KILL OR BE KILLED

Some researchers theorize that women are more averse to team sports than men are. Can a competition-phobic writer toughen up? **By Olivia Stren**

Soccer is a beautiful, elegant game to watch. Unless you're watching me play. "You're on!" a teammate yells my first day on the field. I scurry, hoping for invisibility, toward the safety of the sidelines, feeling vulnerable and stunned, like a gimpy gnu among prowling lions. I'd recently watched a National Geographic documentary about predatory beasts, which the narrator gravely described as "built to kill." Standing awkwardly on the field, I feel like I might be built to *be* killed. Habit (and fear) impel me to get out of everybody's way, especially the ball's. I exert a great deal of energy that might have been better spent, say, running, wondering if I should've worn shin guards, why I didn't tie back my hair, why anyone would do this by choice. At halftime, a teammate offers helpful counsel: "Just get in there! Even if you don't kick the ball. Get in the way! Get in people's faces!"

This person clearly doesn't know whom she's trying to "encourage." At the French school I attended as a girl in Toronto, my teachers exhibited that distinctive Gallic gift for ridicule, favoring a shame-building approach to education practiced with notable enthusiasm by my middle-school phys-ed teacher, Mademoiselle Odor (yes, really). Mlle O. had been an Olympic gymnast hopeful, squat as a kettlebell; her claim to fame—this was the '90s—was that she'd whipped Alannah Myles into "Black Velvet" shape. Even her square, powerful jaw looked as if it had dabbled in bodybuilding, and it wasn't softened by her fine hair, which she disciplined into a tight ponytail that swung, skinny as a jump rope, when she barked orders such as "*Cinquantes pompes!*" ("50 push-ups!"). That was the sort of command you'd get if you showed up sporting nonuniform gym socks, the mere sight of which still prompts in me a Proustian montage of fear, loathing, and gymnasium lighting.

As a result, while I'm not entirely anti-athletics—I managed to develop a love for tennis—I reserve a special phobia for team sports. Partly I'm afraid of incompetence and failure, partly of being *seen* as failing. As a pleaser by nature, there's also the added pressure and, frankly, terror of letting down a group of endorphin-addled strangers.

As soon as phys ed was no longer compulsory, I sprinted the other way. In that, I am hardly alone. Thanks in part to Title IX—the federal education legislation passed in 1972 mandating that girls be given the same athletic opportunities as boys—far more girls in the U.S. play sports today than they did 40 years ago. But according to a report from the University of Minnesota's Tucker Center for Research on Girls & Women in Sport, girls are twice as likely as boys to drop out of sports, and at younger ages. The report blames everything from fewer opportunities for girls to play high school

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Since Title IX was passed, the number of high school girls who participate in sports has gone from one in 27 to one in 2.5.

sports to the stigmatization of female athletes as gay to a paucity of strong female athletic role models. Girls' estrogen levels are also rising during this time, feeding the desire for intimacy as opposed to combativeness, while testosterone is soaring in boys, pumping up their competitive drive, according to theories advanced by neuroscientists such as Louann Brizendine, author of *The Female Brain*. "It's much harder for girls to learn that stealing-the-ball competitive instinct," argues Claire Shipman, coauthor of *The Confidence Code*. "Instead of leaning into the sport, which would be really good for girls, their confidence shrinks and they drop out."

Studies have long correlated participation in sports in adolescence with higher wages and educational attainment in later life, but I've always wondered if that's a chicken-egg thing: Is it simply that high achievers are born with confidence that sets the stage for them to do well in sports? Or is it that playing sports actually boosts confidence? Both, says economist Betsey Stevenson, an associate professor of public policy at the University of Michigan and a member of Obama's Council of Economic Advisers. "It's not just that the people who are going to do well in life play sports—sports help people do better in life." In her own 2010 study, Stevenson found that high school athletes of both genders earn 15 to 20 percent more than others, possibly because former jocks are less leery of fighting for what they deserve. "In the workforce, women encounter many aspects of competition," she says. "I've often felt that's part of the benefit of girls participating in sports in high school—to make them comfortable with competition in the way that men are."

So, more than 20 years after Mlle O. faded out of my life, I find myself wondering about the person I'd be now had I been more adept at sports (or even viewed myself as more adept) back then. Would I be happier and heartier, more self-assured? Generally less hobbled by the bugaboos—doubt, overthinking, compulsion to please—that have no place on a sports field? Hell, maybe I'd even view my body differently—as instrument rather than object. Instead of focusing on its shape and weight and what kind of clothes it can wear, maybe I'd think about what it can do.

I doubt that taking up Ultimate Frisbee at age 38 is going to fast-track me to tycoonville, but neuroscience research has established that the brain remains malleable throughout adulthood. "Participating in sports facilitates a cascade of brain functions," says Laura-Ann Petitto, PhD, science director of the National Science Foundation's Science of Learning Center at Gallaudet University. "Oxygen uptake [during increased physical activity] facilitates frontal-lobe processing and higher cognitive processing." Sports also aid memory and hormonal regulation, the latter of which ramps up our sense of well-being. "And I wouldn't fail to emphasize that to enjoy these benefits, we don't need to have played sports at 15," Petitto says.

My friends do not seem to share her optimism. When I tell them I've determined to muscle past childhood fears, one e-mails: "Wait. You're playing sports? No, no, no. No...no. NO. Etc." Another friend, after emitting an unnecessarily loud snort, says, "This, I gotta see," which she follows with: "Don't die!"

I start by taking up a colleague on her (frankly abhorrent) invitation to join her coed sports team, the Miserables, for a dodgeball game. The vogue for "nostalgic" playground sports is still going strong; the Miserables play in an actual middle school gymnasium, complete with dank smell and rubber squeaking against shiny wooden floors. When I share a flashback horror with Petitto, she tells me to tough it out. I can override what she calls the negative "neural highways" established in childhood by garnering enough new, positive experiences. "Just letting yourself *think* about the fun you had—you benefit from the thought," she says cheerfully. "That's the power of the human brain!"

On the dodgeball court, I dart around like a ball in a lottery machine until suddenly I realize I'm the last one standing on my team. Which is a good thing. I've avoided—indeed, dodged—elimination. For once, my talent for fleeing from the ball in question (basket, Nerf, dodge) comes in handy. There is even applause! Until I get pelted by a storm of balls fired from across enemy lines.

I console myself with the theory that in this arena, failure, too, has benefits. A 2013 poll by Ernst & Young established that 96 percent of women who claim C-suite positions played sports in high school or in college; and Beth Brooke-Marciniak, the company's global vice chair for public policy, believes this is as much due to what sports teach us about losing as it does about winning. "Women in the workplace agonize over failure, fret about it—they don't know how to lose," she says. "But as Billie Jean King said, 'Failure is just a form of feedback.'"

To really put myself to the test, I decide to join a soccer team—for at least a month. (Okay, let's be honest, *decide* is the wrong word; I was going to take up skiing, until my editor pointed out skiing is the consummate individual sport.) In the week leading up to the first game, I begin to feel much as I used to before gym class—my mind swirling with potential excuses (i.e., lies). I have suddenly, as it happens—you won't believe it!—broken my leg. I'm violently allergic to field grass. I'm tubercular. Then I remind myself that I am 38, not eight. I must pull myself together.

Which is how I find myself on that field with sweat-glazed strangers shouting at me to get in people's faces. "Get in the way! Be an obstacle!" yells one of my new teammates on the Riot Club, a coed soccer team. The exhortation reminds me why team sports continue to feel so unnatural to me. As Shipman said, I've spent my entire life trying to be accommodating—trying to get *out* of people's way.

In the weeks that follow, I attempt, uncomfortably, to fight this instinct. I once enact a knee pass (a shining moment!) and sometimes even make contact with the ball in a way that isn't accidental. By my third week, I begin feeling less self-conscious, more prone to doing (as opposed to thinking about doing). The Riot Clubbers are supportive: "Good job!! Go!! Get in that guy's face!!"

But when I do get in said guy's face, he kicks the ball squarely into mine. "Are you okay?" a concerned teammate asks me. "Do you feel stunned?"

"Not really more than usual," I say.

As I wander off the field to ice my stinging face, another teammate pats me on the back: "That was badass!" Blocking the ball with one's countenance is, perhaps, not ideal. But after the game, as everyone takes deep swigs of water and stretches their hamstrings, my "block" inspires when-I-was-concussed tales of hospital stays and sports injuries—the kind that always seemed glamorous to me. (My only memorable injury occurred when the pottery wheel at summer camp fell on my foot.) I recall something Petitto said about the value of sports: "There's also the pleasure part. Pleasure should be on the list of benefits." And as my teammates volley anecdotes of broken noses, torn muscles, and vomiting, I feel, somehow, accomplished, welcomed, a part of the (Riot) club. I also feel, as my cheek tingles from the smack of the ball, stronger: I faced—forgive the pun—my fears. Plus, I avoided death. •