

# **COACHING THROUGH A GENDER LENS:**

**Maximizing Girls' Play and Potential**

**Executive Summary**

**April 2019**

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**A Women's Sports Foundation Report**

## Authorship

This report was authored by Nicole Zarrett, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Department of Psychology, University of South Carolina; Cheryl Cooky, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies and American Studies, Purdue University; and Philip Veliz, Ph.D., Assistant Research Professor, School of Nursing, University of Michigan.

## Author's Acknowledgments

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## Women's Sports Foundation Acknowledgments

This report identifies specific coaching and program-level practices that can address the major barriers that contribute to the gender gap between boys and girls in sport. The successful outcomes of the research required the support of many individuals and organizations. First, the Women's Sports Foundation is indebted to the study authors, Nicole Zarrett, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Department of Psychology, University of South Carolina; Cheryl Cooky, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies and American Studies, Purdue University; and Phillip Veliz, Ph.D., Assistant Research Professor, School of Nursing, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI. We appreciate the knowledge, research skills, and commitment to high standards that they brought to this project. A special note of acknowledgement and appreciation is extended, as well, to Deana Monahan for her editorial and graphic skills and to Elizabeth Flores-Amaya, WSF Associate Director, Community Impact – Youth Engagement, for the critical role she played in recruiting girls' sports programs to participate in the survey.

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We are grateful to Nike for their generosity in providing the lead funding to make this research possible. We give special thanks to its Social & Community Impact team, which is working to ensure that the report findings are widely shared with coaches, program leaders, and parents. Nike believes that all kids are made to play and is working with partners around the world to get kids moving so they can lead healthier, happier, and more successful lives.

The Women's Sports Foundation also thanks its National Partners Chevrolet, espnW and ESPN, Gatorade, and NBC Sports Group for their year-round support and commitment to help strengthen and expand opportunities for all girls and all women through all sports.

## Project Expert Interviewees

Interviews with experts from a variety of sectors provided invaluable insights that informed this research.

Alison Carney, independent consultant, facilitator, advocate and researcher in sport for development and social change

Megan Chawansky Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Health and Sport Sciences, Otterbein University

Diana S. Cutaia, Founder, Coaching Peace

Elizabeth Daniels, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Psychology, University of Colorado, Colorado Springs

Julie Foudy, Founder, Julie Foudy Sports Leadership Academy; World Cup, Champion Soccer Player

Kelly Kratz, Lead Trainer, Positive Coaching Alliance

Phaidra Knight, Girls' and women's rugby coach; three-time World Rugby Cup player and World Rugby Hall of Fame member

Lauren Rauscher, Ph.D., Director, Women's Leadership & Mentorship Program, Associate Professor, Sociology, Robert Morris University

Joanne Smith, Founder and Executive Director, Girls for Gender Equity

## Expert Review Panel

The Expert Panel played a vital role in the formulation of the final report, especially interpretation and presentation of findings in a non-biased manner. The panel members contributed expertise in the relevant academic areas of gender studies, sociology and psychology of sport, and girls' sports programming.

Janet Carter, President and CEO, Coaching Corps

Megan Chawansky Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Health and Sport Sciences, Otterbein University

Elizabeth Daniels, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Psychology, University of Colorado, Colorado Springs

Matthew Geschke, Portfolio & Strategy Director, Social & Community Impact, NIKE, Inc.

Jamison Merrill, Director of Research and Evaluation, Up2Us

Kelsey Moore, Sr. Manager, North America Social & Community Impact, NIKE, Inc.

Benita Fitzgerald Mosley, CEO, Laureus Sport for Good Foundation USA

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Don Sabo, Ph.D., Professor Emeritus and Founder Center for Research on Physical Activity, Sports, and Health, D'Youville College; Senior Health Policy Advisor, Women's Sports Foundation

Renata Simril, President and CEO, LA84Foundation

Sue Shapcott, Ph.D., Owner, Sports Query

Liz Wolfson, Founder and Chief Visionary Officer, Girls Athletic Leadership Schools Inc.

## About Nike Social & Community Impact

Nike believes in the power of sport to unleash human potential and build community. Nike fuels this belief through Made to Play, its commitment to getting kids moving through play and sport so that they can lead healthier, happier, and more successful lives. Together with community partners and employees around the world, Nike is designing innovative solutions to get more than 16 million kids playing, running, and jumping their way to a brighter future. Find out more about Nike's commitment to getting kids moving and providing opportunities for equal playing fields for all at [Nike.com/Madetoplay](http://Nike.com/Madetoplay).



## About the Women's Sports Foundation

The Women's Sports Foundation is a powerful voice, catalyst and convener dedicated to ensuring all girls and women have equal access to sports and physical activity and the tremendous life-long benefits they provide. Founded by Billie Jean King in 1974, we seek to strengthen and expand opportunities for all girls and women to participate in all sports at all levels through research, advocacy, community impact and a wide variety of collaborative partnerships. The Women's Sports Foundation has relationships with more than 1,000 of the world's elite female athletes and has positively shaped the lives of more than 3 million youth, high school and collegiate student-athletes. To learn more about the Women's Sports Foundation, please visit [www.WomensSportsFoundation.org](http://www.WomensSportsFoundation.org) or follow us at @WomensSportsFdn and [www.facebook.com/WomensSportsFoundation](http://www.facebook.com/WomensSportsFoundation).

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# LETTER FROM THE CEO

Founded 45 years ago by Billie Jean King, the Women's Sports Foundation's enduring commitment is to ensure that all girls and all women have access to physical activity and sports together with the benefits they provide. We know that, through sports, girls grow and thrive in limitless ways, developing life-long confidence, perseverance, and leadership, among many other assets key to their personal development. Of equal importance, girls who are involved with sports experience the joy that comes from playing, teamwork, empowerment, and strength.

At the Women's Sports Foundation, research informs all of our work. And though progress has been made, disparities of gender, race, and economics persist in sport—creating barriers to opportunity. What's more, girls also face intersecting challenges around culture, gender norms, environment, policy, and practice that further impede participation. The Foundation works tirelessly to address these challenges, and our programs are making a difference. We are so grateful to our many partners on the national and local levels for helping to tackle these inequities head on, propelling girls and women to new heights.

Given the gender gap and disproportionate drop-out rate of girls in sport participation, the Women's Sports Foundation, with generous funding from Nike, commissioned a study, *Coaching through a Gender Lens: Maximizing Girls' Play and Potential*. With a strong appreciation for the critical role that coaches play in girls' lives, we sought to examine the intersection of girls' development with coaching practice to better understand the factors that influence participation, engagement, and persistence in sport. While evidence-based research in this area has been extremely limited, our research identified specific coaching and program-level practices that can counter some of the barriers, close the gap, and promote stronger engagement and retention among girls.

The research was multi-dimensional and yielded tremendous insights regarding the ways in which coaches can positively influence girls' current sports experience as well as their future likelihood of playing sports. From a national survey of girls and their parents to in-depth interviews with experts in coaching and youth development and to a survey of exemplary community-based sport programs, what we discovered was illuminating and inspiring. This is the first national study to listen to the voices of girls and their parents

about how coaches influence girls' sport experiences. Among the many rich findings, the research confirmed that a positive coaching experience is highly predictive of girls loving and continuing with their sport. The research offers detailed findings about what constitutes a positive coaching experience for girls and offers an understanding of how coaching that integrates a gender lens can maximize girls' interest and motivation.

We encourage coaches, administrators, program leaders, parents, educators, and others to use this research as a springboard from which to employ practices that optimize girls' participation in sport. We are deeply grateful to the thousands of dedicated coaches who make a difference in the lives of young people every day. We look forward to continuing to use this research to create tools that will help coaches continue to teach, mentor, and guide girls forward in their sports experience and in their lives.



Dr. Deborah Antoine  
CEO, Women's Sports Foundation

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Women's Sports Foundation commissioned the *Coaching through a Gender Lens: Maximizing Girls' Play and Potential* report to examine the intersection of early adolescent girls' sports developmental needs with their "current day" experiences in sport, with the purpose of identifying coaching practices and strategies that will best support girls' initiation and continued participation in sport. Coaches play an important role in getting and keeping girls involved in sports. Given the gender gap and disproportionate drop-out rates in girls' sports participation, which is heightened as girls transition from childhood to early adolescence, there is a need for coaching strategies and practices that address the unique challenges girls encounter in participating in sport. Yet, there is a lack of evidence-based research on developmentally appropriate coaching strategies to nurture girls' love for sport and to counter the barriers to their participation. Employing a gender lens, the current report set out to learn from young girl athletes and their parents what they think and feel about coaches and to hear from experts and exemplary sports programs about coaching and program-level practices that maximize girls' personal and sport potential. While this report focuses on coaching as it relates girls' sport participation, many of these findings would also serve to enhance the youth sport experience across gender.

To accomplish this objective, the report aimed to:

1. Examine girls' own personal experiences in sport and the degree to which specific parent, coaching, and program practices/experiences impact girls' participation, motivation, and retention.
2. Highlight the major barriers that contribute to the gender gap in sport, to inform what coaches and programs need to address in order for girls to become involved and stay involved in sports. These barriers include cultural, environmental, and policy-based barriers centered on gender norming, gender stereotypes that influence girls' socialization into sports, as well as girls' own internalization of gender norms as reflected in their self-perceptions, values/interests, and motivations in sport.
3. Determine the ways in which youth sports organizations serving girls can successfully meet the needs of participating girls to foster their continued engagement in sport, with a focus on identifying existing strengths and areas still in need of improvement.

The research involved the use of a multidimensional/multi-informant approach that entailed three major research components. First, interviews were conducted with experts in girls' sport and positive development to identify what

might be key contributors to the gender gap in sport participation, and the specific types of coaching practices that can either contribute to or counter the gap. Second, informed by what we learned from the expert interviews, the Women's Sports Foundation (WSF) commissioned a national survey of 1,129 girls between the ages of 7-13 who currently participate in sports and their parents (N=1,129). The survey results provide insight on how parents and young girl athletes experience and evaluate coaching practices and the coach-athlete relationship. Lastly, to determine the degree to which current sport organizations that serve girls are able to meet the needs and optimize on the strengths of participating girls, a brief assessment was administered to a sample of 64 programs within the WSF's extensive network of community partners. These programs have been identified by the WSF as exemplary for their service in providing quality sports opportunities to underserved girls. This assessment offers important insights on how to build and improve upon coaching practices in girls' sports programs.

## Key Findings

- 1. GIRLS LOVE SPORT.** Overall, the vast majority of girls (93%) loved or liked their sport a lot, and this was key to their desire to continue their sport participation. Liking/Loving the sport was identified as the most prominent factor for predicting girls' intentions to continue playing their sport in the future. Indeed, nearly two-thirds of girls (64%) reported planning to play in high school and beyond. The top predictors found to influence girls' liking/loving their sport are centered around social and mastery aspects of participation and include being with their friends, really liking the coach, not being afraid to try new skills, not being one of the least-skilled players on the team, having goals related to their participation in sports, and perceiving sports as very important in their lives.
- 2. THE POWER OF A COACH.** Coaches play a central role in getting and keeping girls involved in sports. Girls' liking of the coach was directly associated with future intent to keep playing sport, importance of playing, and love for the sport. Experts, as well as girls and parents, identified several features of coaching practices and strategies critical for supporting girls' participation that align with two major dimensions of coaching: 1) the importance of a mastery-based coaching approach, and 2) the need to build supportive relationships within the context of sport.
- 3. GIRLS WANT TO HAVE FUN AND BE CHALLENGED.** The majority of girls (85% or more) reported that their coaches created a positive environment that encourages safety, fun, skill building, and healthy competition. The girls cited supportive coaching practices that reward effort or trying a new skill over winning, encourage learning from mistakes while staying positive, and promote integrity and honesty. However, when asked directly about whether the coach places more emphasis on fun/skill



development or winning, only about half of parents and girls (49%) said their coach was more focused on team members having fun, and 83% of parents agreed that coaches should put more priority on having fun.

- 4. BUILD SUPPORTIVE RELATIONSHIPS.** Building supportive relationships within sport is a critical ingredient for engaging and retaining girls in sport. Key relationships include those between the coach and player; those among the players through friendship and team cohesion; and those between other influential individuals that are involved in the athletes' daily lives, including parents, friends, and others in their schools and communities.
- 5. GIRLS ARE STRONG AND ATHLETIC.** Do not underestimate girls' ability. Girls are powerful, strong and very capable, and they need to be treated this way. Coaches who don't meet girls' needs and interests for competitiveness, or who "are too soft on girls, don't push them enough or treat them as fragile," send detrimental messages to girls that they are different and/or not as capable as boys or that they are not taking girls' sport as seriously. This can result in girls' lower perceived competence, sense of belonging, and investment in their participation.
- 6. COMPETITION IS A WINNING FACTOR.** An emphasis on winning was also perceived to be a highly positive coaching behavior when combined with an emphasis on fun and skill development, a combination

that was predictive of girls' intentions for long-term sports participation. Healthy forms of competition are ideal for fostering girls' engagement. Competitiveness, including liking to win, competing against other teams/individuals, and even friendly competition among teammates, was one of the primary reasons girls provided for why sports are "fun."

- 7. GOALS MOTIVATE GIRLS.** Goal setting is a particularly important part of coaching so that having a coach who sets goals is not only predictive of girls liking the coach, but also of girls loving the sport and intending to play in the future. Seventy percent of girls have goals related to playing their sport, with the majority of these goals focused on their own improvement in the sport, whether that is becoming better generally, working on a specific skill, or making the high school team. Although less common, some girls also discussed even higher achievement goals of acquiring college sport scholarships or becoming professional athletes.
- 8. FEMALE COACHES ARE IMPORTANT ROLE MODELS.** Girls more readily identify with and see a female coach as a mentor and as a role model, which, in turn, can help counter stereotypes and boost girls' confidence, self-efficacy, and sense of belonging. Female coaches were overrepresented (85% and above) on sports viewed as more feminine (e.g., gymnastics, dance, cheer) and on all-girl teams (66%), but highly underrepresented (35% or lower) on sports viewed as

more masculine (e.g., baseball/softball, basketball, soccer, martial arts) in which girls are likely to face greater gender barriers for continued participation. Programs indicated female coaches were key to girls' participation and retention, yet noted challenges in recruiting female coaches. Despite female coaches receiving more positive ratings (82%) than males, nearly three quarters (73%) of girls said they think very highly of their male coaches. It is equally important for female coaches as for male coaches to use a gender-informed approach in their coaching practice to help promote engagement and offset the barriers girls experience in the sport context.

**9. PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IS KEY.** The more parents participate, the more likely it is that their daughter loves their sport, intends to play throughout high school and beyond, and thinks playing sport is very/extremely important. While over 90% of programs responded they build relationships with parents and get them actively involved, and 75% of programs indicated parental education was a part of their programs (e.g., meeting with parents, providing materials), the most frequent challenge programs reported when coaching girls was engaging and communicating with parents.

**10. GIRLS STILL FACE GENDER-RELATED CHALLENGES.** In contradiction to the numerous cultural messages that tell girls that sports are “for boys,” our national sample of girl athletes and their parents both highly endorsed (97%) that sports are as

important for girls as they are for boys, and 75% of girls and 70% of their parents reported that it is extremely or very important that they play sports. However, these girls did report experiencing some of the additional gendered challenges of being a female athlete. For example, nearly one-third (32%) of the girls reported that sometimes boys made fun of them or made them feel uncomfortable while they practiced. Nearly one-third of girls (31%) expressed that appearance-related reasons were part of their motivation for their participation. Over one-third of girls (36%) said they intend to drop out of sport prior to high school.

Findings from this report will inform coaching education and practices across sport to help create a sport climate and coaching dynamic that encourages girls of a critical age (ages 7–13), to fully participate, develop, and persist in sport so that they can reach their personal and sport potential. Consequently, improvements in sport climate and coaching practices will contribute to reducing the disproportionate drop-out rate among girls in sports beginning at early puberty, and close the gender gap in sport participation.

The report indicates a number of positive ways parents, coaches, and programs are meeting the needs of girl athletes, and programs tell us more can be done to help address the challenges of recruiting and retaining girls in sport. While most exemplary programs surveyed have specific policies or coaching practices targeted toward enhancing girls' sport participation, they indicated a

need for more resources and coaching tools to build on their existing policies and practices. These include the development of education materials to address strategies for recruitment and retention of girls as well as coaching strategies for girls; the implementation of formal training programs for coaches, particularly volunteer coaches who may lack sport-specific coach training; the development of technology/ apps for coaches; the establishment of accessible and widely available coaching clinics; and increased resources to encourage women to coach. Given the vital role coaches play in the lives of girl athletes, ensuring coaches' success will have a meaningful impact on maximizing girls' play and potential.

# WOMEN'S SPORTS FOUNDATION

## Women's Sports Foundation founded by Billie Jean King

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