

The Coed Question

By Sam Snow, Director of Coaching USYS

As the soccer boom was taking place in the 1970s, so was the beginning of gender equity in sports.

We in the soccer community embraced the girls playing the game and soon coed teams were a reality. In most cases this was because there were not enough girls playing soccer to form their own teams and leagues.

By the 1990s that had changed and many large population areas had girls teams and even girls leagues by then. However, this is still not true for sparsely populated areas of our nation. So girls there often play on the boys team.

Where the numbers of registered players allows, there are teams for just girls and just boys. In youth soccer we have done a commendable job of providing opportunities for both sexes to play the game with good fields and adult supervision.

But gender-separated teams are not a requirement to the growth of a soccer player. Girls who desire to compete on boys' teams should be permitted to do so.

Here's an excerpt from the Title IX gender-equity law, POSITION: Male vs. female competition should be permitted prior to puberty and in coed sports where there are equal numbers of males and females on both teams and rules governing fair competition between the sexes.

Prior to puberty, there is no gender-based physiological reason to separate males and females in sports competition. However, sex-separate programs may be appropriate because of non-gender differences in skill or experience.

Prior to puberty, boys and girls can and should compete with and against each other. However, competition should be created between teams that are similarly skilled and experienced. In many cases, girls have not had the same experience or skill instruction of similarly aged boys. In such a situation, separate-sex leagues are appropriate. Yet our goal must be to provide quality coaching for both the boys and girls.

What are the differences between a boy and a girl before the onset of puberty? Obviously there are some, but not as many as some people believe. More dissimilarity, other than the basic gender characteristics, can be found within each sex rather than between the two.

At birth, girls tend to be slightly shorter and lighter than their male counterparts, but these differences soon disappear. During their childhood years there are no significant differences in their heights and weights. Girls mature faster; at age 6 their body cells are about a year nearer maturity than those of boys at that age, and at age 12 or 13 they are two biological years ahead.

Even though there are relatively few biological differences, boys generally score higher on many performance tests. It is not known whether these differences are based entirely on developmental characteristics or whether social pressures and expectations for girls have limited their activity, resulting in lower scores. There is no reason, on the basis of being female, why girls cannot participate in soccer and develop a high degree of skill.

Boys and girls can play with or against one another; the primary concern is that the group be performance-matched and size-matched. Research has shown that girls who play mostly with boys or in coed groups are more likely to be sports participants when they become women. When girls have the same expectations and experiences that boys do the performance gap narrows.

Socially, cognitively and emotionally, children all develop at different rates. There can be as many differences here within a gender as between the genders. Physiologically and anatomically there is little difference between children under the age of 10. So it is reasonable to allow coed teams as a matter of course for the U6, U8 and U10 age groups. The boys and girls have a good deal to learn from each other.

Young soccer players brought up in this equal environment are also more likely to respect the opposite sex as they mature.

Of course this positive interaction does not happen by the environment alone. The coaches and administrators must guide and support the attitude and actions that create and sustain such an environment. The result could be a healthier soccer culture for the club.

Sports medicine authorities believe that the physical well-being of young athletes is most likely to be threatened in sports programs that involve a high level of psychological stress.

Of particular concern is parental pressure. In the absence of excessive pressure, children are unlikely to harm themselves in a sports situation. Consequently, efforts should be made to educate parents and other adults regarding the potential risks and benefits of soccer participation for children.

Youngsters may benefit from the discipline involved in athletic conditioning and from a modest level of competitive stress. But there is little to gain and much to lose when overzealous adults pressure young children to train and compete in an excessively stressful environment. Youth soccer should always be conducted with the young player's long-term well-being as the first priority!

Once boys reach puberty, boys and girls should compete on separate teams. Some girls are such good athletes that they can continue on the boys teams even in pubescence. But by the time of adolescence they move onto girls teams as the physical differences are too great.

While there are many benefits for that girl in her soccer growth from playing on the boys teams there are always big social and emotional changes to be made when making the move onto the all girls team.

Now for the part-time player the coed model works even in the high-school years as the experience is generally just getting together on a once-a-week basis to play a game. This is of course an experience we

should support as we want them to stay in soccer all of their lives, not to mention the health benefits of activity. So be it coed play or single-gender teams, our ultimate goal is to keep the kids playing the beautiful game.

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