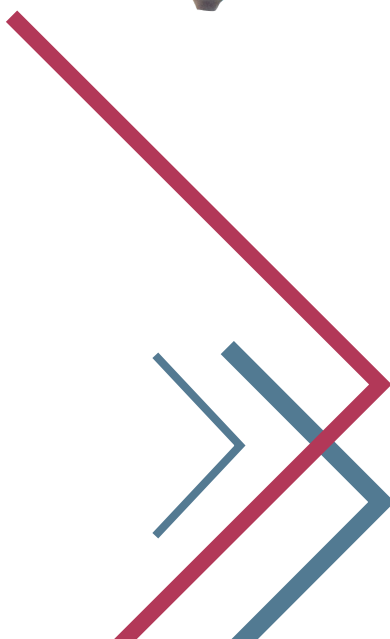




LEADING THE RACE

The challenges, successes and
experiences of female athletes

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In the midst of summer break, Brittany Gomez, one of ISU's softball team members, played for the USA women's baseball team. An accomplishment in itself, Brittany had worked hard to prove she was the best of the best among the women, and in turn, as good as the players of the male team—the expectations to get on the team don't change.

"The rules are all the same, everything was exactly the same, the women pitched exactly how the men pitched, but still I got questioned about how far the fence is," Brittany explains. The best female baseball players were looked at as less powerful, as if somehow they "can't hit the fence at four hundred feet as opposed to men in baseball who do it all the time." Reality check: they can.

Historically, sports has been a male-dominated activity, however the sports gender gap is progressively decreasing. Since the introduction of Title IX Laws in 1972, the participation of women in college-funded sports has been increasing.

As a rundown, the Title IX law states that: "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any educational program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance."

Women can play any sports they want, represent their countries at the Olympics and are becoming role models for girls who are still discriminated against by their gender or society.

Globally, the progression of women in sports is evident in the 2012 Olympic Games participations. The Women's Sports Foundation reported that women were represented in 131 events compared to the 163 male events. Now while there is still a difference, this is the closest disparity between men's and women's events so far.

But women still have a long haul ahead of them. They can compete in so many sports, but as Brittany experienced, they're not always viewed as equals. The 2012 Olympics was the first time women's boxing was included, but women were only able to compete in three weight classes compared to the ten male classes.

Here at ISU, female athletes are rising on par with their male counterparts, if not exceeding them. Women are excelling in the sports programs at Iowa State—this year there are 167 female student athletes

who are competing in nine different sports. Female athletes represent Iowa State in basketball, golf, gymnastics, soccer, softball, swimming and diving, volleyball, track and tennis.

Last year, our women's teams kicked ass on the field, track, court and more. Iowa State's cross country team won the Big 12 Championship for its fourth consecutive title and finished second in the NCAA Championship; volleyball made the second round of the NCAA Tournament and the basketball team made the first round. The gymnastics team placed third at the NCAA Regional Championships. The swimming and tennis had their best-ever Big 12 finishes since the league was formed in 1995-96—and that is only the tip of the athletic achievements by female athletes.

The high achievements of our female athletes are not limited to their sporting prowess. Last year, we saw basketball, golf and gymnastics all receive 100 percent "Graduation Success Rates." Four sports also made it into the top 10 percent nationally for the NCAA academic progress rate: cross country, indoor track & field, outdoor track & field and golf.

Biologically, men and women do have different physical builds. This plays a large role in which sports women can excel in and what can be co-ed or what sports are single gendered. Still, ISU gymnast Haylee Young says there's not much difference.

"Being a female athlete is just the same physically and mentally as being a male athlete," she says. Both sides are great and everyone works extremely hard regardless of gender."

Colliding Ideals

Marty Martinez, sports psychologist at Iowa State, says that through society, women are taught to be inherently feminine and society's feminine ideals can quite often contrast with the ideals of the athletic industry.

As Martinez says, stress is the main issue that all athletes are faced with. This stress is important as it is a key part of the energy that helps an athlete perform at a high level. The way athletes deal with stress that comes from physical activity and the demands of the sport, coaches and competition determines if the stress will lead to anxiety. Martinez says that anxiety is very common among all athletes as a result.



Sophomore gymnast Haylee Young training in the gym after a day of class

Relationships

Where female athletes more commonly differ from male athletes is in their emotional approach to sports. Sports require a fierce and competitive nature—athletes need to be able to push through extreme conditions physically and mentally.

Martinez says that we live in a society where girls are raised to be caring and thoughtful—redeeming and positive qualities, but qualities that result in female athletes not just questioning their performance, but also the depths of their relationships with teammates, coaches and themselves.

“Female athletes [tend to] have a very genuine sensitivity to cooperation and collaboration and sometimes this can be a source of stress for them,” he says.

This is not to say men do not react the same way of course, but as Martinez has seen in his work, this is how women are expected to be and as a result, how most women

are. This being said, caring isn’t a downfall. According to Martinez, the caring nature of women works well in team environments as a shared concern for wanting to please the coach and teammates can help a team work together. While this can create extra pressure, the desire to please each other and to collaborate well as a team translates into their performance.

Body Image

It’s hardly new information that body image and body concerns are prevalent in sports among men and women. When many people picture the ideal woman, they see hips that are proportionate to shoulders and a waist that comes in neatly—not slender arms with slight shoulder definition and legs that curve on the outside and part on the inside. There are two worlds, two expectations colliding for female athletes—one imposed by society to be desirable, and one by that asks for a specific body to fit each individual sport.

For Margaret Connelly, one of ISU’s cross country runners, a slender and light frame is ideal for long distance running. This is a body structure that requires strict maintenance; it needs high levels of cardio and a diet that strictly matches these physical needs. Margaret explains that “eating disorders are pretty prevalent in our sport.” Margaret isn’t the only one to notice this either. In a study of division 1 athletes by the National Eating Disorder Association, “over one-third of female athletes reported attitudes and symptoms placing them at risk for anorexia nervosa” and “most athletes with eating disorders are female”.

As a sports psychologist, Martinez explains that as an athlete, body conditioning, body health, body strength and body weight are always key focal points. These are issues across genders but for female athletes it is this additional focus on the body which is already has so much emphasis from society. It’s always healthy to

help women to steer away from all of this but athletes have to focus on it. Female athletes can be more vulnerable to a lot of stress being placed on the body—another issue that the athletes and those working with them have to consider.

Stereotypes

Beyond the realms of the body there are plenty of stereotypes associated with all sports. For Gomez, there is the fact that softball is viewed as a more “manly sport” for women, as in it is a sports that is often played by lesbians. She says trying to disprove the stereotype may even influence her performance.

“Maybe in a way I want to look more girly, I guess, when I’m playing... I really don’t care what other people think,” she says. “If someone on my team was like, ‘I like girls,’ I really don’t care, but I don’t want to look like I like girls just because I play softball.”

The 24/7 Mentality

Gomez, Connelly and Young, all stress that gender doesn’t reflect on how hard anyone works. They explain that female athletes are training equally as hard as male athletes irrespective of the type of sports or their rankings—doing it like a girl is just as hard as doing it like a boy.

“We have 5:30 a.m. workouts three times a week and then we have class and then we have practice and then tutors, and we’re still expected to do the same amount of work as the regular students and keep our grades up” she says. “I feel like it’s really hard to be who we are, but at the same time I’d never change it.”

Training isn’t just a time commitment—it’s a mentality too.

“Running is a team sport obviously, but it’s also very individual. Because when you’re out there on the racecourse you can’t rely on your teammate to run the race for you and so you need to make sure you’re fit, you’re healthy, you’re ready to go when it counts,” Connelly says. “Ultimately if you don’t do that, then you’re not holding up your end of the bargain and supporting your teammates.”

These women who run out onto fields and courts, our girls who race against opponents and lead the way to victory, may not realize it, but they are closing the gender gap in a field that historically has been predominantly male. They’re showing everyone that doing it like a girl is just as good, if not better, than doing it like a boy—knocking down the barriers left, right and center. ☺

