

**The Benefits of Girls in Sports:
Why they play, what they say, and what we can do to support them.**

Written by Coach Karen Enockson

I often find my roles as a school psychology graduate student and Campton United soccer coach overlapping in my everyday life. The role of a school psychologist in today's modern American schools is to maximize learning and positive outcomes for children of all ages and ability levels. As soccer coaches, our goals are the same: to make all players better. I found myself drawn to psychological research on why girls participate in athletics. In my exploration, I was happy to find research on girls play, what they report about their experiences, and what parents and coaches can do to support them.

My first psychology research database search for "girls athletic participation" yielded several positive outcomes (and a few negative ones) of girls' participation in team sports, including soccer. I found empirical studies linking athletic participation to increases in self-esteem and self-image, increased academic performance, increased interest in future college and career opportunities, and increased active lifestyle enjoyment. I then found a dissertation written by Melissa Cara Ackerman where she interviewed six youth female team athletes about their experience. From her interview analyses, she developed five themes that make girl's athletic participation meaningful and positive. Here, I examine Ackerman's findings and include implications for coaches and parents.

- 1. Enjoyment:** Girls play team sports because they enjoy playing, and stop playing when they no longer enjoy it. As coaches, we strive to make activities fun for players. At the Academy through U9 levels, Coach DJ teaches a variety of games that simultaneously develop soccer skill. At older levels, competition and different types of games are used to create an enjoyable atmosphere. These games help girls enjoy soccer – the key ingredient in keeping them playing. Parents can assist in this theme by also enjoying the soccer their children play. If parents come to games and enjoy watching their kids play, kids will enjoy playing for their parents.
- 2. Self-Enhancement:** Athletics help girls develop an increased sense of self-worth and self-esteem. They gain pride from their athletic accomplishments. As coaches, setting small performance goals and having teams accomplish them is a way to develop this self-esteem and pride. For U9, I often make one or two coaching points before a game that we would like to achieve. These could include doing lots of moves on the field or taking shots from outside the box. At half time, I will praise the girls if they do these things well, or talk about areas for improvement to reach these goals. For me, these goals never include winning or losing, but rather stress improvement and accomplishment. If we consistently improve as a team, we will win games. Parents can improve self-worth and self-esteem by praising things like effort and hard work, regardless of winning or losing. If girls know their parents are proud of them, they can in turn be proud of themselves.
- 3. Life Skills Development:** Soccer can teach girls larger life lessons that also apply off the field. These include the value of hard work and the benefit of doing your best for a team. I had a high school soccer coach who often stressed this point to us as 14-18 year old players, and I have only begun to understand exactly how this works. I hope to pass these values on to the players I coach. Parents and coaches can stress these values after and before soccer as a way of teaching these skills to girls.

- 4. Relationships:** Girls play sports to develop relationships with peers. In male professional team sports, two team members can disagree off the field, but still play together on the field with great success. Unfortunately, female teams don't operate the same way. Girls play better when they all get along. Coaches can foster these relationships by having girls choose different partners during practice, and mixing up groups from those that typically form during practice. Campton has mentioned doing teambuilding activities with teams as a way to increase team cohesion. Fostering this cohesion can positively influence whole teams. Parents can help by making play dates with all members of a team, or offering sleepovers and outings to teams as a whole.

- 5. Femininity:** Between 11 and 14 years of age, girls internalize their identity as a female athlete. Playing soccer becomes a part of who they are. As they grow, this identity can lead to an increased sense of self-worth, positive body image, and confidence. This identity as a female athlete results in empowerment in this role. Coaches and parents can help by serving as role models for young girls, and also providing famous or professional role models to follow. Talking to girls about great female professional players such as Marta, Mia Hamm, and Abby Wambach can give girls a feminine model to look up to. Enjoying the soccer games of higher-level teams in the area, such as high school or college teams can also serve this purpose and are often inexpensive, if not free.

I hope this article can provide some insight on why girls play sports and how we can encourage these aspects of female athletic participation. Feel free to email me at kenock@gmail.com if you have any comments or questions.

In Soccer,
Coach Karen