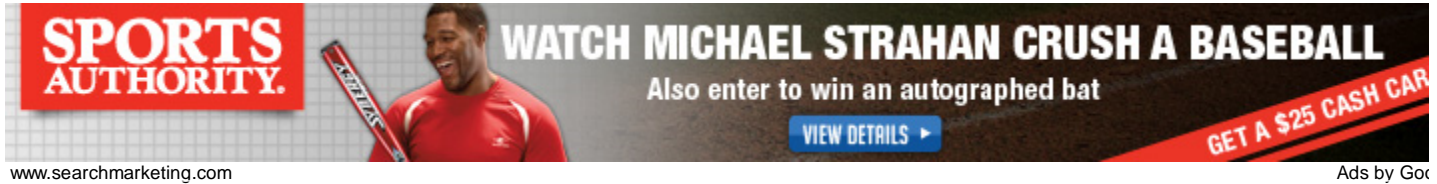


March 2, 2010

An advertisement for Sports Authority featuring Michael Strahan. The ad includes the Sports Authority logo, a photo of Michael Strahan in a red jersey holding a baseball bat, and promotional text: "WATCH MICHAEL STRAHAN CRUSH A BASEBALL", "Also enter to win an autographed bat", a "VIEW DETAILS" button, and a red banner that says "GET A \$25 CASH CAR".

www.searchmarketing.com

Ads by Google

Molly Hunter

This is the print preview: [Back to normal view »](#)

Freelance journalist

Posted: March 1, 2010 10:01 AM

Sports: A Powerful Political and Social Tool that Gets Women Ahead

Female athletes have reason to celebrate this month and not just because of their gold medal performances in Vancouver. Turns out that go-get-'em attitude, determination, and inexhaustible work ethic that lead us to conference titles and state championships in high school, are also skills highly valued by the labor market. Lucky us!

It comes as no surprise that years after hanging up our jerseys, we apply our well-honed skills to our new playing field: the workforce. And, like most of my former teammates, I attribute my confidence in this new game largely to my involvement in sports.

But are these skills that athletics brought to us, or that we brought to athletics? Can we measure this in a meaningful way?

For the first time, economist Betsey Stevenson does just that. Turning the spotlight on female athletes, Stevenson claims to have quantitatively proven what we well know: sports help us be successful.

Studies over the years have shown that American men who play sports earn more than their non-athlete classmates in the work force (economists Postelwaite and Silverman cite a whopping 20-25% wage increase for high school letter winners) but now we may have evidence that American girls who play sports are starting to reap similar benefits later in life.

By rigorously looking at the increased high school female sports participation in the post Title IX era, Stevenson makes the case that sports play a statistically significant role in female achievement. After adjusting for underlying ability and access to resources, she finds female high school athletes earn an 8% wage premium. Furthermore, she concludes that every 10 percentage-point rise in female sports participation leads to a 1 percentage-point increase in

female college attendance and a 1 - 2 percentage-point rise in female labor force participation.

Doesn't sound like much, does it? But consider that these numbers represent more than a 30 percentage-point increase of the total involvement, which accounts for about a ten fold increase in the last thirty years. (We jumped from 294,000 female high school athletes in 1972 to 3.1 million in 2009.) In other words, beyond the usual talk of enhanced self-esteem and valuable teamwork skills, Stevenson found that former female athletes between the ages of 25-34 are more successful in the workforce than their non-sporting counterparts.

What is perhaps more compelling in Stevenson's report, is that girls who played sports are more likely to enter into traditionally male-dominated occupations. In short: being competitive on the court inspires competition off the court.

But is this true for all girls everywhere? Do our American gains on the field translate to other regions of the world?

All signs point to yes.

Stevenson's college attendance and wage statistics are specific to the US, but the other benefits that Stevenson addresses are not uniquely American: "Athletics is a highly regulated system in which social conflict is displayed in a positive light. From this, players learn how to compete and how to operate successfully under a formal code of rules and procedures. Furthermore, players are taught to function as a team. The development of these skills could be especially important for girls who must try to maneuver their way through traditionally male occupations later in life."

In the Middle East, for example, where most occupations are traditionally male dominated, access to sports for girls could be especially valuable. Full disclosure: I work with the non-profit Reclaim Childhood, an organization based in Amman, Jordan that aims to empower women and girls through sport.

It is certain that girls in the Middle East face challenges that American girls do not, making it harder to gain access to sport and thus the potential benefits, but reports in the last decade cite similar gains (though not as quantitatively as Stevenson has) for female athletes in developing and developed countries.

We know that sport provides a powerful political and social tool to advance societies around the world, but it seems that girls who participate in athletics everywhere end up ahead. An increasing number of organizations like Right to Play, Relief International and Loyac share that view and are providing athletic opportunities for girls in Jordan and across the Middle East. It's worth noting too, that the United Nations has championed the benefits, incorporating sports into the majority of its development programs worldwide.

Stevenson's study gives us a measure of good things to come and when the first ever female Iranian winter Olympian, Marjan Kahlor, took to the slopes last week in the slalom, another small step forward was taken. That's something to celebrate.

Join HuffPost Social News and connect with your friends on Twitter

