Female Sports Books and the Values of Athletic Experience: Influencing Value Formation in Young Girls Who Are Not Athletes

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Sport books aimed at teenage boys have often been studied to determine if they help teachers and other adults convince boys to read and help connect them to literature. Sport books written for boys typically focus on a young male as a protagonist whose friends are primarily other boys. These books tend to promote the themes of teamwork, self-esteem and working hard to create success. These themes are less often addressed to sports in books aimed at teenage girls. Would teenage girls benefit from reading sport books where the protagonist is a female athlete whose friends are primarily girls, and who has to deal with problems that girls in high school have to face, such as problems with friends, relationships, or questions about the future? I am interested in evaluating these books and researching whether sport books aimed at girls produce the same themes and values created in girl’s sports, such as teamwork, friendship, recognition, and developing a more positive self-concept (Angove 12). These social benefits are thought to influence girls who play sports, helping them to perform well in school and to have higher self-confidence and more self-awareness. In addition to reviewing the themes produced in sports literature, I am also interested in researching whether reading these books can provide girls with examples of how to handle situations they come across as they enter high school. I am curious whether girls who do not participate in sports can become better prepared for difficult choices some are likely to face in high school by reading sports books featuring girl athletes and written for girls. Would this type of reading help them make positive decisions? I also want to see if girls who participate in sports find the lessons and experiences in these books more valuable and pertinent than do the girls who do not participate in sports.

Rationale and Research Question

My research seeks to address the following questions: what values do sport books portray when they are written for girls? How do they relate to boys sport books? Can teenage readers gain the values portrayed in these books simply by reading them? How much does the experience of reading a sports book supplement the athletic experience? I also want to discover how closely the values portrayed in girls sport books relate to the values girls gain while playing sports.

Specifically, I want to know if girls who read these books actually begin to experience the same values and positive mindsets that female athletes typically gain by actually playing sports. If I can show this is the case, I will want to learn more about how this reading experience affects athletes and non-athletes, respectively, and how the sports experiences and interests of these two subgroups impact their reading experiences.

If I can demonstrate that girls sport books have a positive impact on girls similar to the impact athletics has on girls, this might indicate that girls can learn and experience a lot of other things just as vicariously, like travel, people’s life experiences, love, adventure, magic, and history, simply through reading books. It would also support a direct correlation between what people read and how they look at life, how they act, and what type of person they are likely to be.

Background/Literature Review

My research grows out of evidence that girls sports have positive influence on grade point average and self-esteem, and that reading has positive influence on the development of a teen’s lexicon, their communication skills and
the lessons they learn from reading.

A recent Master’s thesis on The Relationship between Athletic Participation and Academic Achievement provides evidence that high school athletes perform better than non-athletes on standardized tests like the California High School Exit Exam (Powers 22). Powers has conducted research to show there is a statistically significant difference in the mean ELA [English-Language Arts] scores and the mean mathematic scale scores on the CAHSEE [California High School Exit Exam] between athletes and non-athletes. The mean scale scores in ELA and mathematics were higher for those students who participated in at least one sport when compared to those students who had not (Powers 22).

The statistical data discussed by Powers suggests an interesting relationship between athletics and academics. While there is not enough evidence to demonstrate that playing sports caused test scores to be higher, it does provide a basis for asking whether the relationship between athletics and academics should be fostered, and whether reading athletic books might help to establish a connection between the two worlds. Powers also reports research conducted by Carlson showing that athletes were “significantly (p <.05) more likely to have enrolled in postsecondary education and earned a bachelor’s degree than non-athletes” (Powers 9). She intimates that participating in athletics provides certain skills and a certain mind-set that helps the athletes throughout their lives. The difference in the scores and statistics between non-athletes and athletes suggests that participating in athletics is beneficial and that there might be a relationship between higher test scores, grade point averages and the motivation to continue with their education through participation in athletics.

Angove, in her Master’s thesis on Girls’ Participation in School Athletics and Grade Point Averages, explores why girls participate in sports, why they view participating in sports to be helpful, and how it affects their grade point average. The reasons the girls listed for choosing to participate in athletics included teamwork, friendship, exercise, competitiveness, recognition, and development of a more positive self-concept (Angove 12). These reasons indicate the potential values and positive social benefits that girls gain from participating in a sport, in addition to the positive impact athletics has on their grades and test scores. There are numerous reasons these values and positive social benefits arise from participating in athletics; some contributing elements include team atmosphere, working towards a common goal, and dedication and commitment to achieving the common goal. Angove’s thesis also suggests the connection between athletics and academics may actually influence the framing of goals and beliefs. She notes, following Duda and Nicholl, that “the beliefs about success both in the classroom and in athletic activities included cooperation, effort, and collaboration” (Angove 23). Reflecting on these connections, Angove determines that skills students learn by participating in athletics can be beneficial both on and off the field. If the positive social and academic achievements students gain from participating in sports can be inspired by reading a sport book, reading these books might provide a supplementary opportunity for non-athletes to acquire these important life lessons.

The knowledge, communication skills, and other well-known benefits people gain from reading support the notion that novels can be used as an effective tool for acquiring important values in life. If people get so much out of reading in general, is it a stretch to wonder if people can learn important values and lessons from reading sports books? This supports my research goal, which is to discover if the benefits of participating in athletics can be acquired through reading, because if people already gain so much through reading avidly, it is likely they would
gain positive life assets by reading sports books. In their article “Literacy As A Leisure Activity: Free Time Preferences of Older Children And Young Adolescents,” Nippold, Duthie, and Larsen review significant lexicon improvements that occur when adolescents begin reading with more proficiency. They find that after fifth grade “decoding and fluency skills have improved in most students to the point where reading has become a tool for gaining new knowledge” (Nippold 94).

These results reinforce the value of reading as a tool for acquiring new information and highlight the young age at which avid readers can attain these skills. Their research also suggests that “reading is a prime source of word exposure,” and that “there is evidence from research that the amount of time spent reading is closely associated with word learning,” which in turn “suggests that reading should be promoted, not only as a school-based activity, but as a leisure-time activity as well” (Nippold 95).

People gain more than a larger lexicon from avid reading, as Cunninghame has determined through her research into “What Reading Does for the Mind.”

Results indicated that the more avid readers in our study—regardless of their general abilities—knew more about how a carburetor worked, were more likely to know who their United States senators were (Cunninghame 6).

Cunninghame’s research indicates that avid readers are simply more knowledgeable about their world and tend to collect and retain useful pieces of information more frequently than those who are not avid readers. In “Reading in the Real World and Its Correlates,” West, Mitchell, and Stanovich illustrate the positive benefits of reading and the numerous benefits of being able to learn from the literature. They note that “Print exposure, whether measured by the 10-minute airport probe or by the recognition checklist measures, was significantly linked to vocabulary and cultural knowledge even after controls for age and education were invoked” (West 44). Their research indicates much can be learned from reading and intimates positive benefits for those who read frequently.

These articles illustrate how much can be learned from reading and the benefits of being an avid reader. If this line of research can be applied to my study, not only would girls be able to gain more from reading girls sports books, they might also reap the positive benefits sown from participating in sports even if they are only able to participate in a vicarious manner.

If the experiences of athletic participation and avid reading can be combined, then perhaps benefits gained from sports can be gained through reading about the athletic experience. The benefits acquired in these two ways may not be entirely the same, but if there are at all similar, the connection would be worth exploring. Evidence of such a connection would mean more can be acquired from reading than just a higher vocabulary; a mindset can be embedded in the reader and a novel can change a person’s view and attitude towards situations in life.

I want to focus on three books where I discovered common themes of overcoming an obstacle, establishing connections and making friends, and learning about how to handle life situations by surmounting the athletic difficulties faced. In Throwing Like a Girl Mackey portrays the life of a character, Ella, who has just moved from her urban home in Chicago to the suburbs of Texas. Ella has to make new friends in the middle of the semester and has to leave her old ones behind. During her first day at school she is not really noticed, but the P.E. coach makes a suggestion, join the softball team. Ella never really participated in sports at her old school but decided to give the team a try anyways. On her first day of try-outs she has to learn completely new skills, but by they second day she has met some new friends and is finding the connections she was hoping to find. As
the season goes on her friendships grow stronger and she has to learn how to deal with a bully, improving her skills to become a starter, and go to the Prom on a date. Throughout it all softball is her support. Ella uses it as her escape from life’s complications. She says, “Softball seems like something I may actually have a little control over. Something in my new life that isn’t possibly complicated” (Mackey 100). Her ability to fall back on softball shows how sports provide support in a teen’s life. It also provides a kind of friendship. Looking back, Ella recalls “Being out there, playing together with these other people, even some you don’t get along with, working toward the same thing. I never knew how complete it would make me feel” (Mackey 150). Her recollection of all the positive things softball has given her illustrates the positive influence sports has had on her life and how beneficial it has been in helping her start a new life in a new place. Ella is even able to help her friend Rocky with her family life and get her back into playing softball, which helps Rocky handle some tough obstacles. Throwing like a Girl supports my idea that the values girls gain from participating in a sport because of the story Ella tells about how softball helped her start her new life and find new friends.

In Pretty Tough, Tigelaar explores similar themes for a different story. This book focuses on two sisters who have had a tough year, but for different reasons. Charlie is a sophomore in high school and has recently become an outcast from her friends. She does not feel like she belongs anywhere and despises her sister for not sticking up for her when Charlie’s best friend put her down. Charlie’s sister, Krista is quite the opposite. She is Miss Popular, has a boyfriend, and is a star soccer player, but she is also going through some hard times her senior year because she must make some choices between her friend’s expectations and her own values. Soccer intertwines these two sister’s lives and helps them begin to understand their differences. By joining the team Charlie finally begins to feel like she’s accepted. She says, “It was becoming glaringly obvious to anyone in school which girls played soccer: they all had permanent shin guard tan lines. And for the first time, Charlie felt like a part of them” (Tigelaar 100). Soccer gives Charlie a place to finally fit in and find herself a new group of friends. Her friends become her support group and with them around her she feels like she can do anything. Krista feels like she can do anything on the field, off the field she has pressures about what to wear and how to act but she says that, “On the field she had permission to shine. It was the one place she felt free and uninhibited, not plagued by how she looked or what people thought of her. It was the one place she felt truly herself” (Tigelaar 117). By having this place to call her own she is able to gain confidence and when she has confidence in one area of her life it shines in other places too and allows her to stick to her values under peer pressure. The sister’s coach even tells them that, “What matters isn’t what everyone else thinks. Its what you know” (Tigelaar 192). The coach’s independent, confident words give the sisters the confidence they need to reestablish their friendship and put their life in order.

The Beautiful Game, Littman develops a story that encompasses the values of finding confidence through friendship and teamwork, learning how to handle life situations and working as a team towards a common goal. In this book two groups of girls from two opposing teams unite together under one twenty-one year old, All-American, female soccer coach. She pushes them harder than they’ve ever been pushed before but that is the beginning of what unites these girls together. The narrator says how, after their first conditioning practice, “They hadn’t played a game, but they [already] had something in common. Parched throats and newly muscled legs” (Littman 37). Their coach pushes them harder than they’ve ever been pushed before, but this constant pushing
from their coach challenges the girls as much as it unites them. The book follows several of the girls through their own personal stories, and one in particular illustrates how the hard work and discipline of soccer helps her.

[S]uddenly the discipline of practice became a sanctuary. Not just the physical exhaustion, but the fun, the exultation at finishing the hill climbs or making a great pass. For the first time in a long while, Angela felt really good about herself” (Littman 53).

This anecdote illustrates how being pushed by and succeeding with the support of her teammates helps her find more confidence. By working through tough times on the basis of her relation to teammates, she is able to see how something can be accomplished that seemed impossible at first.

The three books I have chosen to focus on illustrate how sports literature can portray some of the important values and life lessons girls acquire through participating in sports. Granted these are only a few examples, they do indicate the potential of sports literature to demonstrate similarities shared between sports literature and sports participation.

**Methods/Research Design**

In her article “Studying Masculinities in Books about Girls,” Harper offers a model for the research method I will be using. In this article, Harper performs a close reading of eight books and compares and contrasts the different themes, symbols and messages in the books. She also performs a character analysis of all the female protagonists, showing how they illustrate masculine qualities in their different cultures. I will use this method in a similar way to collect data from the three teenage novels chosen for my study. I will be analyzing these texts to discover the themes, values, and social connections that can be drawn out from reading them.

Doing a close reading best fits my research objective because I am analyzing whether the same social benefits gained by girls through participation in athletics can also be acquired through reading books about female athletes. These social benefits include, among others, connection to other people, feeling a sense of belonging, accepting guidance from adults and peers, and self-efficacy (a person’s belief in their ability to learn or perform behavior at a designated level, or the belief that if someone else could do it, so could they) (Angove 8). I need to see whether these social benefits are portrayed in the books before I can make the connection to high school female athletes. I will seek to determine whether female sports protagonists portraying these assets and social benefits actually serve as role models for non-athlete girls who read the books.

I will look for these traits by comparing and contrasting the themes emphasized in each book, and by analyzing how each author narrates the sports story. I will examine the specific characters and analyze their development as portrayed in the novels. I will also investigate the specific themes, values, and social connections emphasized in each book. I will look to see if specific stereotypes are portrayed in the novels, such as gender links in the roles of coaching and teaching. I will examine the context in which the narrative of the book is placed, and highlight adversities the girls have to face in and out of the sport. The three books I have chosen to analyze (The Beautiful Game: Sixteen Girls and the Soccer Season that Changed Everything; Throwing Like a Girl; and Pretty Tough) are about teenage females and team sports and focus primarily on the sports story rather than romance or adventure, which are common themes in the majority of books aimed at teenage girls.

**Significance and Conclusion**

My project will shed light on whether reading novels about team sports can help teenage girls who cannot or do not participate in athletics acquire similar values and life skills as girls learn from playing sports. The
knowledge I gain by comparing these texts will be beneficial because studies show that girls who participate in sports perform better in school and have a better self-concept than those who do not. The research supports my research question and illustrates the potential for sports books to portray some of the life lessons girls typically acquire by participating in sports. If even just some of these advantages can be gained from reading a book about girls sports then female non-athletes and athletes who read this type of literature could expand their exposure to different ways of addressing difficult situations in life.

The next step would be to ask athletes and non-athletes to read a sports novel and answer a survey or participate in an interview about the impact the novel had on them and whether they find what they learned from the book interesting or useful. I would also like to see if, after reading several sports novels, a teenage girl’s attitude changes and she begins to act differently in her approach to school, friends and authority figures. There will be many variables in this part of my research, including whether the subject considered herself a “reader” or a “non-reader,” whether readers have a strong preference for a certain genre, whether they actually finished the book, how much time they spent reading the book, and what kind of lifestyle they are already living. These results would benefit my research into what girls actually gain from reading these books and how sports books influence the way young girls view the world and act towards it.

Works Cited