

Benefits - Why Sports Participation for Girls and Women: The Foundation Position

A Matter of Health and Well-being

Founded in 1974 by Billie Jean King, the Foundation is dedicated to advancing the lives of girls and women through sports and physical activity. That's what the Foundation does, but the "why" is most important. Although there is a federal law that mandates equal participation opportunities for male and female students in secondary and post secondary institutions of higher education, the real reason we want equal opportunity for our daughters to play sports is so they too can derive the psychological, physiological and sociological benefits of sports participation. Sport has been one of the most important socio-cultural learning experiences for boys and men for many years. Those same benefits should be afforded our daughters. It is important for all of us to know that:

- High school girls who play sports are less likely to be involved in an unintended pregnancy; more likely to get better grades in school and more likely to graduate than girls who do not play sports.
- As little as four hours of exercise a week may reduce a teenage girl's risk of breast cancer by up to 60%; breast cancer is a disease that afflicts one out of every eight American women. (Journal of the National Cancer Institute, 1994)
- Forty percent of women over the age of 50 suffers from osteoporosis (brittle bones). (Osteoporosis, 1996) None of us should want our daughters to repeat the experiences of generations of women—our mothers and grandmothers—who were not permitted to play sports or encouraged to participate in weight-bearing exercises that are necessary to establishing bone mass.
- Girls and women who play sports have higher levels of confidence and self-esteem and lower levels of depression.
- Girls and women who play sports have a more positive body image and experience higher states of psychological well-being than girls and women who do not play sports.
- Sport is where boys have traditionally learned about teamwork, goal-setting, the pursuit of excellence in performance and other achievement-oriented behaviors—critical skills necessary for success in the workplace. In an economic environment where the quality of our children's lives will be dependent on two-income

families, our daughters cannot be less prepared for the highly competitive workplace than our sons. It is no accident that 80% of the female executives at Fortune 500 companies identified themselves as former "tomboys"—having played sports.

Women Without Sports Experience Are Disadvantaged in the Work Setting

The existing American business model is a male model of organizational structure and human relationships. Males learn the rules of human organizations and interactions from sport. Sport is one of the most important socio-cultural learning environments in our society and, until quite recently, has been reserved for boys and men.

This is not to say that the male model of business or organizations is the preferred model. In fact, women are bringing new strengths to business and organizations that are based on their skills in group process, preference for cooperation models and sensitivity to human needs. Eventually, as women rise to executive positions, the organizational models of business will reflect more female characteristics and become androgynous.

Right now, however, women who don't know the written and unwritten rules of sport are at a disadvantage in understanding business models of organization based on sport. How important is it that our daughters learn the same rules as our sons? It's critical. The most important of those rules are:

- 1. Teams are chosen based on people's strengths and competencies rather than who is liked or disliked.**

This seems like such a simple concept, yet women have traditionally learned to pick their friends and emphasize human relationships rather than skill competencies.

- 2. Successful players are skilled in practicing the illusion of confidence.**

Boys are taught at an early age and through their participation in sport that it is not acceptable to show fear. When you get up to bat or play any game, it is important to act confident and not to let your teammates know you are afraid, nervous or have a weakness -- even if you are not confident. Employees who are skilled at practicing the illusion of confidence—calmness under pressure, acting sure of self and abilities, etc.—get to play the most important positions and are more likely to be starters. People who are practicing the illusion of confidence make everything look easy and don't need constant reinforcement or support.

- 3. Errors are expected of people who are trying to do new things. The most important thing is never make the same mistake twice.**

Errors are acknowledged immediately by each player and players are expected to fix their errors and not dwell on them or take criticism of errors personally. During a game is not the time to have a long conversation about what you should

do or how you might correct an error. That is something you do during practice before or after the game.

4. **Loyalty to your teammates is very important.**

Many women don't understand it when a man who is not doing his job is protected rather than dismissed. Boys learn from sports that every person on the team has a role to play. Even the players who sit the bench are positive forces on the team as long as they are good sports and encourage teammates who play. Players who are satisfied sitting the bench and waiting their turn to play are valued because they promote team harmony by not complaining. Not everyone can be successful players. Few men will criticize their teammates. They will always promote the strength of their teammates and not mention weaknesses. Women who don't play sports are much more critical of each other and much more likely to point out a teammate's weaknesses if asked to do so. When women do this in business organizations, they are perceived as disloyal.

This is not to say that we must tolerate incompetence. What is important is how we do it. If we have an incompetent employee, then good teammates need to find a position he or she can play or trade that player to another team. This means that we need to help relocate employees we no longer wish to keep.

5. **"I will" equals "I can."**

Boys playing sports are taught that being "good at a position" is a function of the will to achieve and working on the basic skills required for that position. They also learn that you need to play the position in order to become adept at that position. Thus, boys grow up thinking that they can achieve anything they commit themselves to achieving. It is not an inflated ego or an accident that men apply for jobs for which we may think them underqualified. It is simply that they have been trained to believe that they "can" meet a new challenge of a new position and can learn by doing. Women, on the other hand, believe that advancing to a new position requires certification, classroom training, degrees or something tangible that says "I am qualified," in addition to being confident that they can meet the demands of a new position. If they haven't played sports, they haven't had as much experience with the trial-and-error method of learning new skills and positions and are less likely to be as confident as their male counterparts about trying something new.

6. **In a hierarchical organization, your boss (the head coach) gives the orders and the employees (players) follow the head coach's instructions.**

Men's organizations are very hierarchical in nature. When playing the game in the business setting, the coach is all powerful and players follow orders. If a player has a better idea, he or she gets to the coach in an informal setting and persuades the coach to consider that idea. The idea then becomes the coach's idea and is carried into the business setting.

Women's organizations are more decentralized and collegial. Women are much more likely to bring a group together, ask everyone to present their ideas and then

come up with an idea or direction that has the support of the majority of the group. It may be unrealistic to expect organizations led by men who have been trained in hierarchical organizations to adopt problem-solving or decision-making models preferred by women. It may be equally unrealistic to expect your coach to understand when you speak up to disagree during team meetings.

It is important for our sons and daughters to learn about the differences in how men and women create different decision-making and problem-solving organizations, and how to operate successfully in each environment.

7. **Winning and losing has nothing to do with your worth as a person.**
In sports and in organizations, sometimes you win and sometimes you lose. Sport gives you experience so you learn to win graciously and accept defeat without blowing the experience out of proportion. You learn to separate the outcome of a game or your performance in one game from your worth as a person. A bad practice does not make you a bad person. This is a critically important lesson for all workers.
8. **Pressure, deadlines and competition are fun.**
In sports and in organizations, pressure, deadlines and competition are commonplace. Sport gives players the experience of dealing with these realities and learning to enjoy and conquer their challenges. When there are only two seconds left on the clock, your team is one point down, and you go up for the jump shot, you learn what pressure, deadlines and competition is all about and how they can be perceived as exhilarating and fun rather than scary and distasteful. The bottom line is that most organizations want to hire people who enjoy and excel in competitive environments. If we don't give sports to women, we don't allow them to learn how to handle these challenges.
9. **When you are too tired to take one more step, you know you can.**
Ultimately, participation in sports teaches players all about the work ethic: that hard work, repetition and constant practice are the keys to successful performance. Athletes know that no matter how tired they are, they can tap into a reservoir of stamina, strength and good thinking—even under the most difficult of circumstances - and continue to compete successfully.
10. **Perfection is sequential attention to detail**
In sports and in business, being exceptional is leaving no detail unattended to. Every athlete has a precise checklist of details involved in every skill from throwing a curve ball to shooting a jumpshot. The more you study your opponent and prepare for a game, the more successful you are. Great players are students of their game, and great students are always learning.

Girls and Women Need Encouragement and Aspirational Role Models

Many people think that girls are not as interested in sport as boys. Women's Sports Foundation research shows that boys and girls between the ages of 6 and 9—and their parents—are equally interested in sports participation. However, by the age of 14, girls drop out of sport at a rate that is six times greater than boys. Girls and women simply do not receive the same positive reinforcement about their sports participation. Boys receive balls, gloves and sports equipment by the age of 2. They see their images on television as sportsmen, they see their photos in the sports section and know from their parents and friends that they are expected to play sports.

Even though our daughters are not as likely to be discouraged from playing sports as they were 10 years ago, they simply aren't encouraged to the same extent as little boys. As a result, they enter organized sport two years later than little boys and are, therefore, less likely to have the skills necessary for early success experiences. If a child is unskilled, he or she is unlikely to have fun. It's no fun to strike three times in row. The no. 1 reason why boys and girls play sports is because it's "fun."

We must do a better job of supporting our daughters' sports participation. For Christmas and birthdays, we must find books about girls in sports, give gifts of sports equipment and sports lessons. We need to take our sons and daughters to see women playing sports so they grow up appreciating and respecting the sports skills of women and so our daughters see images of themselves excelling in sports—because she is not going to see those images on television or in the newspapers. It's no accident that girls' sports participation in Olympic sports increases significantly following the Olympic Games, one of the few times that coverage of women's sports is equal to that of men's sports. Aspirational role models drive youth demand for sports. This top to bottom synergy has not yet become commonplace in women's sports because of limited college and professional sports opportunities and television coverage.

However, the trend is clear: the increased participation and success of female athletes at the Olympic Games, increased television coverage of women's college sports, new women's professional sports leagues and the participation increases of females in all sports and all age levels.

Also check out:

[Go Out and Play: Youth Sports in America](#)
[Her Life Depends on It](#)