

# Do Boys and Girls View Competition in Different Ways?

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Over the years, Melpomene Institute has frequently received questions from coaches, parents, the media and others about boys and girls and how/if they participate in sports differently. As we searched for answers to their questions, we came to discover that there wasn't much out there in the way of research about this topic. Therefore, early in 2000, we decided to explore this question ourselves, to develop a questionnaire that would give us an overview of where young male and female athletes fell along the spectrum of attitudes and behaviors towards competition and to find out if they were different from each other. The following is an abbreviated report highlighting some telling results. The full report will be available in the Summer, 2002 Melpomene Journal.

## **METHODS**

- Questionnaire developed (Summer, 2000) and piloted at the Minnesota Lynx/Minnesota Timberwolves youth basketball camps. Three hundred ninety-nine young athletes completed the questionnaire.
- Questionnaire revised based on lessons learned during the pilot.
- Revised questionnaire distributed to over 1,000 young athletes from across the United States between 11 and 18 years of age at the USA Soccer Cup Tournament in Blaine, MN in July of 2001.

## **DEMOGRAPHICS**

### ***Sample demographics (N = 879)***

#### **Gender**

Female 557 (63%)

Male 320 (37%)

#### **Racial Background**

White 85%

Asian 1.5%

Other 2.5%

Chose not to identify 11%

#### **Age**

12 - 13 years 40%

14 - 15 years 31%

16 - 17 years 29%

## **School district**

Suburban 56%

Urban 33%

Rural 7%

## **Academics**

All A's 40%

A's & B's 41%

B's & C's 10%

C's & D's 2%

Chose not to answer 7%

## **ANALYSIS**

- Cross tabulations were conducted to provide simple descriptive statistics on how boys and girls answered questions differently.
- Nine variables (questions) were identified as "indicating an unhealthy attitude or behavior" towards competition and were combined to create a new variable (see table at right).
- This same procedure was completed to create a new variable focused on "winning" (see table). Ø Correlational analysis was performed on these variables to determine if any relationships existed between them and other key variables in the questionnaire.
- One-sample and independent sample t-tests were run on the two new variables to determine where boys and girls fell compared to the overall sample mean and how boys and girls compared to each other.

### ***Variables included in the "unhealthy" variable***

1. I would do anything to win
2. The main goal of playing sports is to win
3. It is more important for key players to play in order to win than for everyone to get equal playing time
4. I dislike my opponents
5. I get very upset when my team loses
6. Winning makes me feel powerful as a person

7. I have a hard time forgetting a loss

How important is:

8. winning

9. scoring a goal

***Variables included in the "winning" variable***

1. I would do anything to win

2. The main goal of playing sports is to win

3. It is more important for key players to play in order to win than for everyone to get equal playing time

How important is:

4. winning

## **RESULTS**

### **Descriptive Results**

As the chart below shows, the reasons that boys and girls gave for why they play sports are virtually identical:

#### **"I play soccer because I want to..."**

	<b>Girls</b>	<b>Boys</b>
have fun	99%	94%
improve at my sport	98%	94%
learn new skills	95%	89%
be competitive	94%	94%
be in shape	92%	88%
be with friends	92%	87%
keep busy	73%	63%
get into a good college	57%	69%

Even as the motivation to play was the same, some notable differences were found in the attitudes and behaviors of boys and girls.

The following are a few of the differences between the way boys and girls answered specific questions probing attitudes towards winning.

The far right column gives the total percentage of boys and girls answering "frequently" or "almost always."

***"I would do almost anything to win" \****

	Almost never	Occasionally	Sometimes	Frequently	Almost always	Frequently + Almost Always
Female	20%	23%	27%	15%	14%	29%
Male	11%	15%	26%	20%	29%	49%

***"It is more important for key players to play in order to win than for everyone to get equal playing time" \****

	Almost never	Occasionally	Sometimes	Frequently	Almost always	Frequently + Almost Always
Female	25%	21%	30%	14%	10%	24%
Male	11%	12%	36%	21%	21%	42%

***"I get very upset when my team loses" \****

	Almost never	Occasionally	Sometimes	Frequently	Almost always	Frequently + Almost Always
Female	21%	28%	33%	10%	8%	18%
Male	10%	23%	26%	21%	21%	42%

\* Pearson Chi-Square = .001

## **Unhealthy attitudes towards competition**

The difference noted in the above section compelled us to ask ourselves: "so what?" What does it mean that boys and girls differed in these areas? We decided to look at the numbers from the vantage point of competition as being made up of a range of behaviors and attitudes, some of which are healthy and some that are unhealthy.

- A scale measurement was created for the new "unhealthy" variable, with 36 representing the threshold over which an athlete would be considered unhealthy (for a more in depth explanation of this process consult the final report in the upcoming Summer 2002 Melpomene Journal).
- One-sample t-tests were conducted to compare the overall sample of kids with this unhealthy threshold of 36.
- The sample mean score on unhealthy is 27.85, which is significantly lower than the unhealthy threshold of 36 ( $P < .001$ ), indicating that the sample as a whole is not particularly unhealthy. One hundred three cases fall above 36, thus in the unhealthy range. Thirty of these are female (29%) and 73 are male (71%).
- As with the unhealthy variable, variables from the survey indicating a strong focus on winning were combined to create a new "winning" variable. The sample mean score for winning is 12.77.

## **The age factor**

In addition to gender differences, we anticipated that differences might be evident between the younger and older participants. The following few statistics show the

differences in answers between the younger and older participants on a few key variables\*.

	<b>12-13 years</b>	<b>16-17 years</b>
"I would do almost anything to win"	33%	45%
"The main goal of playing sports is to win"	19%	34%
"Is important that everyone gets a chance to play"	66%	25%

\* the percentage reflect those answering "frequently" or "almost always" to the questions.

Pressure towards competition When asked if they felt pressure to be competitive, 43% of the athletes responded affirmatively (42% of the girls and 46% of the boys). Of those who listed sources for the pressure, the following is the breakdown of where these kids feel the pressure is coming from:

- 26% coaches
- 18% teammates
- 25% parents
- 8% peers
- 20% myself
- 2% fans

Of the 125 athletes who fall into the unhealthy range of the sample, 58% respond affirmatively to the pressure question (73% of the girls and 52% of the boys), however, the breakdown of the sources of that pressure is almost identical to the whole sample.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings from the study offer compelling insights into kids who play sports -- their motivations and their feelings towards competition. Further, it raises more questions about these very same topics. The final report in the Melpomene Journal will address the following questions raised by the findings:

- What might it mean that kids seem to adopt more unhealthy attitudes and behaviors as they age? Further, why does this coincide with the decline in healthier attitudes such as "fair play?"
- The findings show kids who appear to be quite healthy in their approach to competition. If this is the case, why do we seem to read/hear so much negative press regarding violence and verbal improprieties among youth in sports?
- Are there any correlation between the kids' attitudes and behaviors and that of their coaches?
- Are there any differences between the coaching styles of men and women coaches?

The full Competition Study report will be published in the Summer, 2002 Melpomene Journal.

