

Confidence in Girls

“A girl’s self-esteem drops by 30% between the ages of 8 and 14.” *The Confidence Code*

For any parent or grandparent reading this statistic, you can’t help but be taken aback by such a drastic number. According to authors Katty Kay and Claire Shipman, “ ‘Right until age 8, there’s really no difference between girls and boys in confidence levels,’ Shipman says. ‘We were surprised at how quickly, and how deep that drop is. As girls approach adolescence, that openness to risk and failure becomes buried under an avalanche of biological and cultural signals telling them to be careful, value perfection, avoid risk at all possible costs.’” Kay and Shipman go on to say girls’ brains develop much sooner in the “risk and consequence” category. For me it explains why you see boys taking shots from ridiculous distances or weird angles, and girls just pass the responsibility off to someone else for fear of letting their teammates down (or coach or parent) or fear of embarrassment.

Having been a coach in college sports, high school sports and youth sports for over 20 years, even I was a little surprised by the “drop” number; however, I’m not shocked when I see statistics demonstrating girls struggle with confidence. I’ve personally witnessed these beautiful young ladies in high school and college who’ve convinced themselves they are only worthy of so much. Whether it’s sports, relationships, or careers, these girls continue to settle for less. I too have found research concluding girls are not innately risk-takers. If you don’t take risks, you can’t push the boundaries to see your true potential. If you don’t reach your highest potential, then you will always feel incompatible or incapable of the best. At some point, especially in sports, most girls either quit or lose motivation.

What is even more alarming, is even prior to the pandemic, “the average child quit sports by age 11, most often because they stopped having fun. During Covid-19, three out of 10 youth sports parents reported their child is no longer interested in sports.” (Globalsportsmatters.com)

So we’ve got girls not only struggling with confidence, but also the one outlet to help build that confidence has been either taken away or badly managed.

So what is the solution? With social media dominating perception versus reality, is there hope to reduce that number? After 20 years of personal experience, I truly believe there is hope because I’ve witnessed it first-hand when done correctly. I’ve seen one of the shyest girls on my team become an aggressive, goal-hungry player. I’ve seen one the smallest girls take on the biggest boy without even flinching. I’ve seen those girls, but it takes time. It may take six months or even a year to get that kind of progression, but I’ve discovered I can usually achieve that kind of success when I start working with a girl between the ages of 8 to 12 years old.

I firmly believe the best way to build confidence is to create the right environment. There must be a conscious effort to focus on building the right foundation before demanding too much of a player. If you get a strong, resilient base, the building will stand firm and steady. I take the same approach to coaching girls. I believe you must create the risk-taking, challenging environment to push the limits but also find the fun. I created the Girls Sports Academy focusing on “Building the Girl” through sports.

What does it mean to “Build the girl?” If I were to create a Lego set, the first building block would be mechanics and core work. Creating a stronger upper and lower body leads to faster, well-balanced athletes. Once you are stronger and more agile, you can build on the second block to encourage risk-taking. For Girls Sports Academy, that means trying lacrosse, field hockey, volleyball, rowing,

Taekwondo with an aura of confidence. Once you see the risk/reward to develop into a multi-faceted athlete, you can begin to feel which sport you enjoy, and which sport pushes your limits. All of these building blocks require a special glue to prevent those building blocks from breaking down. There are mean kids, embarrassing moments, failure, crazy coaches/parents, and even pandemics, trying to bring down a girl's foundation. My goal with GSA is to create a coaching staff dedicated to the "glue" by supporting the player, creating a healthy environment with other athletes, and testing the strength and resilience of that block.

Then, when you build resiliency, you've got the one gift very few people possess in this world...GRIT. Angela Duckworth, a University of Pennsylvania psychologist and professor, wrote the famous book, *Grit: The power of passion and perseverance*. Dr. Duckworth defines grit as "passion and sustained persistence applied toward long-term achievement...it combines resilience, ambition, and self-control in the pursuit of goals." I always thought when I heard the term "gritty" it was deemed to be tough and an in-the-moment kind of experience; however, I can't help but agree with Dr. Duckworth because very few people survive a toxic environment and then still want to play the sport or pursue the dream.

There are great coaches and programs out there focused on building blocks, but the long-term goals for most organizations are win/loss success. We need those organizations to set the bar high for college athletics and high school athletics to be successful and your daughters will definitely want to be apart of that success. My goal is to keep the girl on that path for a little longer, perhaps all the way through high school or college, but more importantly when her time is done, she still loves sports. She still loves being active, healthy, pushing her threshold to achieve things she actually believes are possible because she built a solid foundation of confidence from her time spent with Girls Sports Academy.

I'm excited to launch GSA in collaboration with the Kingsmill Athletic Club this Summer 2022. For more information, visit our website: www.girlssportsacademy.org