

We All Benefit from Women's Participation in Sports

by Richard E. Lapchick

The Women's Sports Foundation, my favorite sports organization other than the Center for the Study of Sports in Society, just held its annual summit in Arizona. It is an event, like their annual banquet, that I always try to attend. For a variety of reasons, I regretfully missed this summit.

As a 55 year old man, I am challenged, learn and am ultimately inspired by any time I spend with the great people of the Women's Sports Foundation. While that was always the case, it took on added meaning as I watch and dream with Emily, our now 11 year old girl. My 26 year old daughter Chamy, has just given birth to Taylor, our first grandchild who happens to be a granddaughter. I'm listening. I hope other fathers and grandfathers are doing the same. We benefit from women and girls playing sport.

There is a business side to this. There is a health side also. Investing in the participation of women and girls in sport is a growing and potentially huge business. I ask those of you who are Dads to suspend that interest. For the Moms, work with us.

That women and girls benefit from participation in sport is pretty much of a no brainer. Smarter. Healthier, more self-confident and on and on. What about us men?

I rarely hear anyone say how women's sport benefits us. It does. When we give ourselves the chance, we enjoy watching sport where the players are having fun, are very competitive, are good sports. That's the least of it.

One of the Center's biggest programs is our Mentors in Violence Prevention Program (MVP) which works on reducing men's violence against women. It is obviously a huge issue in America today when 1 in 6 college coeds will be the victim of rape or attempted rape.

When I sent Chamy away to college I worried about her getting the right courses, having good professors, becoming prepared for a career, and meeting good friends. When Emily is ready I will worry about all those things and about her safety. I will be happier if she hangs around with guys who appreciate women's sports because studies show that they are less likely to be abusive, violent and misogynistic.

They are more likely to share the pressures of life and family with their spouses and not follow the old "caretaker" model of the male shouldering all the financial burdens while the women run the home resulting in more balanced and less stressful lives for the whole family. Those are characteristics of what I want as a future son-in-law.

The notion makes sense. Guys who like sports themselves and follow women's sports will follow grow up valuing women for their skills and abilities. As a father, I am sorry I didn't fight harder long ago so Chamy's generation would have thought their chances were wide open to play high school and college sport.

I am fighting now because I know it is right and because I want to be sure our Emily has no barriers. I want Emily to be coming home from college in 10 years to cheer on the sidelines for Taylor in a youth sport game. I am also fighting because I see that the opportunities for parents to spend quality time with their children seems to be an ever-declining phenomenon. In my heart, I am very close to Emily. I am also close to her brother and sister also but they are grown while my wife Ann and I still have some precious time with Emily. Ann has made me aware of how important it is to be there for any significant event for Emily.

Last year I changed the dates of two important meetings of the Center's Development Council, the Center's major fund-raising group, so I could attend two of Emily's swim meets. Guess what? When I told the members of the Council why I was changing the dates, they got even more involved in our work!

Best of all, I can come home in the afternoon and shoot baskets with Emily or kick a soccer ball. As the ball moves around the driveway, we talk and I learn more about her day at school than the typical response of "good" to the question of "how was your day?" I learn about her friends and what she respects in them or why others disappoint her. As her shot goes silently through the net and she goes "ooooohhh!" I feel her confidence growing. As my shot clangs off the rim and ricochets into the grass she really hears me say for the 5th time that day how much I love her and how proud I am of who she is. A tear wells in my eye when she says "ditto."

Emily has had an up and down time with sports. She went to Trinity Prep this year. It was a big decision and she was not as sure as her parents that it was a good choice. Truth be told, Ann and I also wondered.

Sports are important at Trinity. We are lucky enough to have a pool at home in which Emily could be found at most waking hours. She could "swim" endlessly but surely had no strokes down as a competitor. We went to a special night where the coaches talked about their programs. We asked Coach Rich what was expected. "If she can swim across the pool and not drown, she will be on the team." This was our kind of program. "See you Wednesday, Emily" he said as we left.

We live in Florida and Wednesday was a typical August day. It was 95 degrees with 98 percent humidity. Ever the supportive parents, Ann and I sat in the direct sun for several hours of practice. We were soaked and mentally anguished for our baby girl. The first thing Coach Rich did was ask them to run 5 laps around the track. I will admit that I had asked Emily to run the 15 yards to our mailbox to get the mail several times. But five laps, 95 degrees, 98 percent humidity?

Next it was in the pool. OK, here comes that lap. She had done at least two in our pool which was half the width of the one at Trinity! I choked as I heard Coach Rich say "swim 16 laps." I am glad no one captured what the facial expressions of her parents must have been like. Agony can't be pretty.

Break. A few minutes. Rich ordered another 16 laps but was sensitive enough to see it might be tough for Emily so he managed to extend her break so she caught her breath but not long enough that her teammates thought she was getting special treatment. She swam it ... we watched.

I knew this was mainly a very competitive high school team. This was Florida where swimming is big time. But he said "if she could swim across the pool ... " Next was a 15 minute break. I was ready to call "911" when Emily breezed by us, simply asking if we had seen the water fountain? Ann and I were incredulous, realizing that Coach Rich had judged the situation and asked not only what he could expect but challenged each swimmer to do her best.

Emily ended up on a JV/ Varsity High School team whose girls finished second in the state. At the end of the year, she won two awards. From her teammates, she was named "the sweetest angel." Her coaches named her the most improved. More importantly, she started as a student at a new school knowing others girls for her 6th grade through high school seniors on her team. Meet-by-meet, her confidence grew. Coach Rich was my Coach of the Year.

Yes, men benefit from women's sports. We have to help to make them better. Some of the remaining disparities indicate the reasons why this issue is so compelling. In 1972 a female directed over 90 percent of women's programs. Currently, women are athletics directors at only 8.9 percent of Division I schools. The percentage of women coaching women's teams has declined from over 90 percent in 1972 to 48

percent in 2000. Men's athletics still outspends women's athletics two to one in scholarships, three to one in expenses, and three to one in recruiting.

Finally, the average number of men's sports offered today is almost nine as opposed to seven for women. So let's work to make this work. While women and girls benefit, so do men. Just as in correcting the other inequities in sport and in society, life will be better for all of us.

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