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GIVING GIRLS A SPORTING CHANCE

FEMALE ATHLETES WIN MORE THAN POINTS, RESEARCHERS SAY. THEY ALSO GET A SELF-ESTEEM BOOST THAT LASTS.

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Dan Cullen was a fifth-grader at Rupert Nock Middle School in Newburyport when, two years ago, he invited the girls to play kickball with the boys. Dan, who is freckle-faced, not particularly tall for his age, but self-assured, says he didn't think twice about the invitation: It was, after all, Dan's black kickball the boys had been using at recess ever since somebody kicked the school kickball so hard it burst.

"Yeah, we didn't have enough players, and nobody else wanted to play," says Dan, now 13, matter-of-factly.

"Dan invited Emily to play, and we just followed," says Jamie Connor, a 12-year-old girl who, at 5 feet 4 or so, towers over Dan.

By sixth grade, the game was part of the daily routine. At recess one day, about 20 boys and girls were playing kickball in mixed teams on the sloping land near the school's side entrance. As one girl walloped the ball, sending it sailing through the air, several of her teammates—boys and girls—screamed in the excitement of the moment. No one kept score, yet they all seemed keen on the play and the game.

Recess a generation ago, when Chinese jump rope was as common as chalk, was that short period when girls played their games together, away from the boys, while the boys did whatever it was boys would do—wrestle in the mud, race one another, or hurl a football down the field. But for these teams of sixth-graders in Newburyport, sex-segregated recess would seem totally weird. Stupid, even. Playing together, competing against one another, and even being friends with one another are normal for most of them, regardless of gender.

"I think the boys have gotten good about our playing with them, because we can beat them at stuff and they can beat us at stuff—it goes both ways," says Taylor Nelson, 12, a competitive swimmer and soccer, basketball, and lacrosse player who is nearly as tall as her friend Jamie.

"The girls look at us in a different perspective, and we also look at them in a different perspective," says Dan, now in seventh grade. "They know what happens to us and why we get so competitive, and we know how they can get competitive, too. I kind of think that's broken down the walls, so to speak, between the boys and the girls. Although you don't exactly think of that when you go over to say hi to them."
Dan and his best friend, David Moreno, as well as the group of girls Dan and David count as friends—Jamie, Taylor, and Hilary Walentuk—are among some 44.7 million

American youths between 7 and 17 who participate in organized team sports, according to the National Sporting Goods Association in Mt. Prospect, Illinois. And 43 percent of those players are girls, so the experience of athletic competition is increasingly a common denominator between the sexes, helping prepare both boys and girls for the future.

Why do girls today feel they can compete athletically with boys? Why do boys feel more comfortable relating to girls as equals and as friends? What has changed in the culture that has leveled the playing field? Some researchers believe it is the trickle-down effect of Title IX, an act carried on the muscular back of the feminist movement that has changed girls' lives more than any law since the one that gave women the right to vote.

The 1972 law known as Title IX decreed that any school receiving federal funds—kindergarten through college—had to provide girls the same access to programs that boys had, including sports. Title IX has not only made playing sports normal for girls of every age and ability, it has changed the culture. The lessons learned through athletics give girls a stronger, more confident, more disciplined outlook on their futures—an advantage boys have always had. And with girls gaining ground on boys' athletic turf, both have a new common experience and a new way to interact.

Title IX did more than just level the playing field; it put boys and girls literally on the same playing field. And researchers are still exploring what that will mean for both sexes.

W hen Sumru Erkut, associate director of the Center for Research on Women at Wellesley College, and three colleagues embarked on their 1996 investigation of girls and self-esteem, they expected to find that girls gain their sense of worth from taking care of others. But in their nationwide survey of 362 girls between the ages of 6 and 18, nearly half said the activity that made them feel good about themselves was athletics.

The next most common choice—at 19 percent—was an arts-related activity such as music or dance. When the girls were asked why sports made them feel good about themselves, a significant number said it was because of the sense of mastery that playing sports provided.

A 1997 study, done for the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports, found that participating in exercise and sports enhanced both the physical and mental health of adolescents, improving self-esteem, self-confidence, competence, mental health, and body image. Other independent studies have confirmed that girls who play sports score better on achievement tests; they are also more likely to graduate from high school, to continue their education, and thus to have greater earning potential. Girls who are physically, mentally, and emotionally stronger have a better chance of competing in the classroom—or in the boardroom.

"The world has not caught up with the fact that sports is part of the everyday world of girls," says Erkut. "It gives girls many different things to feel good about. It gets them to use their body in an affirmative way. It's an avenue for you to feel good about yourself because you can do it well—the competence motivation. So many girls say, `I love it because I feel good about it.' Now they're discovering they also get the attention of the coaches and several other adults, including their parents."

The Women's Sports Foundation has been collecting data on women and athletics since Billie Jean King helped found it in 1974, two years after Title IX was passed. One of its most surprising and illuminating studies—an examination of the relationship between girls playing sports and teenage pregnancy—was released in May 1998. The researchers found that female teenage athletes are more likely than non-athletes to be virgins and more likely to delay sex; they have sex less often and have fewer sex partners; and they are more likely to use birth control and less likely to get pregnant as teenagers.

The researchers believe that athletic girls tend to avoid risky sexual behavior because team sports provide girls with a powerful social network, one removed from the pressures of the dating scene. Athletics also provides girls with an alternative way to establish self-worth, one based on a practical ponytail and low-maintenance makeup rather than elaborate hairstyles and heavy eye shadow. Girls who achieve success and status on the field, the authors say, may be less eager to trade sex for social approval.

And, as Erkut believes, sports give girls a new way to appreciate the power of their own bodies. Girls of every generation have grown up knowing that their bodies are supposed to be attractive to boys and acceptable to other girls, yet more than ever, girls are coming to understand that their bodies don't just have to stand around looking nice. They can shoot layups, block goals, hit home runs, and clear hurdles.

After school, it's usually a tossup. Should Jamie Connor and her best friends hang out, maybe dressing up in Jamie's mom's bridesmaid dresses, or play sports outside? Often, they make time for both.

Jamie's is the only bedroom on the second floor of her home, so after school lets out, she, Taylor Nelson, and Hilary Walentuk often congregate in the white room with pink ribbon stencils and posters of the Backstreet Boys, then drag out a collection of taffeta, chiffon, and lycra dresses.

They take turns making one another up with eye shadow and blush, then model before a big mirror in the hall and pose for photographs with a camera that belongs to Jamie's mom, Ann Marie Connor.

Then the three girls will strip off their dress-up clothes, jump back into their cargo pants or jeans and T-shirts, and head out to the backyard. "We play sports about half the time," says Jamie, "although most of the time, we dress up, put on makeup, and stuff like that."

"You can be a girl and do girl stuff and also be competitive and have fun at that, too," adds Taylor.

Jamie's mother couldn't agree more. "I am an avid cyclist, and I can go 27 miles and she's right behind me," says Connor. "She's competitive, and she likes to keep up with Mommy. That's why I named her Jamie—because when she fills out a job application they won't know whether she is a boy or girl. I want her to succeed. I want her to be self-supporting and not rely on anyone. It's a very hard world out there," says Connor, who was a member of her high school track team in Peabody.

"Girls are getting more competitive," she says. "They're skateboarding, rollerblading. Before, only the jocks did sports, the tomboys. But now it's a way of life for

everyone. I was definitely a tomboy. My hair was in a ponytail every single day, and I never wore makeup until I graduated. But Jamie is a girl who can be girly with her friends, who likes to paint her nails, who likes to put glitter on her eyes, and who is thoroughly enjoying life as a girl."

Connor believes that the rules she learned playing sports helped her compete in the work force—when, for example, she became the only woman in the sales department of a technology firm. She thinks that sports provide a milieu for more common experiences and, she hopes, greater acceptance between the sexes.

Jamie thinks that's already happening. "What do boys like in a girl? I really don't know," she says. "They want them to be athletic, they want them to be in sports, but they want them to be pretty, too. I guess there's room for everybody."

In 1971, the year before Title IX was passed, only one in 27 American girls played high school sports. Now, one in three does, compared with one in two boys. And the increase in girls' participation rates continues to exceed that of boys. In the school year ending in 1997, high school girls' participation grew to a record 2.5 million, 4 percent higher than the previous year—and double the growth in boys' participation, according to the National Sporting Goods Association figures.

This means schools are providing girls widespread access to a domain that previously belonged primarily to boys: the experience of competing, being a teammate, and asserting their physical power and mastery.

And it's not just high school athletes who are playing more: Title IX has had a mainstreaming effect so that in increasing numbers, girls—beginning as young as age 5—are playing competitive sports. The Title IX law may apply strictly to federally funded schools, but it has set a precedent and prompted an ever-growing number of girls to join intramural, club, school, church, and town-organized sports programs.

More than 4 out of 10 of the 44.7 million youngsters playing baseball, basketball, soccer, softball, and volleyball are girls. More than 14 million girls age 6 and older played basketball in 1996, a 28 percent increase from the previous decade. And even sports that have been slow to attract female athletes have seen tremendous growth. In 1990, there were about 5,500 female ice hockey players; today, more than 24,000 girls play, three-quarters of them under the age 16.

Sixth-grade teacher Dan Sullivan has been watching girls overcome hurdles ever since he began teaching science at the Nock Middle School in 1972. In addition to his classroom teaching, he coached boys' football in middle school and high school for 20 years and girls' high school track for 10.

During one four-year period, his track team grew from 32 girls to nearly 60, and he saw the girls working just as hard, competing just as fiercely, and achieving just as much as the boys did.

"Now you can go up and see a girls' field hockey game on Friday night under the lights," says Sullivan. "There's no difference [between boys and girls] in the significance of the sport being played. Girls play in the stadium, they play under the lights, they play in front of crowds. All of this has enhanced girls' participation in the sports." By age 11 or 12, many of the girls in Sullivan's class have already had five

or six years of experience playing sports in school intramural programs, club teams, youth leagues, or Catholic Youth Organization programs.

What has all that sweat, hard work, muscle soreness, and joint pain gotten the girls?

Sullivan says even the merely average athletes have been able to translate their experience as members of a team, as competitors, as disciplined and serious sportswomen, into a blueprint for success in the classroom or later in careers—an advantage boys have always enjoyed. And Sullivan's observations seem to be supported by research. One study found that 80 percent of female leaders at Fortune 500 companies said they had been athletes or tomboys when they were girls.

Sullivan's colleague Carol Snow, a sixth-grade social studies teacher, has seen enormous cultural changes at Newburyport High School since the '70s, when she played field hockey there in a shoddy uniform, with no shin pads.

She believes that growing parity between boys' and girls' sports provided for by Title IX has affected girls on and off the field, in every area of life. "Girls seem to have more of a sense of confidence," Snow says. "Whether it be in a discussion or whatever, they realize they are just as valuable."

The girls Snow teaches in 1999 are markedly different from those she remembers from 1979. These days, she says, girls are more willing to speak up. They are more confident, more willing to express ideas, and more comfortable with themselves. They move more freely in the world.

"At the beginning of the year, when [the class] first came in," Snow says, she "had the desks set up facing each other, so there were two rows. This was just the first day. Now, we know these kids and they know each other, yet all the boys sat on one side of the room, all the girls on one side.

And I thought, `This is unreal.' I didn't say anything to them, I was still watching. And I went into [Sullivan's classroom], and it was the same thing. But I would say within a week, it was mixed. It was a girl that made the first move. She said, `I'm going to sit on that side.' Then they all mixed together."

When Elizabeth Suda was 3, she pulled on a pair of pink tights and a leotard and began 10 years of studying ballet. "I always thought of myself as a ballet dancer," she says. It wasn't until she tried T-ball in the fourth grade that she experienced a team sport. "I didn't really like it," she recalls. "The only thing I liked was when I hit the ball and ran the bases."

Elizabeth, now 18, liked running so much that she joined the track team during her freshman year at Newburyport High. She was hobbled by injuries her first two years, but in her senior year she won all 10 track races she competed in—and she ran cross-country all four years of high school, too.

When she graduated in June, she was the first female in 76 years to win the Ryan Cup, the alumni association's annual award to an outstanding high school athlete and scholar.

Elizabeth says that training, practicing, and competing on the track team, alongside the boys' team and with the same coaches, helped strengthen her in ways beyond

the physical. For one thing, she made friends with both female and male teammates. "There really wasn't much difference between us," she says. "We were all runners. Of course, the fast boys can run faster than the girls, but a lot of us were the same as the boys. I guess the boys just think of us as regular people. They'd cheer us on just like they'd cheer each other on."

Elizabeth's former teammate Ryan Spinney, a senior at Newburyport High and captain of the boys' cross-country, indoor track, and outdoor track teams, agrees. "All the girls have determination; I admire that. They're not different than the guys—anybody who is an athlete is an athlete… I don't really understand the concept of girls being inferior to men," Ryan says. "It's just dumb. That whole concept is just ridiculous. Most of my friends are with me on that."

If she hadn't been competing, Elizabeth says, she might have had more time to play the violin and cello, pursue art, and sew dresses with her mother, but she wouldn't have become the person she is now. Sports, she says, "gives you self-esteem and confidence and humbles you at the same time. . .It helps you take risks. When you're running a race, you are real vulnerable. Being injured was a blessing in disguise—it taught me things in life don't come easily, you have to work through a lot of pain. It's also helped me work hard, to push myself."

Sumru Erkut says the impact sports have on girls' lives is complex. "It doesn't work for all girls," she says. "Some girls may enjoy playing sports because it's a way to spend time with friends; others like it because it's a way to take control of their bodies. Still others find it a diversion from a difficult home life, and for others, they learn to make good decisions because they have to be good at making decisions on the field. For others it helps them make plans, weigh long-term planning. Sports offer all-around positive effects, but we don't really know how it works and why. I am searching to identify the reasons."

In the meantime, Taylor Nelson speaks for herself, her friends, and many of the 19 million US girls playing team sports when she says simply, "It's important for me to feel strong."