

For Girls, It's Mind Over Muscle

Self-doubt hinders success, sports psychologist says

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Coaches and parents, beware: You can dress a girl up in a uniform, tell her the rules and send her out for anything from a T-ball game to a triathlon. But how she'll play - and why - will have at least as much to do with her mental state as her physical ability.

And in many cases, the toughest opponent she'll face is herself.

Sports psychologist Caroline Silby, a Shaker Heights native who once daydreamed of herself atop the Olympic medal stand as a figure skater, has a pretty good idea what makes the female athlete tick - and what can make her topple.

Silby learned much of what she knows the hard way, by trying and succeeding - and, yes, failing - as a competitor. When she struggled with her skating as a teenager, Silby's parents got her together with sports psychology pioneer Bruce Ogilvie. And though Silby, who now lives in Alexandria, Va., never made it to that medal stand, she did make it to a doctoral degree as a disciple of Ogilvie's.

Her new book, "Games Girls Play," is a primer for the adults who matter in the lives of young women and girls involved in sports. It offers a wealth of wisdom on how to build the kind of support system that disciplines a young competitor's mind to work with her rather than against her.

Helping girl athletes reach their goals

Silby has plenty to say to parents and coaches, helping them define what should be complementary roles in the lives of children.

Parents are supporters, counselors, providers of shoulders to cry on in tough times and leaders of the applause in good times. Coaches are teachers and motivators, of course, but they can be supporters and counselors, too, in ways that usually differ from the parental role.

Silby says coaches need to know when to cajole, when to demand, when to relax and when to administer - figuratively, of course - a kick in the pants.

Dealing with self-doubt

Many coaches would agree with Silby that girls are different from boys when it comes to motivation in sports, but because the explosion in women's sports is a relatively recent phenomenon, many of those same coaches have yet to get a handle on what the differences are and how to work with them.

Silby, who has counseled several U.S. Olympians, including gymnast Dominique Dawes and figure skater Nicole Bobek, says that among the greatest impediments to a girl's

success in sports are her own doubts about her abilities.

A boy is likely to join a new team with the expectation that he'll fit in because his talent will be respected, or he'll begin work on a new routine with full confidence that with enough practice, he'll master it.

But a girl, Silby says, is far more likely to worry about things beyond her control, like whether new teammates will accept her as a person. And she's less likely to tackle something new with immediate confidence that she will be equal to the task. What's more, she won't even realize how negatively she is thinking.

"A lot of what I do is getting kids to be aware of how they see themselves and their situation," Silby says.

During a recent visit with the girls of Hathaway Brown School in Shaker Heights, Silby offered an anecdote she also included in her book.

Kathryn, a top figure skater, had missed a triple-toe-loop, double-toe-loop combination consistently during performances, even though she could land it in practice. Now, only hours before she was to take to the ice at the national championships, she was panicked and her coach was angry.

Silby sat her down and actually helped her calculate how many triple-toe, double-toe combinations she had done in practice over the previous couple of years. The number came to 8,640.

"What kind of things do you do 8,000 times?" Silby asked her.

"I wake up. I brush my teeth," Kathryn replied.

Silby led her further: "Have you ever brushed your teeth and had the toothbrush slip and jam into your gums?"

Yes.

"Well, do you wake up the next morning worried you don't know how to brush your teeth? Do you analyze your brushing technique or hire a coach to teach a new technique?"

No.

"Of course you don't. Why not?"

The answer came back: "Because I know I know how to brush my teeth."

Silby nodded. "Well, I think you know it's possible that you could land this jump. You have done it 8,000 times." And that day, she did it in competition.

Kathryn wasn't trusting herself, a common problem among young female athletes. "When people aren't trusting themselves, they're over thinking," Silby says. This was a

case in which the athlete's body knew what to do, but she had to get her mind out of the way.

Most coaches know an athlete - male or female - will perform better when thinking positively. But Silby helps coaches by defining how to help girls think positively about the right things.

One step at a time

"Focus on process more than outcomes," she says. Break down the task ahead enough to make it manageable. "Focus on giving kids something they can do immediately. Girls like one thing to do; boys usually can handle more instruction at once."

Rather than thinking ahead to the outcome, Silby says, the female athlete should be thinking incrementally: "What's the one step I can take to move forward?"

Moving girls forward is what Silby is all about - moving them from that first experience with sports - when they participate just because it's fun and games - past the point at which they question whether all of the work they're putting in is worth it, past the adolescent crisis of confidence in which they compare themselves harshly with others and are tempted to give up, to the point at which, as adults, they're back to do it because they enjoy it.

Most, obviously, will never find their way to the medal stand. But Silby believes strongly that the life lessons sports can teach are worth learning. Especially if the learning is a positive experience for both the body and the mind.