
The Benefits of Gymnastics Revisited

For years I promoted my gym and sold my program on the basis of how well my competitive team did. I thought that the way to get more students was simply advertise how many state champions we produced and the high levels we attained. This system definitely worked; enrollment grew and registrations increased. Basically all of the gyms in the area were doing exactly the same thing. I was in competition with the gym in the next town that was selling itself in much the same manner and the big gym in the city that people were willing to travel to train.

After seven or eight years of battling with the other gyms in this way and jostling for gymnasts, I realized there must be a better way. I began to identify the benefits of our sport and all of the wonderful reasons to do gymnastics. As I started promoting the benefits of gymnastics in my program, I watched even more students sign up. As I stopped limiting my marketing campaign to the competitive achievements, I drew increasing numbers of recreation and preschool kids. The interesting thing is that as my program grew, I also noticed that I had larger numbers of athletes to draw into the competitive team and we actually improved our production of top athletes.

While the majority of female gymnasts enrolled in a gymnastics program will not go on to compete at an elite level, the basis of their gymnastics training will ensure a broad base for life-time sports participation. This life-time participation in casual or competitive sports tends to ultimately increase their fitness level and productivity as an adult.

According to the Center for Disease Control, this generation of Americans is the first to have a shorter life-expectancy than the previous generation. The statistics are staggering:

- ★ Obesity: In 1970, only one out of every 21 girls was obese or overweight; today that figure is one in six. (National Center for Health Statistics, 2002).
- ★ Heart Disease: Cardiovascular disease is the number-one cause of death among American women (44.6% of all deaths) (American Heart Association, 2003)
- ★ Cancer: Breast cancer is the most common cancer among women, accounting for nearly one of every three cancers diagnosed in American women (Jernal et al, 2004).
- ★ Osteoporosis: Of the 10 million Americans estimated to have osteoporosis, eight million are women. (National Osteoporosis Foundation, 2003).
- ★ Tobacco Use: In grades 9-12, 29.5% of female students report current tobacco use (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2002).
- ★ Drug Use: Thirty-eight percent of 12th grade girls and 18% if eighth-grade girls have used and illicit drug at least once during the past year (Johnston, O'Malley and Bachman, 2002).
- ★ Sexual Risk: About ¼ of sexually active adolescents are infected with a sexually transmitted disease each year (Kirby, 2001).

- ★ Teen Pregnancy: The United States has the highest teen pregnancy and birth rates in the industrialized world. About 80% of teen pregnancies are unintended (National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2002).
- ★ Depression: By age 15, girls are twice as likely as boys to have experienced a major depressive episode. This greater gap continues for the next 35 to 40 years, until menopause (Cyranowski et al, 2000).
- ★ Suicide: In 2001, about one in four U.S. high school girls seriously considered suicide, and one in 10 actually attempted to kill herself (National Center for Health Statistics, 2003).
- ★ Pathogenic Weight Loss Behavior: Over 90% of victims of eating disorders are female, and 86% report onset by age 20 (National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders, 2004).

The benefits that gymnastics programs across the country provide students cannot be overstated. Research compiled in the 1988 U.S. Institute of Medicine Committee for the Study of the Future of Public Health report strongly suggests that sport and physical activity provide conditions that help to assure girls' health and well-being.

◆ Some findings identified in this report include:

- ★ Breast Cancer Risk: One to three hours of exercise a week over a women's reproductive lifetime (late teens to about age 40) may bring a 20-30% reduction in the risk of breast cancer, and four or more hours of exercise a week can reduce the risk almost 60% (Bernstein et al, 1994).
- ★ Smoking: Female athletes on one or two school or community sports teams were significantly less likely to smoke regularly than female non-athletes. Girls on three or more athletic teams were even less likely to smoke regularly (Meinick et al, 2001).
- ★ Illicit Drug Use: Two nationwide studies found that female school or community athletes were significantly less likely to use marijuana, cocaine or most other illicit drugs, although they were no less likely to use crack or inhalants (Miller et al, 2000; Pate et al, 2000).
- ★ Sexual Risk: Female athletes are less likely to be sexually active, in part because they tend to be more concerned about getting pregnant than female non-athletes (Doge & Jaccard, 2002).
- ★ Depression: Women and girls who participate in regular exercise suffer lower rates of depression (Nicoloff and Schwenk, 1995; Page and Tucker, 1994).
- ★ Suicide: Female high school athletes, especially those participating on three or more teams, have lower odds of considering or planning a suicide attempt (Sabo et al, 2004).
- ★ Educational Gains: The positive educational impacts of school sports were just as strong for girls as for boys including self-concept, educational aspirations in the senior year, school attendance, math and science enrollment, time spent on homework, and taking honors courses (March, 1993).

The competitive sport experience is critically important for our nation's children. Girls who compete in sport are more confident, have higher levels of self-esteem, stronger self-concepts and are less likely to experience depression. Research shows that girls who play sports are more likely to graduate from high school and are at lower risk for an unintended pregnancy. Girls who are physically active reduce their lifelong risks of breast cancer, osteoporosis and heart disease. Learning how to be successful in a highly competitive environment is an important sport lesson that has significant implications for career success.

As you continue to market and promote your program, be sure to include the services you provide to the health and well-being of your students and the benefits of gymnastics. You may just find, as I did, that your next elite athlete came out of the gymnasts that first entered your program for those benefits!