Making An Informed Decision About Girls' Participation on Boys' Teams

Fourteen year old Sarah has been playing for the all-star girls' soccer team for the past three years. It is one of her favorite activities and she practices soccer drills all winter in preparation for the season. On registration night, Sarah and her father are informed that due to municipal recreation budget reductions, the girls' team is being dropped. Sarah stands silently, her jaw tightened, and tries to hide her disappointment. She turns to her father and asks him to sign her up for the boys' league. She just wants to play...

The immediate questions for Sarah, her father, and the league registrar are, "Can Sarah sign up for the boys' team?" and "Is it in Sarah's best interest to sign up for the boys' team?"

Sometimes questions like these arise because of a specific situation like Sarah's. In the short term, a decision must be made. Sarah's request, however, is symptomatic of a larger, more long-term issue — the lack of equal opportunities for girls and women to participate in sport and physical activity. In Sarah's case, the legal and moral decision is not in question. When no female team exists, girls and women have the same right as boys to play on a male team. She just wants to play...

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- Why was the girl's team dropped?
- How can the league, her coach, and her parents ensure that Sarah has a positive experience in this difficult situation?

Increasingly, coaches, administrators, teachers, sport organizations, parents and community programmers across Canada are being asked to respond to requests like Sarah's. The purpose of this discussion paper is to help you make an informed decision. For more detailed information, the reader is referred to the standard paper on this subject available from the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity (CAAWS).

The CAAWS Position

There are two main reasons why girls request participation in boys' sporting activities. Both of them are related to the lack of equal opportunities for females in sport.

1. There is no girls' team.

2. The girls' team or league does not receive as many resources as the boys' team and there are more opportunities for talented female athletes to compete in the boys' league.

CAAWS and other organizations are working hard to ensure that all Canadian girls and women can play on female teams that enjoy the same benefits and opportunities as male teams. CAAWS believes that playing on a girls' team (that has the same resources as the boys' team) is the most desirable situation for girls themselves and for the development of the larger female sporting community.

CAAWS also recognizes that not all girls' leagues receive as many resources as boys' leagues. This leads to the second situation, wherein a talented female athlete may wish to play on the males' team in order to access better competitive opportunities, practice times, and so on. In the short term, until such time as the sport system is equitable, a girl's choice to try out and play on a boys' team should be supported.

CAAWS recognizes that playing on a boys' team is different, not necessarily better. Playing on a girls' team, even with less opportunities, is still an exciting, challenging, and fulfilling experience.

CAAWS believes that a short-term decision to allow girls to play with boys is an important first step. The second long-term step, however, is to consider how your organization can provide equitable opportunities for girls to enjoy high-quality sporting activities with other girls. Building an equitable sport system is the long-term goal that organizations and institutions must consider in their deliberations related to girls' eligibility in boys' activities. It is a goal worthy of the time and effort we must put in now.
Fallacies and Facts About Girls and Boys Participating Together

Making an informed decision means separating facts from fallacies and taking the time to consider your answers to some common questions.

Facts and Fallacies

Fallacy #1: Girls are neither strong nor big enough to play on boys’ teams and they are likely to get injured if they do.

Fact: There is no physiological reason why individual female athletes cannot play and compete with males of the same calibre. Up to age 10 to 12, girls are often taller, heavier, and more physically advanced than boys the same age. On average, after puberty, most boys are bigger and stronger than girls. But there will always be wide variations in the way that individual girls and boys mature. Indeed, physical differences between early and late maturers within each gender are often greater than differences between the genders.

Other factors besides size and strength affect performance, including training, genetics, fitness, motivation, health, and emotional maturity. Girls can be equal to or surpass boys in any of these areas.

There is no evidence that injury is related to gender or size. Responsible sport organizations take all of the necessary safety precautions to prevent injuries in both girls and boys.

Fallacy #2: Females should not be eligible to play on a male team if an equivalent opportunity exists for her on a female team.

Fact: The landmark case of Justine Blainey versus the Ontario Hockey Association successfully showed in court that from a human rights and legal perspective, females have the right to compete for a position on a male team on the same basis as males; that is, they must demonstrate sufficient skills and strengths to meet the requirements of the team.

Fallacy #3: It is reverse discrimination if girls are allowed to play on boys’ teams, but boys are not allowed to play on girls’ teams.

Fact: The landmark case of Justine Blainey versus the Ontario Hockey Association successfully showed in court that from a human rights and legal perspective, females have the right to compete for a position on a male team on the same basis as males; that is, they must demonstrate sufficient skills and strengths to meet the requirements of the team.

Fallacy #4: Then let’s integrate all sports. Girls will learn to be better players by competing with boys anyway.

Fact: Integrated teams can be highly effective as long as their adult leaders are careful to meet girls’ needs for playing time, skill development, and positive reinforcement. However, most educators and coaches believe that after puberty, a separate but equal approach that provides challenging and accessible opportunities for girls to play on girls’ teams and for boys to play on boys’ teams will best encourage personal growth and development for the majority of girls and boys. And, perhaps most importantly, most girls say they want to play on girls’ teams.

Fallacy #5: Girls’ sports are not as challenging as boys’ sports.

Fact: Playing on an athlete-centred girl’s team is an exciting, challenging, and fulfilling experience offering opportunities for friendship, success, and positive self-esteem that girls may not experience on boys’ teams. For example, a female athlete who is a good player in a first or second division men’s league may not be able to develop play-maker and leadership skills to the same extent as if she played among women. It is natural for girls to play any game differently from boys. That a difference exists does not necessarily mean that one way is better than the other.

Fallacy #6: When girls play on boys’ teams, male coaches, trainers, and offi-
cials are more open to allegations of harassment and abuse.

This argument makes the false assumption that only girls are victims of harassment and abuse. All sport organizations should have safeguards in place that ensure that both girls and boys are protected.

An Important Consideration

Sometimes advocates for equity in sport argue that it weakens female sport development when female athletes leave girls’ teams to play with boys. This may or may not be the case.

While some exceptional female athletes may believe they need to hone their skills on a boys’ team, most girls have a better experience playing on a girls’ team. It is interesting to note, for example, that after playing men’s hockey, Justine Blainey chose to return to women’s hockey the next season because it offered her a better all-round experience. Generally, it is in the best interest of the development of women’s sport to encourage female-only teams; however, we need to be flexible in individual, specific situations.

Steps In Making An Informed Decision

When making a decision about integrated sports, each situation is unique. The most effective decision will be the one that considers a number of variables and carefully considers the balance between a short-term and a long-term solution. Making an informed decision requires progress through four main steps:

1. Do your homework

Adequate preparation is critical to an effective discussion and resolution. To help determine whether or not a particular girl or number of girls should compete with boys, prepare answers to questions about

- the type of activity and safety of the sport. Has every precaution been taken to ensure the legal aspects of safety including parental permission, insurance coverage, adequate training of coaches and officials? Are there large differences in weight (such as 35 to 45 kg) that may endanger the lighter participant?

- the tradition of the sport. Does the activity have a history of involvement that is mainly male, female, or coed? Are there systemic barriers to girls’ participation? Is there a readiness to support female participation? Have there been similar requests in the past?

- the current status of equitable opportunities. Does a girls’ team exist? If there are opportunities for girls to participate with other girls, are they equitable? Do girls and boys have equitable access to financial support, transportation, facilities, practice times, participation in tournaments and competitions, uniforms and equipment, number and calibre of coaches and trainers, and administrative support?

- the experience of girls requesting to play with boys. How long have the girls played the sport? Are their skill levels equal to boys?
2. Define and discuss your short term and long term options

Determine whether or not the issue in front of you is short term or long term. Long-term solutions already in place may not deal with a girl’s immediate request to play on a boys’ all-star team next week. The solution may be as simple as reassuring coaches and competitors that the girl under discussion has met the selection requirements of fitness and ability and is capable enough to compete.

In other cases, you may find that creative short-term solutions, such as hosting an extra competition, will contribute to progressive long-term plans for female development. Or, if the request is symptomatic of inequities, you may need to make a commitment to a long-term development plan that involves systemic solutions and changes.

Ask yourself the following questions:

- What are the mandate, goals and objectives of your organization? Is equal opportunity a desired goal?
- What will be gained for the individual or group in the short- and long-term? For the community or school?
- For the future of female sport?
  - What would be the ideal scenario for the future? What financial and human resources are required to attain that ideal future?

3. Make a decision and implement your plan

At this point, you must decide upon the scenario that best meets your mandate and addresses both short-term and long-term concerns. Then it is time to create specific goals and design an implementation plan. The decision will call for action in the short term to meet a girl’s request. It may also call for a long-term development plan for female sport in your community, school, or institution.

4. Monitor and evaluate the results

After your plan of action is underway, assess the results by asking some of the following questions.

- Did the solution address both short- and long-term objectives?
- What aided your success in problem-solving? What would you do differently next time?

Conclusion

Different situations require different solutions. Making girls eligible to play on boys’ teams is a legitimate and important first step. But what comes next?

If your organization is committed to ensuring that girls and women have equitable access to sport and physical activity, you must also act on the long-term solution. Making systemic changes is not easy; but you are not alone. There are many athletes, parents, educators, and community leaders who are willing to help, who will give their time and efforts to promote and manage the changes that are required to achieve equitable opportunities.

The way you achieve change is as important as the positive change you seek. Involve all of the sporting community. Communicate clearly. Give females and males a chance to voice their concerns. Listen to female athletes and empower them with choices.

Good luck in your pursuit of this important goal! *

For more information, contact CAAWS at 1600 James Naismith Drive, Gloucester, ON, K1B 5N4. Tel: (613) 748-5793. Fax: (613) 748-5706. Email: wmsport@magi.com