

GIRLS ARE PLAYING THEIR OWN KIND OF GAME

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Wednesday is National Girls and Women in Sports Day but one might wonder if there is any reason to celebrate.

About 21 million girls between the ages of 7 and 17 are team athletes in this country, according to the National Sporting Goods Association. It is almost as common for girls to be competitive athletes today as it is for boys, who number 22 million nationwide.

Isn't that cause for unabashed celebration? Hasn't Title IX, the 1972 federal law that provided equal access to school sports programs, achieved its objective? It has, after all, gone a long way to eliminating many of the external barriers to access that it was designed to banish. But such celebration may miss the point. Girls have come a long way since Title IX, but while they may be playing the same sports as boys, they are not playing the same game.

Despite the numbers, girls still bring to the playing field expectations and concerns that make their sports experience different. One cannot simply ask girls to don a uniform and go out and play like the boys. To do so does not recognize or respect what is unique in their emotional equipment.

Girls worry more about competing against their best friend. They are bothered more by the coach who yells at them all the time. They are sometimes confused about whether they will be more popular—or less—if they are aggressive athletes. And yes, like it or not, some girls still wonder if boys will find them less attractive if they are more talented on the basketball court.

It is not enough for girls to master the physical skills of being an athlete; there is an equal challenge in coming to terms with, and sometimes rewriting, the interpersonal rules of the game in this other arena of play and competition.

For girls, there are few models for balancing the kind of aggression that fuels competitive sports with a natural concern about how their behavior affects others. They ask themselves: How competitive can I be and still be the considerate person I want to be? How nice can I be if I knock my friend down on the way to scoring a goal? There are no easy answers.

Consider the Danvers father who looked utterly befuddled as his 10-year-old daughter, who plays on the same basketball team with her best friend, explained to him how "her best friend had missed 12 shots in a row. My daughter, on the other

hand, was having a great game until her best friend came up to her and said, 'Don't make any more shots. We're best friends so we have to be equal, right?' "

According to the research of the current crop of specialists on boys' development—ranging from Michael Thompson and Dan Kindlon to William Pollack and Eli Newburger—boys are unlikely to share the same concerns of girl athletes since boys are encouraged to be gladiators, to turn away from their relationships, to shut down their feelings in order to compete and conquer and show how strong and capable they are. In other words, on the playing field, when it comes to a face-off with a best friend, boys will not hesitate to win and they are willing to forfeit friendship for the moment to do so.

Girls, on the other hand, by their very nature, are relational. As researchers on girls' development—people such as Harvard University's Carol Gilligan and Wellesley College's Jean Baker Miller, as well as Wellesley's Stone Center and the Center for Research on Women – have identified so persuasively, the primary aim of girls is to relate to others, to be in relationships with others. That is to say, their most imperative drive is to connect and to stay connected.

Many athletic girls struggle with the fact that competition is not about connecting, it's about vanquishing the other. And vanquishing is not nice.

As a result, girls are searching for new ways to play the game—ways in which they can compete without dominating, ways to emphasize the "team" aspect of team sports.

And they are doing so in great numbers. In the year before Title IX was passed in 1972, only 1 of every 27 girls played high school sports. Now the ratio is 1 of every 3, which nearly reaches the boys' ratio of 1 of every 2. With such a critical mass of girls sweating it out on the field, track, and court, from one side of the country to the other, it becomes far easier to examine this burgeoning social experiment and to quantify just what impact playing sports has on girls' lives.

There is no question that team sports offer many advantages to the average girl. Active, athletic girls have been found to have better self-esteem, more confidence, higher achievement test scores, less depression, improved mental health, more academic success, and greater lifetime earning potential, according to the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports report. Girls who play sports are also more likely to turn away from risky behavior, be it unprotected sex, promiscuity, or experimenting with drugs and alcohol.

All of this will serve girls well. Because of their experiences as girls in the locker room, of setting goals and achieving them, of working as part of a team, of learning to win—and lose—girls will be far better prepared to take a seat as women in the boardroom, or anywhere else in the workplace.

Some issues—such as how to balance their care and concerns about those to whom they are connected with their need to compete as athletes—girls must work out for themselves. But we can help them, too. It is not enough to ensure equal access to athletics for boys and girls through measures such as Title IX; we must also acknowledge, respect, and validate the differences between girl and boy athletes.