wear Towels* features Christine Brennan and other women who made history by being the first females to gain equal access to professional sports locker rooms. An important lawsuit, *Melissa Ludtke and Time Inc. vs. Bowie Kuhn, Commissioner of Baseball*, occurred in 1978. Ms. Ludtke was a journalist with *Sports Illustrated* and was not allowed into the New York Yankees' locker room. The judge ruled that Ludtke had the right to pursue her profession. Women who were at the center of the issue included Claire Smith of the *Hartford Courant* and *New York Times* and Leslie Visser, who became the first female analyst for the NFL. Even though great strides have been made in allowing equal access to female sportswriters, the issue comes up again every few years. And every time, equality wins.

“It was tough—not embarrassing though,” Christine wrote in her diary that night. “Just did my job and got out of the locker room and wrote the story.”<sup>7</sup>

A sportswriter was born.

After that, she always took her larger notebook with her into the locker room.

### DID YOU KNOW?

**There are now over one thousand female sports journalists covering the world of sports.**<sup>8</sup>