



Category:WOMEN AND SPORTS
PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS



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“It is time to create optimal conditions and systems that support women and girls to be active at all stages of participation and competition, and in all roles.”

Opportunities for girls and women to participate in sports have increased dramatically over the last quarter century. A generation ago, women competed in “ladylike” or “graceful” athletic endeavours such as tennis, diving, figure-skating, and gymnastics. Today they also engage in a wide variety of sports once considered the preserve of boys and men. Rugby and weightlifting are just two of the traditionally male sports in which women now compete ardently for world titles.

In terms of participation and equality, women have made tremendous strides in the past few decades. Today it is commonplace to see females participating in all levels of the workforce, the political arena, and athletics. However, while it is generally accepted in many cultures that women can partake in facets of life that were once considered male oriented, there are still many stigmas that surround females that chose to do so. This is especially obvious in the area of sports.

“Equality focuses on creating the same starting line for everyone. Equity has the goal of providing everyone with a full range of opportunities and benefits the same finish line”— DR. BRUCE KIDD

Girls and women should not be excluded from participation in athletic activity because of their gender. As with sports participation for all populations, the benefits for girls and women far outweigh any possible risks. The IOC Medical Commission encourages efforts to understand any possible special concerns of female athletes in order to develop and implement measures to reduce these athletes’ injuries and enhance the quality of their participation.

Role Conflict in Athletics:

Female athletes have a tendency to use more emotion-focused coping strategies which can create more stress. For example, women as a group tend to internalize their anxieties and continually replay or analyse a bad call or error more than their male counterparts. As more and more women and girls across the country are competing in sports and athletic events, the prevalence of those competing in traditionally masculine sports is increasing. Sports such as football, wrestling, and ice hockey are no longer the exclusive province of male athletes.

Participation in sports that require what are considered typically “male characteristics,” such as speed and strength can present an “image problem” for many female athletes. While some research suggests enhanced self-perceptions of female athletes participating in cross-gender sports the perceptions of others may not be as positive. Female athletes are often seen as being more like the typical male in terms of characteristics, attitudes, and behaviours. Female athletes may also discard typical feminine behaviours after they adopt the masculine behaviours that accompany their sport. While these changes in themselves do not necessarily represent a negative outcome the negative reaction of others can result in adverse consequences in terms of the treatment of female athletes.



Questions are often raised regarding female athletes' femininity, sexual orientation, and appropriateness as role models. Because of "gender role violations", female athletes often suffer a great deal of role conflict in other aspects of their lives, including at school, work, and social gatherings which may lead to the experience of high levels of stress. Role conflict is further exacerbated by the attempt of many female athletes to overcompensate for their masculine behaviour on the field by acting in feminine ways off the field. Norms for the "female sports world" and the rest of society differ dramatically.

"The health and well-being of women and girls, and the medals won by women at major Games, are simple by-products of an effective sport and physical activity system that values diversity and creates and supports gender-specific approaches for women and girls".

Although there are several benefits to sport participation, achievement and performance pressures can be highly stressful especially in aesthetic activities such as gymnastics, diving, cheerleading and dance. In sports, females wear revealing uniforms (i.e., track and field, volleyball and tennis), perceived physique imperfections are frequently of concern. Naturally, this can infiltrate the thinking of the athletes, their parents and coaches. Often physical appearance, including physical size and physique, are subjects of conversation that can lead to negative self-perceptions of athletes.

"Positive sport experiences can contribute to the full inclusion of girls and women by enhancing their health and well-being; fostering their self-esteem and empowerment; facilitating their social inclusion and integration; changing gender norms; and providing opportunities for female leadership and achievement".

Benefits of Sports Participation

The benefits of vigorous physical activity are well-understood, and have important implications for female participants. These benefits include physical and psychosocial components.

Physical benefits

- Reduced risk of illnesses such as heart disease, hypertension, diabetes, and endometrial and breast cancer
- Improved muscle-to-fat ratio/body composition
- Stronger immune system with moderate physical activity
- Less menstrual discomfort
- Stronger bones and reduced risk of developing osteoporosis later in life

Psychosocial benefits

- Improved self-esteem, self-confidence, and perception of competence; better performance in academic settings
- Decreased risk of unwanted pregnancy
- Decreased risk of drug and alcohol abuse

Recommendations to Minimize Injury Risk and Enhance Participation

Sport is becoming increasingly important in the lives of girls and women. The increasing number of competitive and recreational female athletes should be viewed positively. To perpetuate and accentuate the progress that has been made in this area in so many countries - and to inspire progress in countries where none has been made - the IOC Medical Commission makes the following recommendations:

Sports governing bodies:

- should, in keeping with Rule 2, Paragraph 5 of the Olympic Charter, promote women in sport at all levels and in all structures, particularly in their executive bodies (including medical committees)
- should encourage the participation of girls and women in their particular sports
- should maintain injury and illness statistics pertaining to girls and women in their particular sport.



“[A social-ecological] model is useful in aiding and understanding physical activity opportunities for women [and girls] because it recognises that potential constraints come from many influences.”

Physical educators, coaches, and other exercise and health professionals:

- should take measures to improve their understanding of the special considerations of the female athlete
- should focus on helping young female athletes (5-18) develop a broad range of skills through exposure to a variety of sports; sports specialization before age 10 is not desirable
- should ensure that increases in training volume are not so great that they cause overuse injury.

“In order for women and girls to begin, maintain, and increase their sport and physical activity participation, communities, professionals, sport clubs and parents must work together to reduce the barriers that stand in their way.”

Parents:

- should encourage daughters to participate in sports and physical activity from a young age
- should increase their understanding of the benefits and risks of sports for girls and women
- should regularly remind themselves that the most important reason children play sports is for fun.

Research:

- should focus on gathering epidemiological data on injury rates in order to develop effective injury prevention strategies

“Some women and girls excel at sport and physical activity despite a variety of complex barriers affecting their participation and performance. A combination of factors allow them to cope with and overcome the barriers”.

Sport task-related pressures:

The most important aspect of sports such as dance, synchronized skating, and swimming is to move as one. Although many athletes get used to competitive attire, wearing skimpy outfits is stressful for some. When there is a choice, uniforms that make athletes feel comfortable should be chosen. Involving athletes in the decision making process is also a healthy way to boost motivation and team cohesion.

Environmental pressures:

Environmental pressures generally involve people who interact with athletes including teammates, peers, coaches, parents, parents of other athletes, judges and the audience. In many aesthetic sports scores for artistry are tied to appearance. Spectators are also implicated in making comments about athletes' appearance. “Spectators are quick to point out the “fat girls” on teams, even when they aren't fat. Consistent with research on female athletes, those interviewed also reported coach practices such as weigh-ins, cutting athletes based on weight, and diet restriction warnings around the holidays as stressful.

Pressures related to biological characteristics:

Aesthetic sports are considered an early-entry sport where young girls often specialize in the sport as early as eight years of age. This means that in many sports, girls grow up in front of the sport community where many are quick to point out changing bodies. A changing body is stressful, especially in the face of constant comparisons. It's really hard not to compare yourself to your teammates.

What many people in sport communities may not realize is that individuals are all on their own pathway to their genetically pre-determined size. Although extreme dietary restrictions and exercise can influence this pathway, growth is inevitable and severe caloric restriction leads to severe health consequences noted earlier. It is also important to keep in mind that a lot of energy can be expended while participating in a sport. Nutritional requirements adequate for developing bodies are influenced by body type and metabolism. Physical characteristics such as height, physique and leg length are tied to the timing of puberty. For example, the growth plates (bones) of early matures close sooner than late matures. Late matures spend a longer time



growing and thus end up being taller, leaner, with longer legs compared to their body. Growth spurts are more noticeable among early matures who are also characteristically more muscular than late matures. Because muscle weights more than fat, early matures can expect to weigh more without worrying about being fat. It is important to note that weight and the Body Mass Index (BMI: weight (kg)/height (m²)), a popular indicator of weight-related health, are not indicators of body composition, or fatness.

Psychological characteristics:

In addition to changing bodies, psychological characteristics such as self-perceptions and self-esteem are developing during adolescence and can be influenced by the way people react to changing bodies. It is common for athletes to experience social physique anxiety (SPA) – anxiety about presenting oneself in front of others. It is important to avoid heightening SPA because researchers have found that people with SPA have a tendency to develop eating disorders and have low self-esteem. Perceptions such as satisfaction with health, strength, endurance, physical activity as well as appearance-related issues are important building blocks of self-esteem, which can improve confidence and buffer the effects of SPA.

Confidence and mental toughness are some of the most important psychological characteristics in any sport. They result from participation and are essential for performing your best. Like positive self-perceptions, they can also protect people during stressful life events.

Each athlete interviewed was asked to provide three pieces of advice for athletes, parents, coaches, and sport officials. Here is a summary of their recommendations:

Advice for athletes:

- a) Remember you are a unique individual first before you are an athlete.
- b) Let your happiness and enjoyment of your sport take precedence over criticisms you may face. Your health is so much more important to your sport.

Advice for parents:

- a) Never criticize your children or other athletes.
- b) Build self-esteem by making positive comments concerning their psychological, physical abilities
- c) Make sure your child knows the importance of good nutrition and appropriate exercise as an athlete.
- d) Monitor the way your athlete's coach treat your child.

Advice for coaches:

- a) Be aware that you are role model to your athletes. Your influence goes a long way in their lives.
- b) Be sensitive in making comments about your athlete and/or team expectations and how you address them.
- c) Avoid discriminating against athletes in any sort.
- d) Provide health education.
- e) Be positive and empathetic.

Sport officials and the media

- a) Seek and share information about nutrition, growth and development, exercise and eating disorders. This information should be mandatory training at judging, coaching and administration seminars.
- b) Consider implementing policies on unhealthy coaching practices and parent behaviours at sport related activities.
- c) Know that there are many resources out there and people who can help you. You just have to take that first step even if it's scary and admit that you need help.

We all have a responsibility to ensure that the next generation of women and girls have a viable situation in the Canadian sport and physical activity system.

"Individually we all have voices, and collectively we can make a difference."

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Goal Setting:

Goal setting involves a process of choosing and embracing progressively greater challenges. Goal setting has been shown to facilitate performance by establishing target behaviours and outcomes. Goal setting helps direct and focus attention on the things that really matter. However, while goal setting might seem to be a somewhat obvious idea, goal-setting implementation is far from trivial. Resistance training lends itself particularly well to goal setting due to the inherently measurable nature of weight training-sets, repetitions, weight, rest interval, speed, and so forth.

Achieving goals has a lot to do with setting effective goals. One should bear in mind the following issues when setting strength training goals or helping athletes set such goals.

- **Realistic goals:** Goals should be challenging but realistic. Unrealistic goals can often be demotivates rather than motivators. Moreover, when realistic goals are achieved, this sets the stage for further goal setting that tends to continue to increase the likelihood of further achievement.
- **Short-term versus long-term goals:** It is wise to set only a small number of long-term goals (perhaps one to three), and long-term goals should be easily broken down into short-term goals. Short-term goals serve as the building blocks for long-term goals. The goals should be stated in measurable and behavioural terms, not vague generalities. At any given time, an athlete should be working on only three or fewer goals.
- **Performance versus outcome goals:** Performance goals are also called process goals. Outcome goals are sometimes called results goals. Performance goals are basically improvement goals. Outcome goals might include winning a particular contest. The athlete should concentrate on performance goals as opposed to outcome goals, primarily because performance goals are considered to be under greater control of the athlete, while outcome goals are seldom under such control. Environment, cheating, bad officiating, and other factors can render an athlete's control of a competitive situation mood.
- **Flexible goals:** Goals should be elastic so that the athlete has the options of moving faster or slower, pursuing slightly different goals, and undertaking targets of opportunity. Goal setting is not a foolproof endeavour. Athletes may have set goals without knowing how difficult they might be, or without knowing that resources may become more limited in the interim. Injury, illness, and other factors may also force a revision of goals.
- **Individual goals:** Goals should be applied to individuals as much as possible. Clearly, applying individual goals when members of a group are pursuing the same outcome may be redundant and unnecessary. However, individual goals are more common in resistance training because of individual differences in experience and abilities.
- **Goal assessments:** Goals should be measured at regular intervals. Setting goals without monitoring and measurement does not serve to establish when goals have been achieved. The process of goal setting and goal assessment should be cyclic, in that each time a goal is achieved a new goal should be set.

Goal setting is among the first steps in implementing principles of sport psychology in resistance training. Goal setting should be encouraged so that continual progress is both demanding and measurable.

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