

COMPETITIVE EXPERIENCES LEAD TO BUSINESS SUCCESS FOR WOMEN

BY HEATHER ETTINGER

Several years ago Donna Lopiano, former CEO of the Women's Sports Foundation, spoke about the difference between girls and boys picking teams in sports. Typically, the girls would pick their best friend first, then her best friend and so forth. Boys, on the other hand, chose the most skilled player for their team, then the next most skilled player and so on. Boys seem programmed to choose teammates based on skill competencies, while girls emphasized human relationships. In other words, boys inherently have the competitive wiring to create the winning team.

What, then, contributes to the emergence of the competitive and successful woman leader? What changed in her upbringing or environment to bring out that desire to win rather than to appease? Sylvia Rimm questioned more than 1,400 successful women in the United States in her report published in 1999 ("See Jane Win: The Rimm Report on How 1000 Girls Became Successful Women," Crown Publishing). She found the most formative experience for girls who became leaders in their career fields was success in competition. Many of these women went on to say that sports taught them how to cope with the competition they were faced with in their professions. The Women's Sports Foundation states "it is no accident that 80 percent of the female executives at Fortune 500 companies identified themselves as former "tomboys" – having played sports."

In 2002, Mass Mutual Financial Group released a study,

"From the Locker Room to the Boardroom: A Survey on Sports in the Lives of Women Business Executives." Of the 401 senior women business executives surveyed nationwide, an astonishing 327, or 82 percent, played organized sports after grammar school. Here is what the survey found:

- 86 percent said sports helped them to be more disciplined
- 81 percent said sports helped them function better as part of a team
- 69 percent said sports helped them develop leadership skills that contributed to their personal lives
- 68 percent said sports helped them deal with failure
- 59 percent said sports gave them a competitive edge over others.

While these are critical lessons that women learned from their participation in competitive sports, what else did they learn that was unique to being a female athlete that has carried over to the business world today?

Breaking down the ultimate goal into incremental steps

Susan Playoff Shaw, president of Playoff Communications, who was a collegiate swimmer and today manages media and communications for athletes and national and international sporting events such as the Olympics, etc., notes that "while I learned about teamwork, perseverance, goal setting, etc, I think one of the overlooked lessons from sports to business is knowing how to set incremental goals that eventually lead to great success or your ultimate goal. The most common training philosophy is helping athletes know all the fundamentals before letting them attempt the big skills. You have to have a solid foundation AND be really sure of yourself before trotting out the big plan, your big idea and your perfect vision."

Facilitating social acceptance

Sports can be an icebreaker in male-dominated discussions that give women more equal footing as measured in men's hierarchy systems. Often, the small talk before a meeting is centered on sports. Women who have played and follow sports can participate and contribute to those discussions, becoming one of the "boys."

Understanding the structure and the unspoken roles

In their book published in 2007, "Playing With the Boys: Why Separate is Not Equal," Eileen McDonagh and Laura Pappano illustrate that organized athletics from youth sports



through professional sports define cultural attitudes, hierarchies, social relationships and power structures. Women who understand that there are the written and unwritten rules in sports can translate that to a competitive advantage in understanding the written AND unwritten business models of organizations.

Having the tough outer skin to compete in male-dominated fields


Christine Brennan, sports columnist for USA Today, shared that during her high school years, there was only one bus for all the girls' teams to share. She also had one coach who coached her in all six sports that she played. And it was not unusual for her to have to help mow the grass on the sports field before the games! Today she is probably best known for being the first woman to hold interviews with male athletes in their locker rooms. Clearly, she learned not to be flustered no matter what the challenges were.

Building successful teams

"Star players don't become star players on the field. They are merely recognized there," comments Connie Clore, COO of Asurint: One Source Technology. As a multiple sport athlete and a former state-ranked tennis player herself, Clore knows how to build successful teams. "We want athletes, not just position players. We want to understand everyone's strengths so we can put them in the best position for success."

Managing a demanding and busy schedule

Many of the female athletes comment that they achieved their best academic performance when they were "in season." The fact was that they had such demanding schedules that they had to be highly organized and multi-task to get all their work done and balance their other activities. This ability carries over to their careers where often they are also raising children and performing community work while climbing the corporate ladder.

Like successful women athletes, successful women business executives are goal-oriented, high achievers who have learned to maintain composure amidst pressure and multiple demands. Laura Stein, senior vice president and general counsel of The Clorox Company, played high school volleyball and tennis, ran track and competed in downhill ski racing. In college, she went on to try rugby as a new challenge. In her career, she continues to drive her organization forward with goals and determination. Speaking five languages, traveling internationally, raising two wonderful children with her husband, and volunteering in her community are all part of her busy life. What does she credit her success to? Stein says "Being involved in sports taught me the importance of teamwork, strategy, leveraging each team member's strengths and back-stopping weaknesses, priority setting and having fun." 



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