



# Girls' Guide on Leadership



The Sports 4 Life initiative founded with espnW, promotes four foundational benefits of girls' participation: leadership, confidence, self-esteem and perseverance. *The Girls' Guide on Leadership* is the first guide in a four-part series, which will explore these pillars.

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## Facilitators:

# How the Sports 4 Life: Girls' Guide on Leadership works

The Sports 4 Life: Girls' Guide on Leadership will explore the five dimensions of leadership in detail with the following sections.



**Discussion Starters** offer questions to help girls understand each dimension of leadership.



**Written Reflection** is a more personal exercise to help girls connect their personal experiences with the topic.



**Practice Makes Perfect on the Field** is an opportunity for girls to apply what they've discussed about each topic to their relationships and interactions with their teammates and to monitor their progress around it. This activity can be done in a small or large group.



**Practice Makes Perfect off the Field** is an opportunity for girls to apply what they have learned from the discussions to their own lives. Encourage girls to make simple and actionable commitments that will help you track their growth.



**She Got Game!** highlights female athletes or prominent figures in the media with a personal relationship to the world of sports.

## Best practices for community building and community learning

As you plan for each session, consider incorporating some of the following structures. They ensure that everyone has a voice and an opportunity to positively impact their teammates' learning and growth.

**Hook:** Facilitator kicks off a discussion about the central theme by sharing a personal anecdote, a current events story relevant to girls, or posing a question that would spark dialogue.

**Time on Task:** Give the girls enough time to explore the written reflections as well as engage in discussion.

**Reflection/Close-out:** Offer the girls the opportunity to share their "aha" moments and lingering questions to the whole group or their smaller group.

**Points of progress:** Find easy ways for you to measure the girls' progress throughout the course of the guide. Simple anecdotes are a great place to start.

# Facilitators' tips for creating a risk-free, safe space

As facilitators, you'll also be responsible for cultivating team spirit, normalizing transparency, and monitoring for bullying and bias. Here are a few guidelines to help set these norms.



**Create a safe space.** This means having a calm demeanor, facilitating an open dialogue, and having a deep focus on listening with the goal of understanding. When girls feel safe and comfortable, they are more willing to share their thoughts, feelings, and ideas.

**Respect diversity.** Girls are not all the same, and we have to make space for each girl's journey, perspective, strengths and needs. When leading discussions, highlight diversity across ability level, linguistic backgrounds, socioeconomic status, gender identity (e.g., cisgender, transgender, non-binary) and ability (mental, emotional, physical) so all girls are affirmed.

**Speak truth to bias.** As the adult facilitator leading these discussions, remember that your words, actions, and behavior have a great impact on the girls you support. Since we all carry bias, it's important to actively and openly monitor yours. It removes the stigma and empowers the girls to do the same.

**Be responsive.** Some of the themes you discuss may trigger emotions, memories, or more for participants. It's not necessary to be an expert on all of life's challenges to start these important conversations, but it is a good idea to know how to offer support should a girl need professional or community-based assistance.

**Be prepared.** Be sure to review and reflect on the discussion questions you're planning to ask in advance. To help launch discussion, consider sharing a personal anecdote, highlighting a culturally relevant story in the news, or inviting a guest whose experience and/or expertise aligns with the session's theme.

**Know the terrain.** Adolescence is a challenging time when concerns about what others think are particularly heightened. This may cause girls to feel nervous about sharing their thoughts and experiences until they feel more comfortable in the group. Know who and what resources are available within your organization to help you communicate effectively with the girls you serve and seek out their help when needed.

# Dear Sports 4 Life superstar,

Welcome to the Sports 4 Life: Girls' Guide on Leadership! We're so excited that you're making sports a part of your life (or seriously thinking about it).

Participating in sports is much more than just strengthening your muscles and winning championships. As an athlete, you have to communicate effectively, think on your feet, and support your teammates. Essentially, sports bring out the leader in you.

That's right, the leader in *you*.

## Leadership looks like...

Leaders use their talents to inspire others to reach a common goal anywhere they go. You've been a leader your whole life without realizing it. If you've helped out at home or raised your hand in the classroom, then you've flexed your leadership muscle.

Sports can take your natural leadership skills to the next level. However, we know that there are some internal and external factors that make staying in the game for the long haul a challenge for you.

## The struggle is real. Let's discuss.

First, there's puberty. Your body is changing so fast right now, and it's completely out of your control.

And then there are the haters. Even though gymnast phenom Simone Biles and soccer superstar Marta Vieira da Silva are killing the game, they still deal with gender bias from strangers and the media, just like you may deal with bias from people in your circles.

And finally, playing sports can require sacrifice. We're talking about money and time. Everything from your uniform to equipment to transportation has a price tag. If you take public transportation, you're adding extra hours to your day.

## Real talk and baby steps

Are solving these problems simple? No way. So, let's start with baby steps. If you keep showing up, your community will help you cross the finish line.

The world needs more girls like you. Girls who are not afraid to speak their truth (even if their voice shakes) so they leave their mark on the world, on and off the field.

Yours in Sports,  
Women's Sports Foundation and espnW



## Hey, girls! How to level up using this guide

**Bring your A-game.** Be present and be open to engaging with all of the activities and exercises in the guide. Each exercise will give you insight into how to cultivate leadership skills and the role sports can play in making it a core part of your character.

**Be willing to assist.** Throughout the guide, you'll be asked to partner up with a teammate to share your thoughts and opinions. This may come more easily to you than it does for your teammate. Be willing to assist by being patient and supportive.

**Set goals.** As you work through the guide, you'll be asked to do some solo work in between sessions. Make sure you write down your goals for the week, so you'll be able to crush them by the time you return to your team gathering or practice.

**Be gentle to yourself.** Adolescence can be a crazy time for you in good ways and in some challenging ways. You're discovering so many new things about yourself, which can be scary and exciting all at the same time. You don't have to be perfect; you just have to be open to growth.

# Leaders communicate a vision

Every leader has a vision. When you have a vision, you possess a clear understanding of what you want to do and why you want to do it. The vision is so powerful that you can rally others to share it.

When you're on a team, you're working toward a shared vision of how your team will show up for each other during practice and when the pressure is on.



## Discussion starters

- Why does each of us need a vision in our personal lives? What happens if we don't have one?
- What is important to consider when creating a team vision?



## Written reflection

You can choose to craft a written reflection to any of the previous discussion starters. Also, you can engage in the following visualization exercise:

"Close your eyes and visualize what you want your life to look like one year from now. Don't skimp on the details. What do you want to be reading? Which teachers do you want to mentor you? Which friends do you see? What hobbies, projects, or problems would you like to solve? How will you feel?"

Once you have a preliminary vision, think about the actionable steps you have to take now to make that vision a reality.



# Practice makes perfect

Once you leave your group session, focus on communicating your vision.

## Communicating a vision on the field



Jot down what you believe the vision is for your team. After you do that, ask three different people on your team, including your coach, for their perspective on the team's collective vision.

## Communicating a vision off the field



Interview one or two people that you know who have strong visions. Ask them why they are passionate about their vision, who benefits from the vision, and who helps them execute the vision.



## She got game!

If you're wondering what being a leader with vision looks like, then here's a quick intro to the United States Women's National Soccer Team (USWNT). They are back-to-back FIFA Women's World Cup champions, winning in both 2015 and 2019, but were paid a fraction of the prize money their male counterparts would have received had they won.

Members of the U.S. Women's National Soccer Team, which includes powerhouses like Crystal Dunn, Mallory Pugh, and Megan Rapinoe filed a gender discrimination lawsuit against U.S. Soccer over pay disparity with the men's national team and working conditions.



# Leaders build trust

Trust is the key to successful relationships. What we mean by that is you're going to need people to believe you, feel comfortable around you, and feel connected to you in order for you to succeed in any endeavor in life.

When you play on a team where trust is part of the culture, you feel like your teammates have your back. That feeling of connection and alignment can make a team unstoppable and makes winning become second nature.



## Discussion starters

- Trust takes time to build. Brainstorm activities to create and deepen trust on your team.
- Think about someone you trust the most. Why do you trust them? What have they done or said to develop trust and how does that make them a leader?



## Written reflection

You can choose to craft a written reflection to any of the previous discussion starters. You can also reflect on the following:

- Trusting others can be hard to do if you don't trust yourself. Do you trust yourself? What characteristics make you a trustworthy friend and teammate?
- What examples have your parents taught and/or shown you about trusting others? How does trusting others bring out the leader in you?



# Practice makes perfect

Once you leave your group session, try to build trust with those around you. Here's some direction.

## Developing trust on the field



Sit next to one of the new team members and ask them about their day, why they joined the team, what they're winning at, or what they're struggling with on the team. Also, be willing to share information about yourself so there's a sense of reciprocity.

## Developing trust off the field



So much of building relationships and being a leader is about demonstrating you're serious about what you say. So, whether it's agreeing to help *abuela* or *tia* run errands or telling your mom you'll be back in an hour, stick to your word. That also includes showing up on time and meeting deadlines.



## She got game!

Malika Andrews is an NBA reporter and writer for *ESPN*. Andrews graduated from the University of Portland, where she served as the editor-in-chief of the student newspaper, *The Beacon*. Before working there, she had no journalism experience. Both she and her advisor had to trust Andrews' innate talent for writing. The leading role at *The Beacon* led Andrews to pursue her dream career as a sports reporter for *The New York Times* and now, *ESPN*. She credits her early experience at the student newspaper for her successful career in journalism. It strengthened her leadership skills, built her self-trust and taught her to trust in the expertise of those around her.



# Leaders step out of their comfort zone

A comfort zone is a psychological state in which things feel familiar to you and you are at ease and believe you're in control of your environment. As an athlete, it's cool to visit your comfort zone, but it's not a place where you want to stay...at least, not for too long. If you want to lead, set new personal records, and test your limits, then you'll need to live outside of your comfort zone.



## Discussion starters

- What internal voices (or self-talk) do you hear (over and over) as you attempt to take a risk and step outside your comfort zone? Are these voices supportive or discouraging?
- What have you accomplished that previously would have been in the "too hard," "not possible for me," or "you're dreaming, right?" categories? What does this show you and tell you about comfort zones?



## Written reflection

You can choose to craft a written reflection to any of the previous discussion starters. You can also reflect on the following:

- Jot down three activities or projects that would push you outside of your comfort zone. Write a letter to yourself dated six months from now where you describe how you overcame this challenge. Speak about how life is different for you and what you had to do to accomplish it. Speak about how you've developed as a leader.
- What do you worry about when you avoid stepping out of your comfort zone? People will laugh at you? Afraid you'll fail? Afraid you'll give up? Now write about a memory where you were able to stand out as a leader and overcome a challenge. Include how it made you feel.



# Practice makes perfect

Once you leave your group session, try to step outside of your comfort zone. Here's some direction.

## Stepping out of your comfort zone on the field



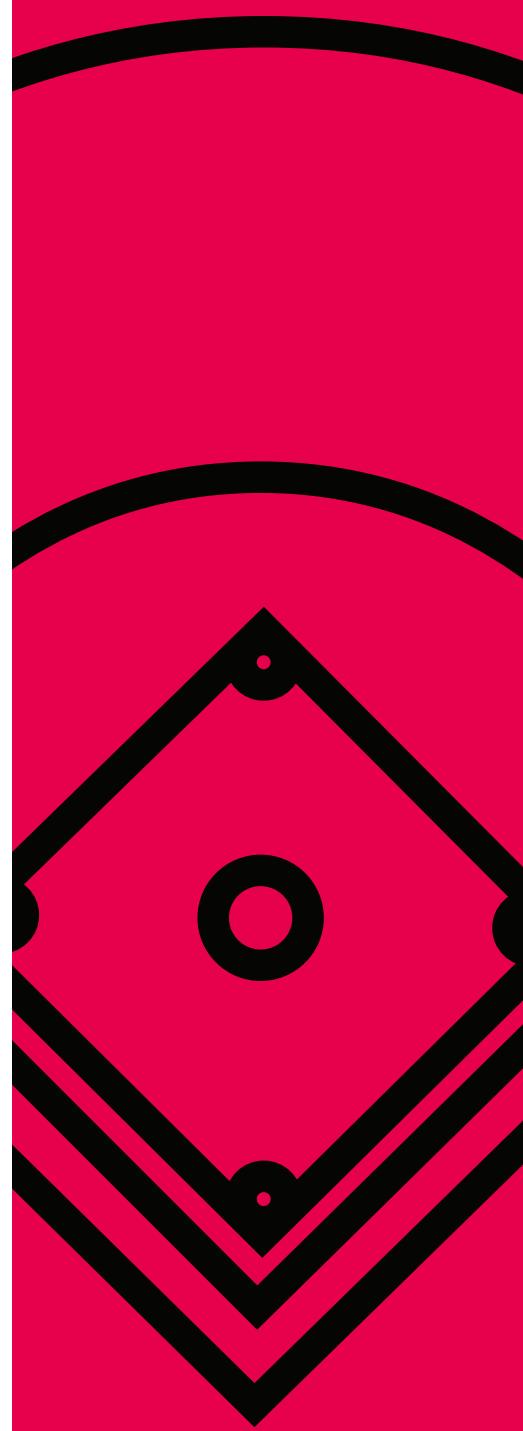
Set goals that go above and beyond what you've been asked and what you're comfortable with. For example, if Coach asks you to run one mile, push yourself to do a mile and a half, especially if you don't like running.

## Stepping out of your comfort zone off the field



Prove to yourself that you're brave enough to try something new...

- Enroll in a class that no one would expect you to take.
- Introduce yourself to someone you don't know.
- Raise your hand in class even if you're unsure about the answer.



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## She got game!

Uzo Aduba was one of the top sprinters at Boston University. Years later, she's a sought-after actress and tastemaker, starring in one of the top Netflix series, *Orange is the New Black*. Aduba credits her involvement with running for inspiring her to try new things and to pursue her dream of becoming an actor. "I think playing sports...really prepared me for being out here to pursue this," she said.

Now, Uzo is stepping into a new leadership role as a member of the first majority women-owned team in the National Women's Soccer League. As an actress and owner, Uzo steps outside of her comfort zone, and it pays off big. She's a true leader!



# Leaders hold themselves accountable

Accountability is an important part of being a leader. Accountability occurs when you reliably deliver on your commitments, showing others you can be trusted to do what you say you'll do.

Accountability is also at the heart of teamwork. The saying “all for one and one for all” emphasizes the idea that all the members of a group support each of the individual members, and the individual members pledge to support the group.



## Discussion starters

- What is an experience or situation when someone was relying on you, and how did your accountability improve your relationship with that person?
- What characteristics make someone accountable?



## Written reflection

You can choose to craft a written reflection to any of the previous discussion starters. You can also reflect on the following:

- Do you like to be held accountable for your actions? If so, why? Why not?
- Is there anyone that you could partner with to help you stay more accountable to your team and your personal goals?
- Where would you be in terms of reaching your goals if you incorporated more accountability into your personal and team goals?



# Practice makes perfect

Once you leave your group session, practice staying accountable on and off the field.

## Staying accountable on the field can look like:



- Staying on track and not getting distracted by competing priorities or desires when you're at practice.
- Acknowledging when you haven't been able to fulfill your role and share a strategy or solution on how you'll execute the next time.

## Staying accountable off the field can look like:



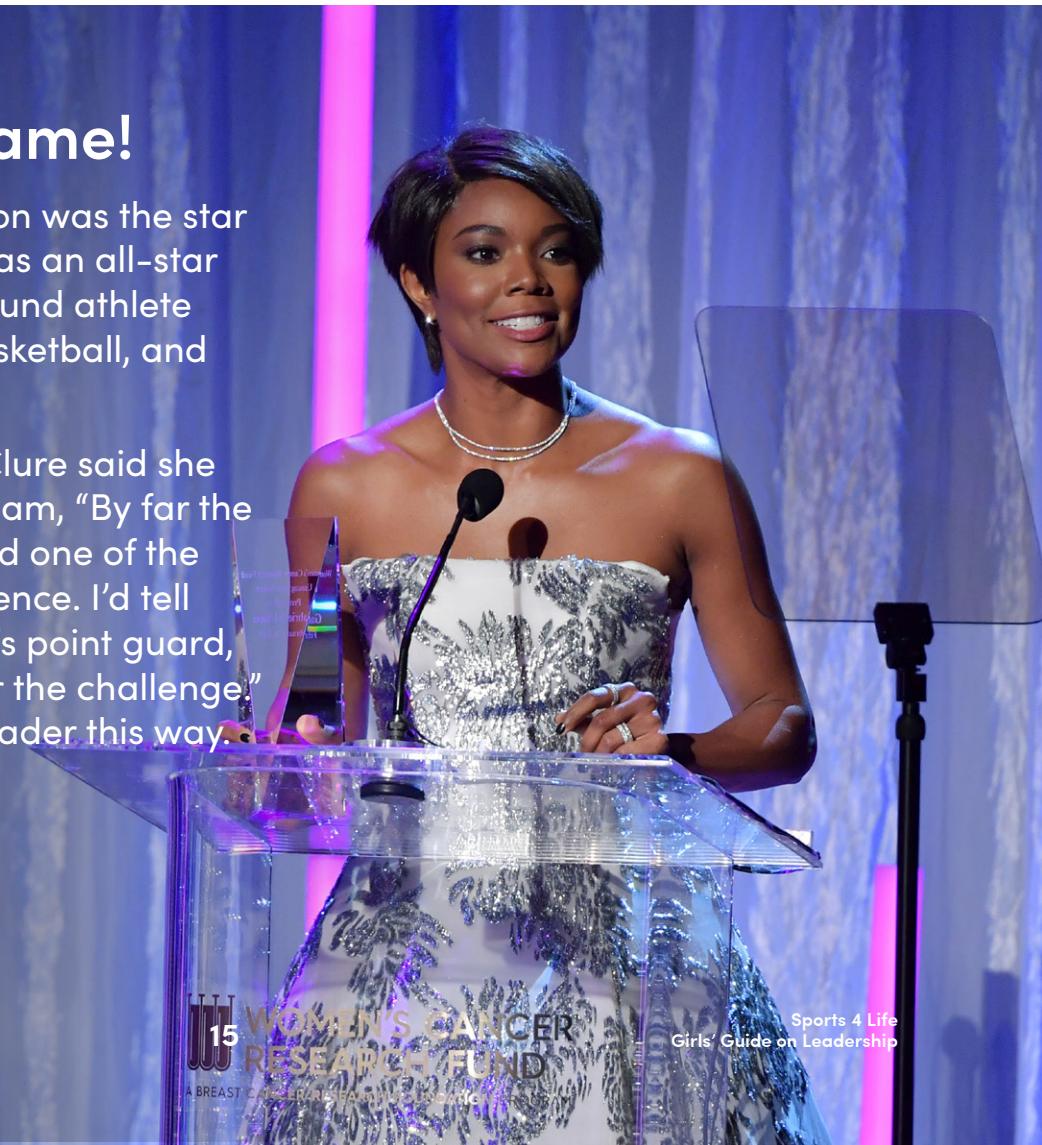
- Use your phone to schedule reminders about your commitments so you can arrive on time and prepared.
- Encourage members of your family to set goals together and prepare an agenda to set clear expectations and milestones.



## She got game!

Long before Gabrielle Union was the star of *Being Mary Jane*, she was an all-star point guard and a year-round athlete participating in soccer, basketball, and track in high school.

Her former coach Jim McClure said she always delivered for the team, "By far the quickest player we had and one of the best athletes in the conference. I'd tell her to stop the other team's point guard, and she was always up for the challenge." Union really shined as a leader this way...



# Leaders develop self-awareness

Self-awareness is the conscious knowledge of one's character, feelings, motives, and desires. It also encompasses the ability to understand your strengths and shortcomings.

In the context of sports, greater self-awareness can help you honestly assess when you may need to reach out and ask for support when you're struggling with a core concept, drill, or move. It also allows you to offer support and assistance to your teammates when you feel you have mastered something.



## Discussion starters

- What are some ways you can develop self-awareness?
- Do you think society sends different messages to girls and boys about the importance of self-awareness? If so, how? Also, what would be the motivation to do so? Who benefits? Who loses? How does it impact girls' and boys' leadership abilities?



## Written reflection

You can choose to craft a written reflection to any of the previous discussion starters. You can also reflect on the following:

- What are my strengths in school?  
On my team?
- What areas of myself do I want to improve?  
Who can help me?
- What do I need physically, emotionally, and mentally when I'm struggling on the field or in school?



# Practice makes perfect

Once you leave your group session, try to engage in more self-awareness wherever you go. Here's some direction.

## Developing self-awareness on the field

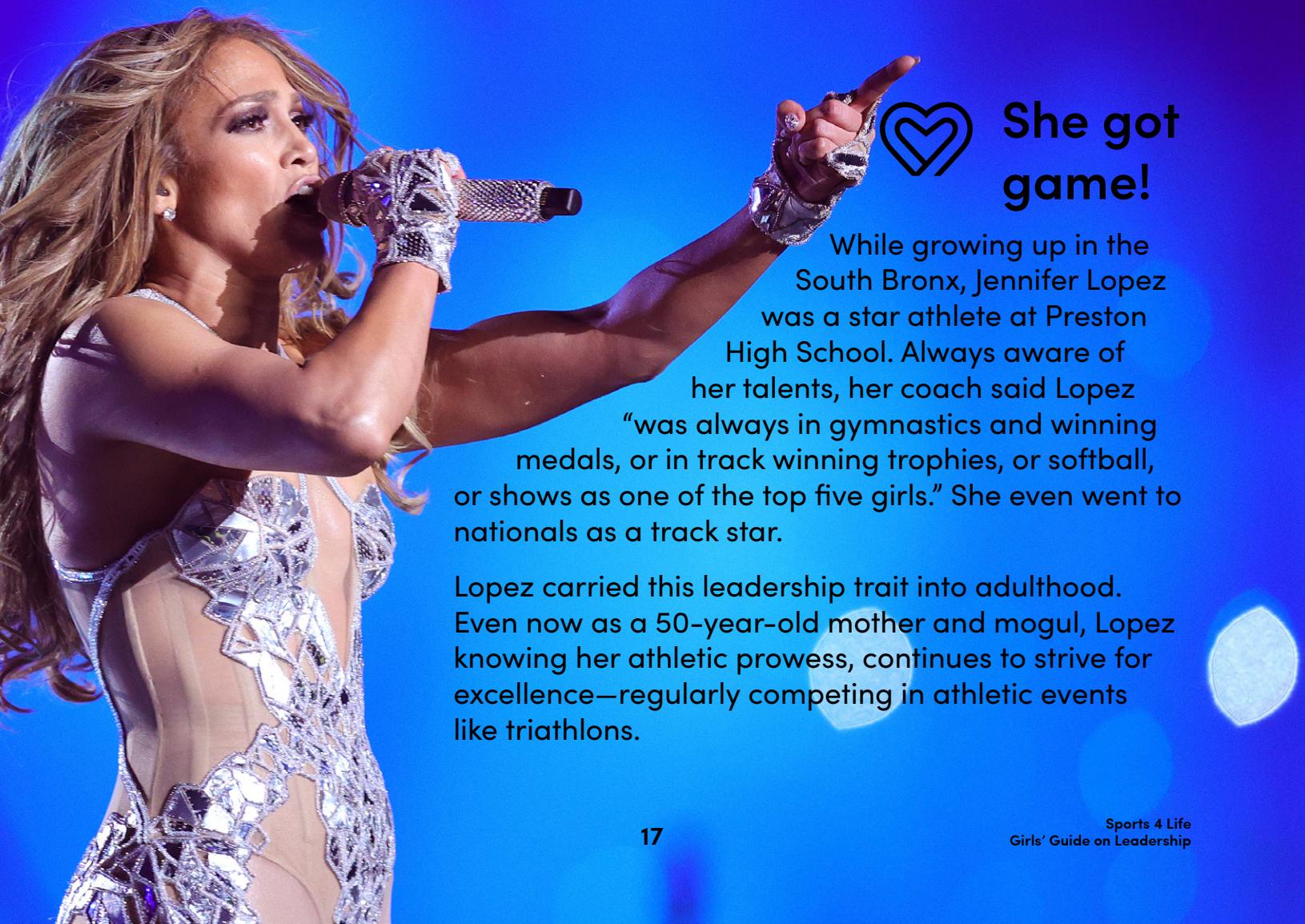


During your next practice, scan your thoughts and feelings when you're learning something new or challenging. What did you learn about how you feel about being out of your comfort zone?

## Developing self-awareness off the field



Pay attention to your thoughts, actions, and feelings throughout the day. Observe how you respond in different situations with peers, family, friends, and even when you're by yourself. Journal about it.



A photograph of Jennifer Lopez performing on stage. She is singing into a microphone, wearing a shiny, sequined outfit. Her right arm is raised, pointing upwards. The background is a bright blue stage light.

**She got game!**

While growing up in the South Bronx, Jennifer Lopez was a star athlete at Preston High School. Always aware of her talents, her coach said Lopez "was always in gymnastics and winning medals, or in track winning trophies, or softball, or shows as one of the top five girls." She even went to nationals as a track star.

Lopez carried this leadership trait into adulthood. Even now as a 50-year-old mother and mogul, Lopez knowing her athletic prowess, continues to strive for excellence—regularly competing in athletic events like triathlons.

# Acknowledgments

Sports 4 Life, cofounded by the Women's Sports Foundation and espnW in 2014, was created based on the knowledge that while sports participation offers tremendous life-long benefits – from improved physical health and self-esteem to better grades in school and enhanced leadership skills – young girls of color are disproportionately excluded. The program seeks to increase the participation and retention of African American and Hispanic girls, ages 11-18, in developmental youth sports programs. The Sports 4 Life initiative supports community programs and helps foster four foundational benefits: leadership, confidence, self-esteem and perseverance. In 2020, the Foundation introduced this new Sports 4 Life discussion guide series, for girls, to help reinforce the positive benefits of their sports participation. The *Sports for Life: Girls' Guide on Leadership* is the first guide in a four-part series, which will explore these pillars.

The Women's Sports Foundation exists to enable girls and women to reach their potential in sports and life. We are an ally, an advocate and a catalyst. Founded by Billie Jean King in 1974, we strengthen and expand participation and leadership opportunities through research, advocacy, community programming and a wide variety of collaborative partnerships. The Women's Sports Foundation has positively shaped the lives of millions of youth, high school and collegiate student-athletes, elite athletes, and coaches. We're building a future where every girl and woman can #KeepPlaying and unlock the lifelong benefits of sport participation. All girls. All women. All sports. To learn more about the Women's Sports Foundation, please visit [www.WomensSportsFoundation.org](http://www.WomensSportsFoundation.org).

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