

The Female Runner: Gender Specifics

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KEYWORDS

- Female runner • Gender specifics • Female athlete triad
- Exercise and pregnancy • Stress incontinence

The magnitude of benefits that exercise has on the health and well-being of female athletes is continually being expanded. Before trailblazers such as Babe Didrikson Zaharias, women were not included in most athletic endeavors. Relegated to the sidelines, women had to wait their turn on the playing field. The face of athletics changed dramatically in 1972 with the passage of the Title IX of the Education Amendments, which specifically prohibited sex discrimination in education and programs that receive federal funding¹:

No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving federal financial assistance.

Since Title IX was enacted, female participation in sports has sky-rocketed. Women's participation in Division I college athletics rose from a mere 15% in 1971 to 44% in 2004. In 1972, 1 in 27 girls played high school sports or 7%; today, almost half (41%) of high school girls play, an increase of more than 1000%.² The applaudable efforts of Title IX have resulted in athletics opportunities for 2.9 million high school girls and more than 170,000 collegiate women in 2006–2007 with 21,516 college women participating in outdoor track and field.³

In the past 35 years, girls and women stopped being just spectators and cheerleaders, and became players. This changed far more than just their after-school activities; it increased their self-esteem, reduced risky behaviors such as drug use and teen pregnancy, and gave them life skills.⁴ Mariah Burton Nelson wrote "Sport for women represents autonomy, strength, pleasure, community, control, justice and power It changes everything."⁵ Today, an overwhelming number of female athletes compete recreationally, competitively, and professionally. Images of the female athlete appear on the covers of magazines and posters on bedroom walls. Young women today are

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presented with female role models from a variety of sports ranging from tennis and golf to track and field. The legacy of Title IX will be the generations of inspirational stories of female athletes that made a difference in their sport, community, and world. However, it is evident that girls who live in the suburbs have benefited much more than urban dwellers. Only 36% of city girls describe themselves as “moderately active” compared with 50% of girls who live in suburbs according to a 2007 survey.⁶

The 1928 Olympics in Amsterdam ushered in a new era of female athletics. For the first time, women were allowed to compete in track and field events. Although inclusion of women was a milestone, the longest race sanctioned by the International Olympic Committee for the next 32 years was the 200 m. In 1960, women were given the opportunity to compete in the 800 m followed by the inclusion of 1500 m in 1972. The 23rd Olympiad in 1984 included the running of the first Olympic woman’s marathon. In the 2000 Sydney games, the Olympic distance triathlon was introduced for men and women. Female athletes have come a long way. Only 36 women competed in the 1908 Olympics blazing a trail for the 4746 female athletes that ran, jumped, and played in the 2008 games. In these most recent games (Beijing, China, 2008) more than 42% of Olympic athletes were female.⁷ With greater involvement and increased notoriety, female involvement in athletics is continuing to make strides toward equality. Specifically for the United States, 52% (N = 310) of athletes were men and 48% (N = 286) were women.⁸ The US track and field team consisted of 59 women⁹ and 74 men.¹⁰ Overall, the United States won 110 medals; the men’s track and field team won 14 medals and the women’s track and field team won 9.¹¹

Women are now integral in the sports entertainment industry and endorsements of female athletic superstars rival those of their male counterparts. You can now turn on your television and watch women in sports from the Women’s Soccer World Cup to the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA) to the Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA). In 2000, US\$25 billion was generated through merchandise associated with female sports attire. The athletic shoe and apparel industry anticipates this amount to top \$38 billion throughout the decade.¹² The Williams sisters alone have endorsed millions of dollars, Serena making US\$14 million with endorsements including Hewlett-Packard, Nike, and Kraft, and Venus making US\$13 million in earnings.¹³

With an increase in visibility and a greater acceptance of female athletics, women of all ages are turning to sports for recreation, health and fitness, weight management, social interaction, competition, and personal accomplishment. Running is an integral component of most training regimens. Regardless of motivation for running, long or short distances, it is essential that the effect that running may have on the overall well-being of female athletes is understood. This article outlines the anatomic, physiologic, and psychological issues of the female runner. The updated female athlete triad position stand is discussed as well as new research showing that athletic amenorrhea is associated with increased cardiovascular risk.

GENDER DIFFERENCES

There are significant physiologic, anatomic, and psychological issues facing the female runner compared with their male counterparts. Risk factors for running injuries in women are divided into 2 categories: extrinsic (training surface, shoes, and orthotic equipment) and intrinsic (age, sex, phase of the menstrual cycle, biomechanics, and fitness levels).¹⁴ This section focuses on some of the intrinsic factors that affect the female runner. A thorough understanding of these unique factors is essential for comprehensive care of the female runner.

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