She shoots, she scores!

What sports actually do for girls -- and for all of us

By Keith O'Brien | August 1, 2010

No one likes to say it out loud, but in American culture girls sports rarely matter as much as the games played by the boys.

Schools have spent huge amounts of time, energy, and money building girls sports programs since the late 1970s, at best out of a sense of fairness, and at worst because they were forced to do so by law. But the payoff has been hard to measure. Tickets sold for, say, girls high school volleyball don't come close to the number sold for football or boys basketball. Girls sports don't typically fill stadiums on Friday nights with chanting, face-painted students and dedicated, deep-pocketed alumni. And as for the participants themselves, we have known frustratingly little about what the girls are getting out of the games.

But now, for the first time, new research has begun to document a measurable benefit to girls playing sports, sweeping away any fuzzy, feel-good reasons why girls athletics matter and showing that sports can truly change the lives of the young women who get the opportunity to win, lose, and just play. A study released earlier this year, examining the impact of Title IX, the federal law that opened the door for greater sports opportunities for girls, offers hard evidence that playing sports leads to greater educational and employment opportunities. Most notably, it found that up to 40 percent of the overall rise in employment of young women in recent decades can be attributed to the increased opportunity to play ball.

The findings are significant for one key reason: They take the conversation about sports out of the realm of abstraction and into the world of clear benefit. It has long been speculated that sports can teach young people qualities of character, or life lessons, that they might not learn otherwise, but now there is evidence that the games can be transformative — not only to the participants, but also to the workforce and even the country at large.

"There's more going on in education than the reading and arithmetic that students are learning in school," said Betsey Stevenson, the author of the research and an assistant professor of business and public policy at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School. "Sports," she said, "leads to students becoming more productive members of society."

Her conclusions, published recently in the Review of Economics and Statistics, have already started to make an impression in both academia and the education world; US Secretary of Education Arne Duncan cited Stevenson's work in a recent statement commemorating the 38th anniversary of the passage of Title IX. And beyond its impact on girls sports, the research is opening a rare window on how playing sports affects all of us: boys, girls, and American culture overall.

We live in an era of sports madness, where Little Leaguers are pushed to perform and tiny soccer players are projected to become World Cup heroes starting at age 5. We expect sports to turn our children into somebody — a name, a star. Or, in more enlightened cases, we just hope that playing the games will teach them good sportsmanship, eye-hand coordination — something. The idea behind the mania is that time spent training and competing, winning and losing must have some effect on young lives, even if the kids don't end up on an ESPN highlight reel some day.

"There are skills learned in sports that are not — and cannot — be learned in other places: teamwork, winning and losing, learning how to put off short-term gratification for long-term rewards," said Nancy Hogshead-Makar, a US Olympian who won four medals as a swimmer at the 1984 games and is now senior director of advocacy at the Women's Sports Foundation. "These are the most important lessons that all kids take with them from the sports experience."

For years, studies have indicated that there's something to this theory. Men and women who play sports as kids often earn higher wages later in life and land better jobs. But economists have nursed nagging doubts about these studies, questioning if sports participation was directly driving the change or if it was due to other factors. Perhaps former athletes do better later in life not because of sports, but because of who they are in the first place — competitive, motivated self-starters, hard-wired to succeed at the office just as they did on the playing field.

It's a chicken-and-egg argument that was difficult to unravel until Stevenson began hacking away at it in her doctoral studies in recent years. Like many researchers, she wanted to know if there was any way to prove that the opportunity to play sports made a difference in people's lives. Specifically, she was interested in determining what it meant to girls. Then she realized that she had the perfect, real-life experiment from which to extrapolate her data: Title IX, the sometimes controversial policy, signed into law in 1972, that ultimately forced schools to give girls just as many opportunities to play sports as boys had.

To make valid before-and-after comparisons, Stevenson measured the level of boys' high school sports participation state by state before Title IX passed, and estimated the mandated increase in girls' sports participation. Then she compared those figures with census data on female educational attainment and employment to analyze the impact of high school sports.

What she found was that the states that required the greatest growth in female sports under Title IX — for example, North Dakota and Nebraska — saw the greatest growth in women's workforce participation in the 1980s and '90s. And the states that required the least growth in female sports — for example, North Carolina and Mississippi — saw the smallest gains in women's workforce participation. In other words, demographics, attitudes, and employment opportunities might vary from state to state, but the growth of the female workforce in a particular state almost always mirrored the sports opportunities afforded to girls in that state — a correlation that played out again and again across the country.

Using the same formula and types of comparisons, Stevenson went on to conclude that Title IX was also responsible for one-fifth of the rise of female educational attainment for the generation that followed the new policy, as well as a 10 percent increase in women working full time, and a 12 percent spike in women in traditionally male-dominated occupations, such as accounting, law, and veterinary medicine. It's the kind of evidence that advocates for female sports have long wanted to have in their arsenal. But many believe these findings also say something much greater about the importance of access to sports for everyone.

"There are a number of studies that show a good correlation, a strong correlation, between sports and benefits to health, mental fitness, and several other things," said Lisa MacCallum, Nike's global general manager of access to sports. "But Betsey's work is innovative in the sense that it actually shows causality, and that's a fairly key breakthrough."

So what are sports doing for the kids who play? Even with Stevenson's findings, the answer to that question is still speculative. But studies in the past have offered a plethora of reasons why it's important for children to play games. Lower rates of obesity and drug use have been noted among sports participants. In some states, high school student-athletes have better GPAs than those who don't participate in sports. And there is evidence that they will also do better after graduating. Surveys in the past have shown that corporate executives are more likely to have participated in high school sports than not, possibly preparing them for a life of cutthroat, real-world competition — something that girls, pre-Title IX, may not have learned as well as boys.

"There's a lot of research indicating that women don't like to compete as much as men, and they're not as successful in the labor force because they're not as willing to be competitive," Stevenson said. But perhaps playing sports is helping to change that as well. "Certainly anything we do repeatedly, we get used to," she said. "Kids — who grow up playing sports as part of everyday life — play games, either win or lose, and move on."

The idea that increased access to sports might be making women more competitive in the workplace is compelling. But what excites many researchers is what Stevenson's research means for both boys and girls.

Raymond Sauer, an economics professor at Clemson University who focuses on sports research, said Stevenson's results make him more confident that participating in sports enhances outcomes later in life, no matter a child's gender. Therefore, parents of both girls and boys should be taking notice: "Betsy's paper shows that there really are benefits for the children who get that opportunity to participate," he said.

Stevenson, however, cautioned parents not to "drag their children kicking and screaming into sports." There are certainly other activities — the debate team, for example — where children can learn many of the beneficial lessons that they presumably learn through athletics: the value of teamwork, competition, and what it feels like to win and lose. But given her findings, Stevenson said she would definitely nudge her own daughter — now just 11 months old — toward taking up a sport someday. And, she said, she would try to send her to a school where there are more slots for girls to play sports, even if that school was smaller or the sports programs less prestigious. What matters, she said, is the ability to play, not necessarily the championships or the outcomes of the games.

In the meantime, Stevenson is worried about high school sports overall and, specifically, the way that many school administrators today tend to view them as expendable in times of budget deficits. Cutting the lacrosse team or the football team might save a few bucks in the short term, she said, and that impact likely won't show up in a particular school district's standardized test scores. But given her findings, Stevenson worries about what the children are losing when they don't get that chance to actually win and lose on the scoreboard.

"If sports didn't do anything for kids, if it was just some random play with no benefit to learning," she said, "you might think of sports in the same way we think of high school dances. But sports, in actuality, is teaching kids something."

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