



## WHY COMPETITION?

By Jennifer Benningfield and Catherine Henderson

### Introduction

At GALS Inc., we believe if you have a body, you're an athlete. We take the research behind the benefits of athletics and integrate the lessons of healthy competition and personal growth into our schools and our personal lives. We ask ourselves and our students: what is competition? What does healthy competition look and feel like to you? For

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GALS Denver sophomore Jasmin Storer, "Competition is a motivator — it pushes me to want to improve my overall performance so that I can beat another opponent or even just break a barrier I had set for myself." Competition is both uncomfortable and rewarding, challenging and motivating. Competition is not a zero-sum game, not winner takes all; rather, it creates a school culture that fosters growth. Competition builds confidence, resilience, and spirit in our students and prepares them to take on the world.

We believe competition is a feminist value. Women who play sports are going against the most powerful, ingrained stereotypes about femininity and triumphing over patriarchy by existing as athletes. By competing, we grapple with definitions of success and questions about body image, gender identity, sexual orientation, social roles, and values that continue to restrain women as athletes even 46 years after Title IX.

Female sports participation has risen 10 percent since Title IX,<sup>1</sup> but this key piece of legislation continues to shortchange women of color in particular. Girls at heavily minority schools have 39 percent of the opportunities to play sports compared to girls at heavily white schools, demonstrating an opportunity gap in athletics.<sup>2</sup> At GALS, movement and competition include everyone and become a uniting force in a diverse school. Competition and teamwork are the foundations of our inclusive feminist culture, embodied in the energy of our schools. GALS Inc. is the idyllic manifestation of Title IX.

### Benefits of Competition

Research shows the benefits of competition extend off the court and into athletes' academic, social, emotional, and professional lives. Competition teaches the values of teamwork

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<sup>1</sup> Stevenson, Betsy. "Beyond the Classroom: Using Title IX to measure the return to high school sports." National Bureau of Economic Research, February 2010. p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> National Women's Law Center. *Finishing Last: Girls of color and school sports opportunities*. Poverty & Race Research Action Council, 2015. p. 3.

and collaboration, enhances social and emotional learning, increases self esteem, and improves academic outcomes, particularly for girls. There are risks that come with competition, creating jealousy, anxiety, and fear of failure; however, at GALC Inc., we apply the research about competition to maximize the benefits while also addressing the challenges. Our model supports personal growth and emphasizes the importance of a healthy lifestyle regardless of access and ability. In the words of a student, “If competition is used in a positive manner, meaning that I am trying to beat an opponent for myself and for my team rather than having pressure from other people ... then I start to feel that I am in control which gives me a boost of confidence and a feeling of wanting to change the game.”

According to the Women’s Sports Foundation, sports participants are significantly more likely to engage in healthy behaviors like eating breakfast and sleeping seven or more hours a night compared to their inactive peers.<sup>3</sup> All of these benefits increase for students who play two or more sports.<sup>4</sup> Competition provides social support, leading to high self-esteem and self-efficacy for athletes which counteracts the stress and anxiety often associated with competitive pressures, especially for girls.<sup>5</sup> According to the Girls’ Index from Ruling Our Experience and the NCAA, women who play sports have a healthier body image: they are 11 percent more likely to say they are happy about the way they look.<sup>6</sup> In the classroom, sports participants were more likely to report an A or A- average in school and aspire to go to college.<sup>7</sup> 61 percent of high school girls who have a GPA above 4.0 play on a sports team.<sup>8</sup> In our schools, we see this evidence first-hand, translating the lessons of sport in the classroom. Teachers use movement for memory and competition for motivation in rowdy trivia games and choreographed dances embodying math equations. By weaving competition through all aspects of a day, we develop a school culture of “sportswomanship” that motivates kids to come to class and stay in school.

The benefits of team sports are clear, yet women and in particular low-income students and women of color continue to miss out. In 2016, 68 percent of children in families that make more than \$100,000 played sports compared to 34.6 percent of children whose parents make less than \$20,000.<sup>9</sup>

At GALC, students move throughout the day, starting in the morning with vigorous workouts, continuing in classes with energizing “Brain Breaks,” ingrained into lessons where students use their bodies to learn, and practiced in competitive events like GALympics and “Thunder Wars.” Because every student gets to participate in competition instead of only students with the time and means to engage in extracurricular athletics, all of our students reap the rewards of competition and form connections across class, race, and other differentiating characteristics.

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<sup>3</sup> *Teen Sports in America: Why Participation Matters*. The Women’s Sports Foundation, January 2018. p. 39.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> *Teen Sports in America: Why Participation Matters*. The Women’s Sports Foundation, January 2018. p. 33-36.

<sup>6</sup> *Girls & Sports: A Girls’ Index Impact Report*. Ruling Our Experience, April 2018. p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> *Teen Sports in America: Why Participation Matters*. The Women’s Sports Foundation, January 2018. p. 28-31.

<sup>8</sup> *Girls & Sports: A Girls’ Index Impact Report*. Ruling Our Experience, April 2018. p.6.

<sup>9</sup> “State of Play 2017: Trends and Developments.” Aspen Institute Project Play, 2017. p. 5.

At GALS Denver, 25 percent of our students represent our school on a sports team, and with more resources, we would be able to have 50 percent. We take the game beyond the court and engage 100 percent of our learners in competition through our movement practices. All of our students gain experience as leaders, and acquire the self-confidence to compete beyond school walls.

### **Competition in our schools**

In GALS Schools, the research confirming the benefits of competition manifests in our building and our students. For middle and high school students, GALympics, “Thunder Wars,” and other competitive events are movement in its most joyful form. Students compete in advisory teams, collecting points over the year in celebration of their abilities and growth. They sing, laugh, dance, paint their faces, cheer on their teammates, and celebrate as a school.

We start with the research demonstrating the importance of sport sampling: playing multiple sports as student athletes. Seven out of 10 Olympians grew up as multisport athletes and described this experience as “valuable.”<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, recent studies demonstrate that participating in a variety of sports reduces risks of certain injuries.<sup>11</sup> Oddly, the current movement in sports emphasizes specialization, creating a hyper-competitive, inequitable, and unhealthy environment for young athletes. At GALS, we are going against these norms and following the research for the health and safety of our socioeconomically diverse student body.

By exposing our students to a variety of activities, we reach every type of student and impart the lessons of a healthy lifestyle. Our students defy gender stereotypes as they lift during CrossFit; they build awareness of their bodies through yoga and dance therapy; they experience the intersection of environmentalism and athletics through climbing and hiking; and they gain teamwork skills in every sport from ultimate frisbee to flag football to lacrosse.

We focus on the process of competition, emphasizing joy and growth. According to Aspen Institute Project Play, 9 out of 10 kids say “fun” is the main reason they participate in sports.<sup>12</sup> But we push our students one step further, helping them understand the impact of competition on their lives through every triumph and every failure. Students gain a sense of ownership — movement is about our kids rather than parents or coaches. As a team, students form strong bonds while achieving a common goal. We breathe together; we sweat together. Hence, the competition our students experience is about connecting rather than excluding. We often find girls come into our schools with a negative impression of competition, fearing judgement and failure. However, we see they learn to love our version of competition, as they become more connected with themselves, their peers, and their community.

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<sup>10</sup> “Sport for All, Play for Life: A playbook to get every kid into the game.” Aspen Institute Project Play, 2017. p. 12-17.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> “Sport for All, Play for Life: A playbook to get every kid into the game.” Aspen Institute Project Play, 2017. p. 12.

At GALS Inc., we view movement and leadership as intertwined. Women who play sports change the game — 94 percent of businesswomen in C-suite positions played sports, 52 percent at the university level.<sup>13</sup> Sports participants are 10 percent more likely to vote and 13.5 percent more likely to watch the news closely compared to their inactive counterparts.<sup>14</sup> We fill the gap between athletes and leaders, developing young women who thrive physically through lessons of competition. They learn the values of practice, repetition, self-reflection, and showing up under pressure. These skills should be accessible to everyone, yet trends in youth athletics and club sports move against these key findings. GALS Inc. has created the how-to of development to break barriers for women of all backgrounds. We must build more schools in order to build more young women who will lead us into the next generation of barriers broken. GALS students take the statement, “if you have a body, you’re an athlete,” one step further, understanding “when you’re an athlete, you rock the competition.”

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<sup>13</sup> Miller, Monica. “4 female C-suite executives who played college sports.” NCAA: After the Game, March 8, 2018.

<sup>14</sup> Mark Hugo Lopez and Kimberlee Moore, “Participation in Sports and Civic Engagement,” *The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement*, February 2006.