

# KUNHARDT **FILM** / FOUNDATION

DONNA DE VARONA INTERVIEW  
*MAKERS: WOMEN WHO MAKE AMERICA*  
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

**Donna De Varona**  
**Swimmer & Sportscaster**  
**5/18/2011**  
**Interviewed by Betsy West**  
**Total Running Time: 37 minutes and 25 seconds**

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:  
Makers: Women Who Make America  
Kunhardt Film Foundation

ON SCREEN TEXT:  
Donna De Varona  
Swimmer & Sportscaster

**Donna De Varona**  
**Swimmer & Sportscaster**

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BETSY WEST:  
Can you tell me where you grew up and describe your family a little bit?

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DONNA DE VARONA:

I was born in San Diego, California, and my dad had been an All-American football player at Cal Berkeley and would've gone to the Olympics in rowing. So he had an affinity for the water, and we would go down to the beach on the weekends and he would put me on his back, and I remember diving through the waves, and feeling the force of the water but feeling very safe with him and loving the environment. And then I remember being thrown like a football with his friends who used to gather on the beach on the weekends.

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BETSY WEST:

Were there any people who thought, maybe this wasn't a good thing to do with a little girl?

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DONNA DE VARONA:

I don't know. I mean, I was too young to know that. But my father... his father had left him when he was very young, so sports really saved his life.

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BETSY WEST:

Was there ever any sense in your childhood that there were things as a girl that you couldn't do?

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DONNA DE VARONA:

Well, there was a sense of things that I couldn't do because little girls weren't allowed to play Little League Baseball. They weren't on teams. I remember following my big brother out to Little League Baseball practice and they would- I couldn't play, so I spent all my money on bubble gum so I could bribe my way into the dugout. And I learned something then, because the sponsor of the team sent me a uniform a few weeks later and I became the official bat girl of the team. And I loved every minute of it. But there was something inside that made me feel really bad that I couldn't play.

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BETSY WEST:

What moment did you decide you'd try something else?

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DONNA DE VARONA:

What I did was, because I loved being around my brother because he was so active—I mean, I preferred him than other girls to play with because he did great things—I followed him to the swimming pool because he'd had a knee operation, and they had little races in this pool and I dove in and I did really well. And I said, "That's for me."

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BETSY WEST:

What about the competitive part of this? Tell me about that. At what moment did you realize, "Hey, I've got that in me. I really like this?"

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DONNA DE VARONA:

Well, I always loved- At recess, before I found swimming, I always loved to rush out to the softball diamond and I would... dominate the pitcher's mound because I loved to play softball. And so when Little League was organized, little girls were organized right out of the games. So I knew I loved to compete. I loved to be part of a team. So when my brother found his way to the swimming pool for rehab and there were races, I realized that I found my competitive sport. And I think he was happy to get rid of me too.

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BETSY WEST:

What was your mother's role in all of this?

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DONNA DE VARONA:

My mother was the one that kept everybody a little sane, because when I started training really hard and there was a time I didn't want to go to workout and my dad chased me around the house, she said, "That's not permissible." She was the one that would get up at five o'clock in the morning

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and make me breakfast and put it in a thermos bottle so I could take it to workout and then have breakfast after. She was the one that, when I quit swimming and started my professional career, kept the books and answered the letters. She was as much a part of my success as my father.

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BETSY WEST:

What was it like for you as a young athlete?

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DONNA DE VARONA:

Well, I always say time, place and circumstance put me on the road to success, because I grew up in California where coaches had just come back from the 1956 Olympics and the United States didn't do well in those games. But they discovered that in Australia, they had something called Age Group Swimming, where when you're very young, you're put in an age group so you can swim up the ladder. And those coaches coached for free, many of them. And they found a way to bring the community in and often used school facilities.

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So, I think that I was very fortunate to have been born there, because if I'd been anywhere else in the United States, maybe I wouldn't have made it to the Olympic Games.

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BETSY WEST:

Tell me what it was like to be at the Olympics at such a young age.

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DONNA DE VARONA:

Being at the Olympics at the age of thirteen was magical. I held the world record in my best event, but it wasn't an Olympic event yet. It was one for men, not for women. So I qualified as an extra for the freestyle relay. Swam the trials, qualified the team that went on to win the gold medal. I didn't get to swim in the final, but the Olympic village is what really captured my heart. You've heard about the pin trading. Well, I came with a handful of pins and I was able to meet people from all over the world.

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BETSY WEST:

These were pins- Tell me what the pins are.

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DONNA DE VARONA:

The pins are much like this one. Each team creates a pin that represents the country. Now they've gotten much more sophisticated. And you only get a few, but it's kind of a calling card, an Olympic calling card. And it's a way to meet somebody from another country if they don't speak the language. So I probably had the best pin collection in the village.

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BETSY WEST:

And then you went again. Tell me about that.

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DONNA DE VARONA:

Well, the first Olympics was magical, there wasn't a lot of pressure on me and that inspired me to go to the next Olympics. Going to the next Olympics was a completely different experience. I'd already been on the cover of Sports Illustrated, LIFE, Post Magazine. I was expected to win. And although I did make a lot of new friends at those games, and loved every minute, the pressure was almost unbearable.

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But when I won the individual medley and our team swept—we got first, second and third place in that event—it was a great relief. So that gave me the opportunity to really enjoy the freestyle relay which I had qualified for, and we broke the world record, beat the Australians. It was a team event, and it was my second gold medal effort and it was fabulous.

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BETSY WEST:

Tell me what is that moment like?

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DONNA DE VARONA:

Well, comparing one with the other, it's a relief to win the gold when you have that kind of expectation. The other one is just pure joy, because you're part of a team. I always swam better in my 100-meter races when I was part of a team. It's just something that motivates you. And my parents were in the stands. They hadn't gone to my first Olympics, they'd gone to very few Nationals because they couldn't afford to go. So it was great to have them there watching, because they made the sacrifice for me to get that far.

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BETSY WEST:

So we always think that Olympic athletes can kind of, write their ticket. Tell me what happened for you after the Olympics?

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DONNA DE VARONA:

Well, I remember going back to the pool. Swimming's the first week of the Olympics, track and field's the second, and I petitioned to stay because I wanted to enjoy the Olympic village and see the competition. But after the swimming was over, I went back to the pool and I climbed all the way up to the highest tower. And I sat and looked out at this empty arena and I thought, "What's next?" And I had this great sense of excitement but this huge sadness, because it was a world that I'd lived in ever since I was very young.

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And I thought, "Well, how am I going to make the transition?" All my male counterparts were being given scholarships to school. They knew what their future was going to be. I had to go back and finish my senior year in high school. And so it was with mixed feelings when my career ended, at 17.

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BETSY WEST:

So there was not one college that was calling you up and saying, "Hey Donna, come and..."

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DONNA DE VARONA:

There wasn't one college that was recruiting me with a scholarship. What happened was that my roommate, who had a wonderful friend, who said, "Donna..." A few months later said, "If you want to go to college," which I did want to do, "I'll put you through if you don't have the money." And also Jesse Owens said the same thing. He said, "When I came back from the Berlin Olympics, I had to run against horses to pay my way." And of course, this is before civil rights. And so that shows you that if you do excel, there are people that are going to help you, it's just finding them.

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BETSY WEST:

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What was it like to give that up and move on to another phase?

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DONNA DE VARONA:

That's why I've done a lot of work with other athletes. I don't think we do enough for athletes in transition, because your life is so defined by your sport. You have a routine everyday. You have your set friends. You have your father figure, if it's your coach. Everything's built in and you're on a road map, and then all of the sudden, the bottom falls out. And it's very scary.

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I didn't know what to do after the Olympics. I did swim in one more competition, and then I went down to the pool and I thought about it. During this time however, when ABC would come to the swimming meets, I'd made friends with the producers and I thought, "Gee. If I could just be around this sport, I could give it up." And the challenge was once you... took on any professional role in those days, you could never change your mind and go back to sport, because the amateur rules were so strict.

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So after a few months, I picked up the phone and I called Chuck Howard who was a producer at ABC, and I said, "You know Chuck, I could bare to quit if you let me sit with Jim McKay and be an expert on swimming 'cause I love the sport." And of course, from his perspective, he thought, "We'll be accused of turning you professional. We have to think about this." And finally, I called

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back and I said, "I want to do it." And they got me a work permit and I flew to Yale University and I covered my first event with Jim McKay—live television.

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BETSY WEST:

So that was the turning point for you.

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DONNA DE VARONA:

That was the beginning.

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BETSY WEST:

Let's talk about ABC Sports. It had quite the reputation for being a macho place. What was it like working there for you?

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DONNA DE VARONA:

My beginning introduction to ABC Sports was... fun. I was a competitor. Chuck Howard would come to me and say, "Donna, what races should we cover? And is it okay if we put a diver underneath your lane with a tank? You know so we can get some really good pictures." Because ABC was known for innovation. So with every Nationals, I'd say, "Okay. Let's do this." I remember

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once I'd set an American record in the 200 butterfly and Chuck said to me,  
"Well, what was it like with the diver down there?"

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I said, "I like the company but don't let him breathe when I'm swimming over him because the bubbles are distracting." So that was a lot of fun. My first on-camera was a little... challenging because I'd never done it. They put earphones on me and it was live and they said, "Go." And maybe because television was in its infancy, and again, I was just 17, I got away with being not so great.

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But sitting next to people like Jim McKay—he was a perfect gentleman, and I only really, really realized this later on—was really, really a very special opportunity. Trying to get off the pool deck was the big challenge.

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BETSY WEST:

What do you mean?

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DONNA DE VARONA:

I wanted to be in the world of sport. I didn't just want to be an expert on swimming. I felt I understood as an athlete how athletes think, that I could provide the kind of color you need, and that I would want to branch out. I was told that a woman's voice on men's sports isn't going to work, that making

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the transition is going to be very difficult. But Roone Arledge did feel that I had... the talent to make that choice.

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Not necessarily did the producers underneath Roone Arledge, who was President of ABC Sports at the time. So I came back to New York and I started auditioning for roles in the local market. I auditioned at CBS. I auditioned at ABC four or five times. I think I finally wore them down and I was accepted to work at Local. I became the first woman Local sportscaster. And that was great.

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I got to cover the Jets, the Nets. I went out to the racetrack. I went and covered basketball. It was a great experience. Each one, though, was... I usually got the opportunity at Christmas, Thanksgiving, holidays, but that's what you do when you pay your dues.

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BETSY WEST:

You worked at ABC, off and on, for a long time, and then you left. So tell me about that.

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DONNA DE VARONA:

Well, I worked at ABC Local from late '74 through '76. And then after the Montreal Olympics, I wanted more. I wanted to do more and I'd felt I'd just hit

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a glass ceiling. And I had been working on the Amateur Sports Act, which was to restructure the Olympic Committee and I'd worked in the Senate, and Senator Stevens said, "You know, we're never going to get this thing passed 'cause Carter is going to be president and we need somebody down here pushing the bill."

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And I felt, "Boy, I'm going to be much more satisfied if I do something worthwhile than hit my head against the wall." So I went to Washington and worked on legislation that was passed in 1978. And then I got a call from NBC because they were starting Sports World, and I went over to work with Don Ohlmeyer and Jeff Mason and the group over there. Named first woman host of the 1980 Olympics in Moscow and guess what? It didn't happen.

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So I stayed there until '83, and then I got a call from Roone Arledge and said, "You gotta come back." Because at the same time I was working for NBC, I was also working with Peter Ueberroth to organize the LA Games, so I was having two jobs. And Roone said, "I need you back." And I said, "Well if I'm going to come back, this is what I want." Because I left ABC very frustrated and hurt, and I felt like I'd grown a lot and he did recognize that.

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When people would leave and grow, he recognized that. And he really needed somebody who'd been involved not just on air, but somebody that really knew the International Olympic Community, which I'd kept in touch with, and someone who had relationships on The Hill. So I came back and I said,

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"Roone, I want a management contract and an on air contract." Which was very unusual. It went up to the board and so I was named- He said, "I can't give you a title because you're going to be on the air," so I became a Senior Assistant to Ruin Arledge with a responsibility to all international sport, and I was working on air as well.

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BETSY WEST:

And then, you were there for a number of years, and then you left again. What happened?

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DONNA DE VARONA:

Well, I was there through Capital City's takeover and did some of my very best work under Dennis Swanson. And then, Mickey Mouse and Disney came in. And I remember going in for a meeting and... I was told that my contract wouldn't be renewed. This was right around 1998. And... I said, "Well, why? I've done my best work. I've won Emmys. I've been nominated for an Emmy. I've won Emmys. I've done my best work. Why is my contract not being renewed? I can do management. I can do on air."

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"Well, we just don't need you anymore." I had covered the Olympics for Good Morning America. I had worked in all the departments. And I think it hurt so much because ABC—regardless of the struggles and all the things that went

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on when we were young with women in the business—it was like my family was abandoning me.

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So I just said, "Listen. Well, listen, if you're gonna let me go, will you say goodbye to me on the air? Will you do something for me? This has been my home. So I can leave with a little dignity." "We don't do that." So I called some friends, and I had a friend who'd worked with me on the Olympic legislation. He'd been an Olympian. He said, "Donna, you can't let them get away with it. Because you're an example, you have to do something about it."

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And I said, "Well, there is an end to this career. I don't know. I don't feel comfortable." But I thought about it and thought about it, and finally the day before you can really submit a lawsuit, I did.

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BETSY WEST:

What did your lawsuit say?

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DONNA DE VARONA:

It was age and sex discrimination. And actually, we went to arbitration and I basically said I never wanted to be here. This was not something I wanted to do. And eventually, we settled. I called up the new president of ABC Sports, not the one that got rid of me, and I said, "Let's just get this thing over. You

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and I can do it. Let's put the lawyers aside and we'll work it out." And we did, and I went back for two years.

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And I was on the bid committee to try to get ABC the Olympics again. And I made peace with a lot of it, but if you look at my life, being abandoned by ABC—which it felt like—and leaving swimming at that time, felt so much the same. Because my life had been so focused on these goals that, part of it was maybe primal scream, it was amazing hurt. It was feeling like I was thrown out of my family. 'Cause we were. We were family.

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We covered so many Olympics together, been up all night, and hustled for stories, and been proud of our work. And to be just thrown away like that was devastating.

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BETSY WEST:

What was your calculus when you finally said, "Okay, I'm going to do this." I mean, what were you thinking when you thought, "Alright, I'm gonna take them to court."

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DONNA DE VARONA:

I... It's hard to say what I was thinking. It was accumulative. I had a lot of people come up to me saying, "You gotta fight this. You're a role model, you

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were one of the firsts. You can't let people treat you like that." Part of me said, "Gosh. I've always worked through these things. I'm not a victim. I've had a great career." I was weighing it all. I think the thing that finally made me do it was when I saw they got rid of Keith Jackson,-

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-and they gave him this wonderful farewell on the air and donated money to his foundation. I remember the day I left. It was raining and one of the guys didn't come back from lunch in time and the moving truck was outside and it was raining. And I thought, "Wow, what did I do to deserve this treatment?" I mean, it's a tough world out there but you don't treat people like that. And I think that's what really was the turning point. I just said, "I gotta do this."

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BETSY WEST:

Do you think they thought they could get away with it because you were a woman?

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DONNA DE VARONA:

I don't know if they thought they could get away with it because I was a woman. I think I'd always just toughed it up and worked under any circumstances. And I'm not a litigious person. I fought for things, but not vindictive. I never stabbed anybody in the back, that I remember, to get a job.

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I brought women in. I was really a team player. I just thought they didn't think I'd do it.

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BETSY WEST:

What was your strongest card against them?

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DONNA DE VARONA:

I think that my card was my longevity, the awards I'd won, the fact that I'd worked in all levels of the company. I mean, I wasn't just leaving as a commentator, I was leaving as someone who'd worked in management and helped build a tradition. I don't want to overstate my contribution, but I'd been there since I was really... thirteen, if you look at it. I'd been covered by them. I'd worked with them.

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I think that was a strong suit, and no matter how much the opposition tried to find things that were not ethical, they couldn't. That's the name of the game in a lawsuit. It's pretty vicious.

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BETSY WEST:

Didn't they actually articulate the sense that, oh, you've gotten too old here?

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DONNA DE VARONA:

Well, there was a situation where one of the executives took my tapes and said to me, "Listen. We're looking for a younger audience and you're getting older. And we have taken your tapes and shown them to younger people, and we have made a decision that... you're not right for this audience." Basically. We want the 18 or whatever you do in sports, and no matter what you've done here, you need to consider looking elsewhere.

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BETSY WEST:

So taking them on on this issue actually had some consequences for other women. It was a precedent to some extent, was it not?

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DONNA DE VARONA:

I have heard from other women at the network that what I did helped them extend their career a few more years, which is gratifying. I know a newswoman in California that told me that. I had no idea. But if that happened, that's great.

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BETSY WEST:

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Let's talk a little bit about the work-family challenge that so many people face. Your expectations, did you think that, "Hey, I'm gonna grow up and get married." This was a given? Or tell me... and then what happened?

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DONNA DE VARONA:

Well, I always wanted to grow up and get married. It just took a lot longer. I got married at 39. I don't think I was ready before. When you're in that intense world where we were all making our way as the first women in an industry, it's 24/7, it's a way of life. And then when I had my first child ten days before the Winter Olympics in Calgary, I remember Dennis Swanson calling me up and saying, "Well, listen. You don't have to go."

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I said, "You've got to be crazy. If I give up my seat, I'm never going to get it back." And so, I took my son up, he was 10 days old, and covered the games in Calgary. And there were many that said they were going to put me in an inferior hotel, and I said, "Wait a minute. I'm going up there. I want two rooms. I want to be where all the A announcers are. I want to be where their pool is 'cause when my stitches heal, I'm going to be swimming," because you get four hours' sleep at night.

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And to his credit, after the Olympics, Roone Arledge said to me, "You know..." He said, "You filed more stories out of your venue," which was the Olympic

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village, "Than every other venue but ice skating. And my hat goes out to you, I didn't think you could do it." So that was a high point.

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BETSY WEST:

Did it continue to be difficult for you to juggle this challenging professional life and having kids?

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DONNA DE VARONA:

I think having kids at my age, when I gave things up, it didn't feel like a sacrifice 'cause I was so happy to have these children and this new life. I think it made me better, because things weren't out of proportion, just kind of helped me balance my life better and be more focused and worry over the things that really mattered and get rid of the things that didn't.

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BETSY WEST:

When did you first become aware of the women's movement? What did you think of it? What's your recollection back to that time?

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DONNA DE VARONA:

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I think I became first aware of the women's movement while I was at UCLA studying, because it was a human rights movement. It was civil rights, it was... My boyfriend was drafted into Vietnam. Lew Alcindor, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, had come to UCLA, and he was like- he was one shade darker than everybody else on the campus. And we were gathering and talking about all kinds of issues, so it was such an exciting time.

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It was a confusing time because our government was so separate from us, and I remember thinking I'd had such a black and white world. I knew where I was, there were values I understood, and then all of the sudden, I was thrown into this world I didn't understand. But I had connected with the movement through the African Americans on the track team, through Wilma Rudolph, through the work I did in Humphrey in inner cities when they were burning.

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And so, I was quickly- really brought up to speed from a naive, blonde teenager that kind of looked at life, "I gotta swim. I gotta eat. I gotta break records," to, "Hey. What's really going on here?" And that was a depressing time and a time of elation.

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BETSY WEST:

So you talk about the civil rights movement and the women's movement together and I think that's the way a lot of people experienced it, but was

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there ever a click moment for you when you thought you were identifying as a woman particularly?

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DONNA DE VARONA:

I think I became sensitized to the women's movement when Margot Polivy, the lawyer in Washington who was working on Title IX, came to me and said, "I know you're into this Olympic thing, but you really need to focus on women. Because there's not enough language about women and you've been discriminated against. And this is how. You didn't have a scholarship. Yes, you had a team, but these are things that this law can change and we need you to be part of it." And that was the turning point.

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BETSY WEST:

Have you ever really thought of, "Oh, I'm discriminated against?"

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DONNA DE VARONA:

You kind of accept what you get and you fight for what you want. I felt that we were- As athletes, I felt that we were the underclass in the Olympic movement. We had no rights, we had no way to speak to anybody. So I was born working there. It was everything. But when I met Margo, I really

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realized, Margot Polivy, I really realized that, "Hey, wait a minute. I've got to put more energy into this area."

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BETSY WEST:

Did you consider yourself a feminist? How would you define that term?

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DONNA DE VARONA:

Well, I consider myself a humanist, but of course, I'm a feminist. The young women don't like it, I think because they don't own it. I think we all in a generation want to own our movements and what we contribute. Yeah, I'm a feminist, but I also think I've always worked for human rights in the broader sense.

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BETSY WEST:

And when you say the young women don't like it because they don't own it, do you think that is why for some women, feminism is kind of a dirty word? Like, "Don't call me a feminist."

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DONNA DE VARONA:

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Yeah, I think so. I think a lot of young women don't realize why they are where they are. They don't relate to our struggle, and I guess that's what we wanted. But sometimes you want to say, "Urgh! You don't know what this cost me." And oftentimes when they're educated in a nice way, rather than, "You owe me," "Let's discuss this, this is what I went through," they're totally supportive.

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BETSY WEST:

You've worked with a lot of men. Do you see that there's a difference in the way men operate in the world, versus women?

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DONNA DE VARONA:

Well, I've worked with men because my world's dominated by men. The sports world is like the last sandbox, "This is for men only, but we'll let a few women in." And it's been by circumstance. I think I've mentored a lot of women, which I love doing, but because my world's been dominated by men and I was one of the first women in it, I was able to gain their respect and their support. And they have been very helpful to me.

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BETSY WEST:

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And what do you think women learn from men about how they operate in the world?

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DONNA DE VARONA:

I think men get into battles and they may compete a lot, but when the competition's over, they'll pat each other on the back and they'll say, "Okay. I'll help you next time." I've watched in the industry of television and sports, someone loses a job, a male loses a job, they got another great job the next week. Maybe we're just not in a position to do that for each other. It's something that's evolving, but I don't see the same kind of sisterhood as I've experienced in the man's world in sports.

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BETSY WEST:

When somebody says, "Oh, the women's movement's gone way too far. Title IX went too far, women's movement's gone too far," what do you think?

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DONNA DE VARONA:

Well, when people say the women's movements' gone too far, I just tune out 'cause we still have a lot more work to do.

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BETSY WEST:

What's the work to do?

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DONNA DE VARONA:

I think there's a lot of work to do in my world. We see women newscasters and producers. I think there's an age issue that's completely different for women that we struggle with that men don't necessarily struggle with. That's something that's cultural that I'd love us to see change. I think that across the board, we're not doing enough in education for young people. That's not a gender issue as much as it is something that we need to value more in our culture.

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In the area of Title IX, however, in sports, I'd love to get over this argument that supporting women in fitness and sport is undermining men. I think we all need to be healthy. It's really a resource issue, and we need to come to terms with that. There's not one woman athlete that wants to deny a male athlete an opportunity. And I would hope most male athletes would feel the same way.

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BETSY WEST:

Did you ever get out there on the streets for women?

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DONNA DE VARONA:

Oh, yeah. I remember I got a call from Gloria Steinem when we had our first women's convention in Houston, where we had our platform. We were working on Equal Rights Amendment. And what we needed to do was find a way to have a torch relay from Seneca Falls to Houston and I happened to know somebody at General Motors. I said, "We need a car. We just need a car." So can you imagine we ran a torch relay from Seneca Falls to Houston with one car and runners relaying a torch all the way to Huston.

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And I was part of that organization, and the whole slogan was "Women On The Move" with the t-shirts, and the convention was incredibly exciting. But I do remember fighting with Bill and Gloria about the rules of sports play. 'Cause they said, "We have more important issues. We've got equal pay for equal work. We've got abuse issues. We've got all these other things." I said, "Yes, I agree. But if we start with youngsters, and they learn how to compete, and take care of themselves, and be healthy, this is an educational opportunity that will help them throughout their life."

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And that was always my struggle. Because I was always- Sports was like, not that important. So that's why we started the Women's Sports Foundation, 'cause we felt we had to do it ourselves.

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BETSY WEST:

Tell me about starting an organization for women. I mean, how did that all happen?

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DONNA DE VARONA:

Everything I've done has kind of happened gradually. I don't think I ever really had this huge vision about where I was gonna go next. But as a child of the '60s who saw her boyfriend drafted to Vietnam, and lived in the Olympic village with Wilma Rudolph and became a friend and then watched her come back to the United States and have to enter a hotel from the back door, I really felt that I wanted to make a difference. There was something wrong.

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And I went to UCLA at the time, and we had these group sessions where we talked about issues. And so, I wrote a letter to the state department when I came back from the Olympics and said, "We should create a Peace Corps Sport in America, and go in and work with kids." I wound up working for Humphrey in a special program, and that became- And then I testified in Washington, and pretty soon, I realized that my arena was sport and that we should make it better. And that would include athlete's rights. It would include inclusion of minorities and women.

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And while I was working on that, I ran into a woman named Margot Polivy, who'd been working on the Title IX language. And she said, "I know you're

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working on Olympic movement, but Title IX is very important." And I had already been appointed to the President's Council on Physical Fitness and had relationships in Washington. And then when Billie Jean beat Bobby Riggs in the Battle of the Sexes, and I read about all the stuff she'd done for tennis players, I said, "I have to meet her."

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And a friend Suzy Chaffee, a skier, said, "I'll introduce you." So I met Billie Jean, and I said, "We really should start an organization." And she had the money and the fame, she was a superstar, and after a few months of talking about it and getting her to focus 'cause she was in such demand, we started the foundation. We didn't know what a foundation was, really, we just did. And I became First President and started all the programs that are still working today.

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BETSY WEST:

Can you tell me what the foundation is, the formal name and what it does?

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DONNA DE VARONA:

When I met with Billie Jean, we talked about a World Sports Foundation and that morphed into The Women's Sports Foundation. And she had been given a check to donate to charity and we needed to set it up as a legal entity. And it was, and then we said, "Well, what are we going to do?" So Larry King—she

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was married to Larry then—said, "Come out to California and tell me what we're going to do." And I sat down and I wrote everything we wanted us to do on a yellow legal pad,-

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-which was bring in more Olympians and male athletes to support us, have a dinner where we created fundraising, create a Hall of Fame so we could recognize great pioneering women that had never been given credit for what they do. Later on, we created travel and training so we could give out money to struggling, aspiring women athletes. And of course, we need to be very vocal and visible in Washington D.C. when it came to women's rights, both in the Olympic area and under Title IX.

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BETSY WEST:

Why did women need a special foundation of their own?

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DONNA DE VARONA:

Because the women that were fighting for Title IX within schools were getting fired. They were getting pressured. I was getting pressured. Football coaches were calling ABC saying, "What are you letting her... as an announcer being in Washington lobbying?" And my comeback was, "Well, if Howard Cosell can talk about boxing in Washington, why can't I as a woman athlete go to Washington and testify?" So we needed to be independent, but I

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think more important- I had the experience in government programs with handouts that nothing's sustainable, depends on the political whim.

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And so if we were going to have a sustainable organization that we help define and control, we could be independent and we could be an independent voice on all these issues. And so, it gave us strength.

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BETSY WEST:

You've accomplished a lot of things. What's the one you're really the most proud of?

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DONNA DE VARONA:

I think you have to separate it between personal and professional. I think being a good parent is the top of the list. And professionally, I think it was when I chaired Women's World Cup. And we filled the stadiums in 1999, and I was able to work with an extraordinary group of women that were real team players, that will be lifetime friends. And they took on a huge challenge and I got to be part of it. So that was probably the most gratifying.

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BETSY WEST:

Even more than your Olympic medals, your...

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DONNA DE VARONA:

More than my Olympic medals. More than... anything I've ever done. That being part of that wonderful experience of working with those athletes in 1999 and filling stadiums, but just knowing those people personally. They're extraordinary people.

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BETSY WEST:

What's the most meaningful piece of advice that you've ever received?

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DONNA DE VARONA:

My father said, "Never give up on your dreams."

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BETSY WEST:

And what's the one piece of advice that you would give to a young woman starting out?

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DONNA DE VARONA:

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I'd say never take "no" for an answer. Be open to working very hard, setting your goals... Not letting setbacks get you down. Sports teaches you all those things. Setting your goals, not letting defeat get you down, coming back after a defeat, looking at things in the long term, creating a vision, never giving up. It's all that sports talk, but it works.

END TC: 00:37:25:00