education

Give Girls a Competitive Edge

by Bob Ehlert

Cara "Breakaway" Holloway was not much of a threat to score a three-goal "hat trick" in a hockey game until after attending her first year in the master's program at The Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire.

Holloway's hockey potential hadn't occurred to her until she got on campus last year and discovered it is a tradition for women students in the two-year-program to don the pads and chase the puck. Skilled and unskilled, they all play on one of three teams. Losing is not taken lightly—especially if the game goes to other graduate business schools in New England and Canada.

"It's a chance to get out on the ice, forget about studying, school work, looking for a job—and all the other things you're dealing with—and have some fun," says Holloway, who had never played the sport until last year. "And there's no better way to bond with the other students and find some things out about yourself and your teammates than out here on the ice."

Most of the students graduate with credentials that will qualify them for high-paying, high-pressure jobs in the business world. Those who have participated in athletics—or who at least have been active—seem able to convert that competitive drive into the professional world with rewarding results. In fact, a University of Virginia study says 86 percent of the senior executive women at Fortune 500 companies were athletes as children.

Parents need to understand that winning matters for girls.

Encourage Girls to Join Teams

But not all girls are encouraged to nurture athletics along with academics while growing up. And many experts say that is unfortunate.

"Parents still take boys' sports more seriously than girls' sports," says Mariah Burton Nelson, a former professional basketball player and now a speaker on the subject of girls' sports and author of the book *Embracing Victory: Life Lessons in Competition and Compassion.*

"Parents should know that girls need encouragement and support to join teams, stay on teams, and put up with disappointment and defeat," says Nelson. "Some still believe girls don't care as much. Sure, hard work, teamwork, self-discipline, and having fun are important. But winning is important too."

When she was growing up, Nelson recalls how her mother taught her about competition as the two took recreational swims at a local pool. Even at age 5, Nelson wasn't allowed to win when the two would race across the pool. Not until

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Nelson was 10 or 11 years old did she finally beat her mother to the finish line.

"Girls need to know how to win for later in life, to get into college, to get a good job, to succeed—all these things require desire and competitive experience," says Nelson. "But a lot of mothers who haven't participated don't see the value in it for their daughters."

Teach Daughters the Value of Activity

Amy Lynch, editor of *Daughters*, a newsletter from *American Girl* magazine, says it's important to talk not just about sports but about activity. "The girl who is active is the girl who is going to have more confidence," says Lynch. "That doesn't mean she's playing one of the most popular girls sports. It may just mean she's riding her bicycle. Team sports are wonderful. They teach leadership. But don't leave simple activity out of the equation."

Since the introduction of Title IX legislation in the 1970s—mandating equal college scholarship opportunities—women's sports have become increasingly competitive, Lynch says. That can be intimidating for those who don't have the athletic skills. Consequently, some girls drop out of athletic pursuits. Lynch says activity is the goal, whether it manifests itself in team sports or not.

"Climbing a tree and running with the dog are just as important," Lynch says. "Also, the girl who plays a game of Ping-Pong in the basement with her brother is active. Her heart's beating fast and hard and she's having a good time."

Lynch feels that a mother who sets an example by getting up and riding her bike on Saturday mornings—or by taking her daughter hiking or canoeing—is teaching her child the value of activity. That lesson can be one that lasts a lifetime.

Moms Can Set the Pace

Both Nelson and Lynch believe strongly in the influence a mother can have on a daughter's lifelong pursuit of physical fitness or sports—and the impact such activities have on other phases of the girl's life.

Girls who have athletic training often have confidence, says Nelson, whose mother taught her from an early age that competition in sports was a bridge to understanding competition in other aspects of life, even in the business world. "I think you can compete and care at the same time in the workplace and on the playing field. You care about your own ambition enough to pursue your goals. You care about the opponent because they challenge you to do your best," Nelson says.

"Let's go out and walk a mile at the track. Let's go out and ride a bike," are the suggestions Lynch believes mothers should routinely make. "Get them out there for 30 minutes. There's so much that daughters are required to do these days. But so many are not physically active."

Out of that activity comes a bond that carries over to all aspects of the girl's life—from the relationship of mother and daughter, to an ice arena fielded by competitive MBA students, to the business world where those who are active and know how to play like a team will be the real winners. ⌂

WINNING WITHOUT SPORTS

One clear finding in Dr. Sylvia Rimm's study of how 1,000 girls became successful women was that these busy and interesting women were once busy and interesting little girls. High on their list of important positive childhood experiences was "winning in competition."

"The winning was motivating and exhilarating," says Rimm, author of the best-selling book, *See Jane Win*. But the winning didn't necessarily have anything to do with sports. Extracurricular activities involving music, drama, dance, science, or other hobbies provided experiences that gave the young women confidence and discipline in other areas of their lives. Today, many of the ways in which they won in competition are directly tied to their careers.

Rimm's research showed that while physicians, nurses, and teachers did tend to be active in sports, women in government were more likely to have been active in student government. Attorneys were frequently in debate, and women in media did more writing or were often in drama.

"Helen Gurley Brown is one woman whose father encouraged her to enter writing contests as a child," Rimm says. "She remembers winning in a writing contest when she was about eight." More than half of the women interviewed belonged to the Girl Scouts or some other all-girl organization. They often commented that their leaders were good role models for them.

The women reported that their activities provided social opportunities and creative outlets, in addition to teaching the value of discipline and hard work and how to perform under pressure. It also taught them that they wouldn't always win.

"Women also need to learn to lose," Rimm says. "Winning builds confidence; losing builds character. If girls are to be successful and take risks in a competitive society, they will have to experience both winning and losing. Entering contests provides winning experiences they will never forget, as well as losing ones from which they will undoubtedly benefit without even remembering them.

"Top-status careers and top-paying careers always involve competition," Rimm says. "If we don't teach our daughters to compete, we're basically closing doors to opportunities for the rest of their lives. It just makes sense to teach them the whole process of trying to do their best, trying to win, and then graciously dealing with losing and not quitting."