

Have Jewish Female Athletes Been Shortchanged?



Much that has been passed down is holy and valuable. Yet, for Jewish women, females have been steered away from competitive athletics. Thankfully, the notion that competitive athletics for Jewish women with its concomitant tough physical contact is inappropriate and is no longer considered wise advice. ⁽¹⁾

Of fencing's three weapons, foil, epee and saber, the lattermost was, for centuries, deemed too physical and not appropriate for women. Scoring in saber bouts is most often achieved with swinging strikes. The blade, a thin steel rod, strikes the opponent. While these strikes can leave bruises, they are minor. In the other fencing weapons, foil and epee, points are often achieved by a more delicate touching of the opponent

with the tip of the blade - a far less physical affair. In the 21st century, women's saber finally entered the Olympics. Men's saber fencing had been an Olympic event since the 19th Century. The interval between the 19th and 21st centuries represents a long time of lost women's opportunity to excel at a sport, be a member of a team and benefit from the lessons competitive sports can teach.

Shortchanging women in sport also has consequences academically. It has been found in academic studies that college competitive athletes achieve higher GPA scores than the general student body.^{(2) (3)} Unfortunately, the well-meaning tendency to protect and exclude women from the rigors of competitive sports has had an unintended depressing academic effect.

Women as a whole and, ironically, Jewish women in particular, have been victims of short sighted parental emphasis on grades alone as the primary key to entrance to a good college and a successful life - never mind wasting time practicing athletics. Well-intended parents constantly harping on grades above all else can yield to serious negative consequences. Especially in this time of the coronavirus pandemic, well-meaning Jewish parents should take their foot off the academic pedal and be mindful that athletic activity and allowable social discourse can enhance physical health and diminish depression. ⁽⁴⁾

Female Modesty and the Compatibility in Sport

In the Orthodox Jewish community, women are raised to be modest. Sometimes though, the fundamentals of tzniut [modesty] is at odds with the notion of Jewish women participating in sports. ⁽⁵⁾

There is no modesty in competitive sports. In basketball, the rebound often goes to the player who wants the ball more than her opponent, who exerts her court presence. In soccer, where opponents are crowding around a loose ball up for grabs, the player who charges into the melee and exits with the ball has not, I assure you, practiced tzniut; here the relevant noun is courage, koiach. Courage to enter the maelstrom though an elbow to the head or nose is a possibility. There is a time and place for everything. The significant benefits that befall the competitive female athlete are alien to modesty.

During my career as a competitive college fencer, I once fenced saber against the female Yeshiva University fencing team. This was of course on a Sunday, after the Sabbath, which significantly restricted the number of competitions the Yeshiva fencers could participate in. The women would warm up with a loose skirt over their knickers, as women are not to wear pants in public. When a bout was about to occur, the Yeshiva women would pull off their skirt, and stand en guard on the strip with their knickers exposed. It was this touching moment in time where an exception was made, and when they put on their mask they become a female saber fencer, alike the rest of us, tzniut aside. It was a fabulously unifying experience, and proof that even the Orthodox Jews adapt to modern times and sport.

Competitive Sports Teaches Achievement

It is said that to excel at an endeavor, one must practice for 10,000 hours. In competitive sports, the mental lessons learned by practicing and perfecting an athletic skill pay big dividends later. Believing that almost anything can be achieved with hard and focused work is a priceless lesson. Practicing and perfecting one's athletic abilities with rigorous training pays big dividends.

Jewish athletic competition continued to build on the basis of the above beliefs, with multiple sports clubs growing in East European countries in the late 1800's. At this time many young Jews wanted to dampen an image of the "ghetto Jew" and emphasize the physical strength of the Jews. This belief eventually with the hard work of Jewish athletes led to the establishment of the Maccabi Work Union and the first Maccabiah games, or as some say, "the Jewish Olympics," which was first held in 1932.⁶ Jews from around the world gather to compete every four years in Israel, and it has now become the third-largest sporting event in the world. Today, this worldwide Jewish athletic competition promotes the physical strength of the Jews while building a sense of unity and nationalism among Jewish athletes.

The wise teenager in Louisa May Alcott's "Little Women" said, "I am not afraid of storms for I am learning how to sail my ship". This wise teenager had no interest in becoming a ship captain. She was saying she had confidence if she put enough time and effort into a worthwhile task, her 10,000 hours of practice and dedication, achievement can be had no matter what obstacles were present. Training to excel at competitive sports teaches this lesson. Thankfully, Jewish female athletes are now free to practice, compete and achieve. The barn door is wide open, there is no stopping new female triumphs.



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