

Girl Power

As British sportswomen fail to deliver on a national level, **Patricia Carswell** finds out how schools are selling sport to girls



It's the same story year after year. British sportswomen promise so much but then fail to deliver. Apart from a handful of Olympians, the track record for women in sport is pretty average, and the past 12 months has shown little improvement. Our tennis players crashed out of Wimbledon and the women's cricket team lost the Ashes.

Each time our sportswomen bring home the wooden spoon, questions are asked. Why are our athletes underperforming? What is going on with our daughters' sporting education? National research conducted by the Girls in Sport and Physical Activity Initiative between 2005 and 2007 showed that by the age of 14, 65% of girls do not reach the recommended levels of physical activity, 54% do not enjoy PE and half do not think PE is an important subject.

The problems tend to start around the onset of puberty. Girls who are not picked for teams, feel labelled as unsparty, which soon becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. "If you don't shine immediately, then you don't get encouraged," says Emily, 13. "I'm not good at netball so the teachers assume I'm not good at any sport."

Even if they are picked for the team, not all girls relish the idea of training on muddy lacrosse fields. Off the field, while locker-room humour is generally harmless among boys, girls can be spiteful. As girls pass into puberty, body shyness and appearance are also an issue.

However, schools are switched on to this and have found ways to inspire a more positive attitude to sport. Kath Rochester, Head of Sport at Durham High School for Girls, who sits on the Girls' School Association Sports Committee, doesn't feel this is such an issue in independent schools. "There is some drop-off in participation in sport outside school but not within the school, where sport and exercise are part of the culture and all the girls are in teams and clubs." She engages the less sporty ones in dance and fitness classes and even sports' leadership initiatives and has designed more comfortable, modern, trendy PE kit that they like to wear, which, she says, makes a huge difference!

The presence of boys can be a catch-22 situation, says Henry Lamb, a teacher at Fulham Prep School, London and who runs tennis and football courses around the country for seven to 14 year olds. While boys are

naturally stronger and more confident, they can also force the girls to raise their game to compete with boys.

Girls may not always want to play with boys, but that doesn't stop some girls wanting to play their games. Football and cricket are creeping on to the sports agenda. "Girls love it, and cricket, too. It's hugely important to provide a variety," says Lamb. Ceri Crawford agrees. "Variety is key and girls also want more adult-type sports like rowing. Haberdashers' offers tag rugby, cricket, aqua-aerobics and legs, bums and tums.

Lamb also emphasises the importance of enthusing girls and building up their confidence at prep school age. Alastair Thomas, headmaster of The Elms School, a co-ed prep school in Worcestershire agrees. Enthusiastic sports teachers are essential, as is offering a wide range of activities to bring in the less naturally sporty. "We have riding and tennis coaching, and a professional swimming coach visits the school twice a week," he says.

Other schools have gone for more unusual solutions. Frustrated by Britain's performance in international sport, head teacher Helen Davy of Haberdashers' Monmouth School for Girls, brought in Joe Finn as resident sports psychologist, to help motivate the girls and provide insight as to why they don't engage in physical activity. "The words 'sport'

and 'exercise' are a problem, because of the perception. There is a sport for everyone, just don't call it that," says Finn.

Consulting girls about what they enjoy makes a big difference to participation levels. Pauline Stott the Director of Sport at Kilgraston, a girls' school in Perthshire, asked the girls to design their own PE programme and they opted for gym and dance classes.

Lamb believes that emphasising the social side of sport is essential to getting girls involved, and providing sports they can continue later in life, like tennis.

"Even if you're not good at it, so long as you can get the ball over the net, you can play it at the weekend."

Bit by bit, then, the culture is changing, and the schools with the foresight to adapt to the times are reaping the rewards: this year alone 16 pupils at Haberdashers' Monmouth have represented their country. Godolphin & Latymer has several girls representing their country and many more playing at county level. If this trend continues, it looks as though the prophets of doom will soon have to find something else to worry about. 

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