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Playing like a Girl: What we can learn from the feminine approach to sport and competition

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Introduction

The word “compete” means to strive or vie for something for which others are also contending. Without others, competition does not occur. Research studies of gender differences highlight ways that girls and boys differ in their approach to learning and competing in sport. Competition is described as a “learned” social process that is influenced by the social environment. Patterns of play result from the influence of socializing agents and institutions. Family, friends, teachers, and role models are socializing agents; institutions of socialization include education, government, religion, the media, and sport. Studies have shown that “girls typically interact in a cooperative and caring way within a competitive sport environment whereas boys tend to interact in an individualized and egocentric way.” At the same time, masculine traits can be seen as more valuable than feminine traits in competitive sport, and female athletes are typically valued more highly as athletes, by themselves and others, when they “demonstrate masculine traits.”

In this article, I consider the consequences of valuing one competitive approach over another in sport, both for athletes and for the culture of sport, and ask: What can we learn from girls’ approach to competition that can inform and enhance the current culture of sport?

One could argue that feminine competitive traits are also valuable, and that such traits could potentially inform and enhance the social conceptualization of competitive sport. Integrating the feminine approach to the competitive sport culture could help to resolve some of the challenges and issues currently threatening the reputation of sport such as doping, cheating, violence, and abuse, much of which is born of an individualistic ‘win at all costs’ mentality. If competitive sport were grounded in the values of care and cooperation in addition to individualization and egocentricity, the culture of competitive sport could broaden and evolve to a new level of play that expands and supersedes the ‘win at all costs’ mentality.

I question the costs associated with the abdication of feminine attributes in competitive sport, consider a competitive sport that integrates both the feminine and masculine competitive approaches, and imagine a sport culture that holds human excellence as its fundamental goal as opposed to simply ‘winning’. Beginning with a review of the literature on gender differences in competitive and learning style in sport, I then describe the current culture of competitive sport, which includes dominant values and beliefs guiding coaching and athlete interactions, and discuss the implications for girls attempting to compete within a sport culture that runs counter

to feminine values and beliefs. I conclude by identifying ways that the feminine approach could inform and enhance sport's culture and reputation, and recommending strategies for building a sport culture that leverages the best of both genders.

Gender Differences in Competitive Approach and Learning Style in Sport

Within the limited and often complex literature on gender differences in competitive and learning style in sport, common themes emerge. Minimal research has been conducted on how girls or young women experience, value, or approach competitive sport, and results stemming from this research are complicated, entwined in cultural, societal, familial, and personal factors and influences. However, themes do emerge to differentiate young women's approach to competition and sport participation from those of young men, including difference in stress appraisal, focus, values, and goals.

Women and men differ in their interpretations of the process of competition and the structure of cooperation. Generally, female athletes value the interdependence between cooperation and competition both within a team and between opponents, while male athletes are more concerned with the outcome of competition. "For women, the primary experience of self is relational, that is, the self is organized and developed in the context of important relationship," wrote Janet Surrey. This model contrasts the traditional separation/individuation model of development. John Dickinson, in his study of 125 athletes, found gender differences regarding competitive style with boys scoring significantly higher in focus on skill and speed and girls in focus on luck. Mark Anshel and colleagues found differences in perception of competition stressors involving a cheating opponent, experiencing pain, and a 'bad' call by the referee/umpire between genders. For Jonathan Wildman, significant differences were discovered between men and women on variables measuring preferred performance/task, relationship, motivation, and representation behaviours.

Distilling these studies highlights the most stark difference between genders to be that of goal orientation: a person with predominantly a task orientation defines success as mastering tasks or improving one's own personal skills. An individual with primarily an ego orientation defines success as being better than competitors. Stephanie Hanrahan and Ester Cerin, in their study of 272 athletes (108 males and 164 females) from team and individual sports, competing at recreational and competitive levels, found girls scored significantly higher on task orientation than boys. Likewise, studies using the Sport Orientation Questionnaire devised by Diane Gill and Tom Deeter and examining competitiveness, win orientation, and goal orientation in competitive sports, revealed that while males consistently score higher than females in sport competitiveness and win orientation, females scored just as high on goal achievement. Thus, the gender differences observed do not reflect interest in competitive sport, but interest in winning.

The difference in competitive values and goals between genders is clear, and most likely socially and culturally mediated. Perhaps most problematic is the differing cultural valuation of these competitive orientations. Valuing one competitive approach over the other poses consequences for girls attempting to compete in a 'man's world', according to her 'woman's values and goals' and for a society attempting to develop social capacity.

The Current Culture of Sport

Culture grows and takes shape when values, beliefs, and assumptions are communicated, shared, and enacted. The values, assumptions, and beliefs enacted in western sport are typically masculine in nature and based on a military model: the object of the game is to win, dominate your opponent with size, strength, speed, and skill, and develop and run both a strong defensive and offensive strategy. Little exists in the coaching media, literature, handbooks, or training materials to highlight the value of striving for excellence, understanding one's opponent, collaborating with one's team and one's opponent, sharing best practices, or being creative in sport. Instead, girls must negotiate a competitive environment dominated by masculinity by supplanting these feminine values with masculine or androgynous traits. Often, a woman's only choice in the competitive sport arena is to compete like a man.

Competitive sport requires competitive behaviours. In many cultures, however, those behaviours are considered appropriate only for males. As a place where traditionally masculine traits and qualities such as performance, strength, power, dominance, and winning are glorified, sport is not as encouraged or celebrated for girls and women as it is for boys and men. Research into sport as male territory has highlighted the concept of "hegemonic masculinity" or "cultural dominance of a masculinity that embodies traits which legitimate patriarchy, the dominant position of some men over others, and the subordination of women":

"... we don't have a word - or even a concept - for a 'tall strong feminine woman'...we have instead the word amazon, a term equated with female power and in the same breath with masculinity and therefore deviance or aberrance" (Mariah Nelson, 1994, p. 67).

For girls attempting to compete within a sport culture that runs counter to feminine values and beliefs, devalues feminine competitive orientation, and offers little to no space for feminine values to thrive in the sport culture, the implications are significant. As Cheryl Cooky and Mary MacDonald report in their narrative inquiry into the lived experiences of 10 young girls, the dominant sport culture shapes and places limitations on the experiences and the possible narratives girls could co-create to understand their experiences within the institution of sport. While the 'tomboy' approach may satisfy many girls, the absence of feminine values within the cultural framework of sport leaves a cultural gap and communicates a negative message to those who uphold feminine values as well.

Of course, the implications of denying important human values are significant for an individual, and for a society. Girls cannot win. Those who strive to play according to masculine values and goals are perceived as deviant; those who strive to play with a collectivist mindset are perceived as non-athletes. Likewise, a society focused solely on winning, individualism, and being 'better than one's opponent', is missing the overarching goal of sport — human excellence.

Playing Like a Girl in a Boy Culture

I conclude by identifying ways that the feminine approach could inform and enhance western sport's culture and reputation, and recommending strategies for building a sport culture that leverages the best of both genders. What may be called for is a paradigmatic shift in competitive

sport culture that moves beyond ‘winning’ to ‘human excellence’. Feminine-oriented athletes need not only to be allowed to play, but to play as they want to. Such a shift in focus may be fostered by a more intentional and complete integration of both the feminine and masculine approaches to competitive sport.

Integrating the best of both gendered values in competitive sport would essentially androgynize sport by making sport more about human excellence through competition than simply about winning through competition. A focus on human excellence would encourage competition as a collaborative effort and contextualize outcomes as collective, thereby discouraging cheating, violence, doping, and abuse.

Coaches and athletes themselves have the power to shift culture by communicating a new, more integrated set of values, beliefs, and assumptions. As Katie Liston suggests, “sport can highlight and challenge the polarization of the binary oppositions of masculinity and femininity. In particular, it is the sports persons themselves who can challenge the perceptions of gender, masculinity, and femininity. Kari Fasting and Sheila Scraton support the power of sport to transform itself, acting as an important sphere for the disruption of the binary oppositions of masculinity and femininity and the emergence of potentially transgressive forms of sporting femininities.

Efforts can be made to shift the culture of competitive sport by intentionally seeking channels by which to communicate integrated values, assumptions, and beliefs. Athletes can share their narrative experiences of sport as a collectivist rather than gendered activity. Spectators can be challenged to cheer for demonstrations of excellence as opposed to taking sides. Parents and educators can teach young children to focus on setting goals, challenging themselves and others, all for the purpose of bettering the overall mark as opposed to besting each other. The idea is not to be better than our opponent; the idea is to be the best we can be together. Imagine a coach handing out cards to the parents in the stands that say: “Today, let’s try cheering for both teams to see what happens.”

Finally, we can acknowledge more intentionally the values, icons, and role models we already possess as beacons of more holistic sport values: the Olympic values could be better integrated into our educational systems, and better leveraged by coaches, educators, and parents as an illustration of the overall goals of sport: excellence, respect, friendship. Writers and broadcasters can act with greater awareness of the role that feminine values play in sport, highlight the link between competition and human excellence, and celebrate the outcomes more intelligently and explicitly:

“Perhaps it will be from women that the world of sports is reminded about the performance-enhancing aspects of teamwork.” — (Timothy Wildman, 1998, p. 80).

About the author

After teaching English for 20 years, Dr. Jennifer Walinga combined her passion for communication and athletics in pursuing a master’s degree in leadership where her research focused on the impact of experiential training programs on organizational performance. She

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In designing communication, change, and performance coaching strategies, she blends theories from organizational, educational, and sport psychology. As a facilitator, educator, and consultant, she draws heavily upon her experience as a member of Canada's Commonwealth, world, and Olympic gold medal rowing teams from 1983 to 1992. She is the mother of three and is an active member of the athletic and educational communities in Victoria.

References available upon request.