

Girls and male dominated sports

Earlier this year the Youth Sports Trust (YST, 2022) released its annual report into PE and sport provision in schools in England. As expected, there were a number of findings that related to girls in particular. More specifically, the authors concluded that:

- Girls are more likely to report barriers to participation than boys, with lack of confidence and peer pressure being some of the biggest barriers.
- Increasingly, girls are also more likely to see their periods as a barrier to participation, with 37% of girls saying that their periods stopped them being active this year, which is an increase from 27% in 2018/19.
- By their teenage years, 78% of girls understand the importance of an active lifestyle but only 28% really enjoy taking part in physical activity.
- Work by Women in Sport found that 43% of girls who considered themselves “sporty” at primary school no longer felt that way by their teenage years. This led to them dropping out of regular exercise, with the concern that this continues into adulthood.
- Historically, girls have consistently reported lower activity levels and more barriers to participation than boys. This year, YST saw activity levels even out across the genders, but unfortunately only because boys’ levels of physical activity have fallen.
- There is a disparity in enjoyment of PE between girls (72%) and boys (82%).
- Women in Sport report that almost two thirds of girls quit sport by the time they reach puberty.

Similarly, Childwise (2022) released their annual Monitor Report with further findings for girls in sport. More specifically they found that:

- Boys continue to spend more time playing sport at school than girls do, with the gap between boys and girls widening. Overall, boys spend 2 hours playing sport (1.8 last year) compared to 1.5 hours for girls (as last year).
- Girls aged 15-16 spend the least amount of time playing sport at school, spending less than an hour per week (0.9 hours compared to 1.3 hours for boys the same age).
- Boys continue to be more likely than girls to play sport outside of school (82% boys, 77% girls), and spend longer doing so with the gap widening. Boys play for an average of 2.6 hours a week, compared to 1.8 hours for girls (2.3 boys, 1.9 girls last year).

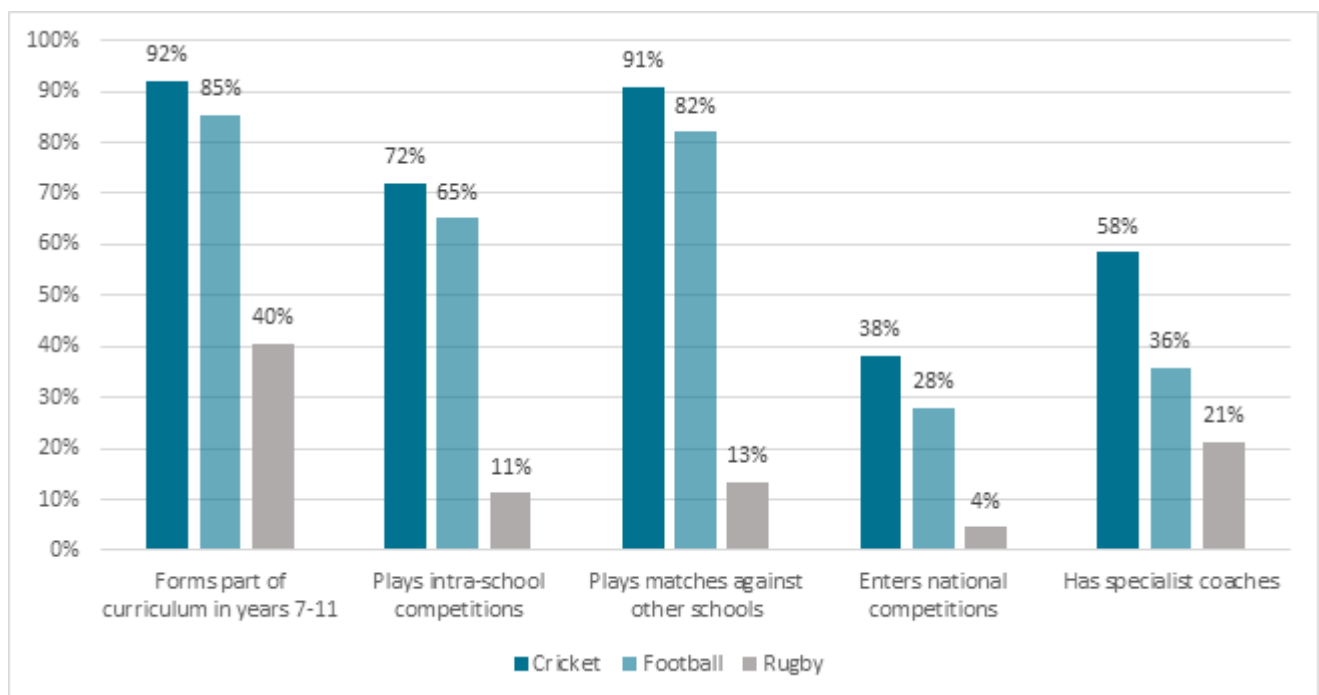
It’s therefore no surprise that MP Liz Truss recently called for the minimum levels of sport for girls in schools to increase (The Times, 2022). Currently, there is no minimum requirement for a set number of hours of PE - this is left to the discretion of individual schools. Unfortunately with her swift departure as Prime Minister, it is feared that the ‘Lionesses legacy for girls’ football is at risk due to the revolving door’ of politics (iNews, 2022).

Of particular interest, are the findings in relation to traditionally male dominated sports. Childwise found that just 33% of girls aged 11 to 16 said they played football in school, compared with 63% of boys. They played less than half the amount of rugby as boys, with 29% of boys surveyed playing the sport, compared to 14% of girls. Girls also played around half the amount of cricket as boys (12% compared to 21% of boys). We know that this is often driven by unequal access to such sports in schools. Recent data from England Football – part of the Football Association (FA) – shows that only 63% of all schools in England offer equal football coaching to both boys and girls. The figure is even lower for secondary schools, with only 44% offering equal access to football.

The Girls' Schools Association has a dedicated committee focused on girls in sport that meets regularly to discuss and debate key issues such as sports kit, menstruation and other barriers to participation. Annually, GSA's committee brings together sporting experts and over 400 girls in their Girls Go Gold event (GSA, 2022) so that these issues can be debated with the very people it affects – girls in schools. Girls in male dominated sports was a focus of keynote speaker Sue Anstiss MBE, co-founder of Women's Sport Collective. Sue's session, entitled "The unstoppable rise of women's sport" certainly sparked healthy debate, particularly when the audience was asked to imagine a scenario where men were suddenly told to stop playing football, as what happened to women in 1921. Simultaneously, the GSA Team were keen to understand what provision was offered across the Association's 160 schools.

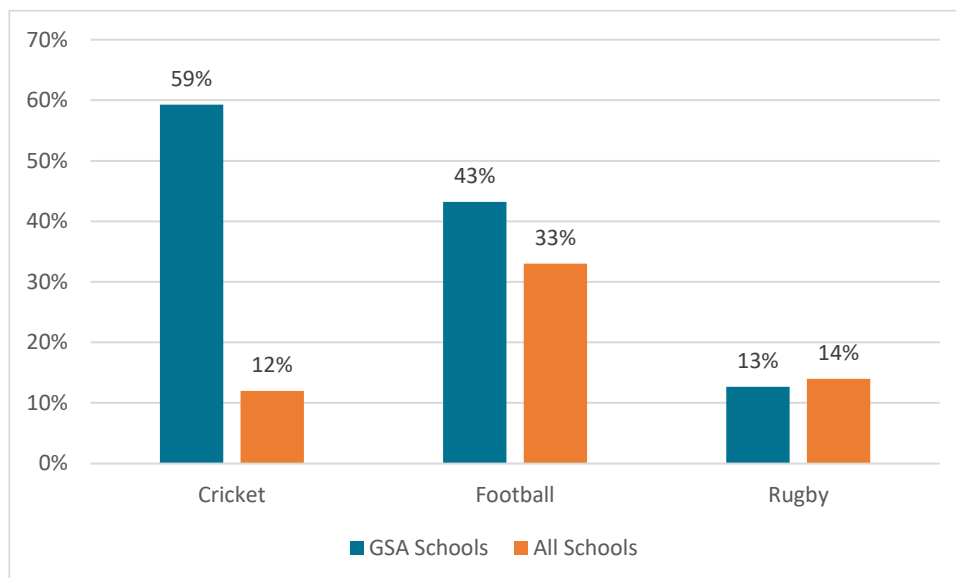
A short five question poll was undertaken by GSA at the start of the 2022/23 academic year, to understand the offering of male dominated sports in GSA schools. Another more detailed poll was conducted several weeks later to understand corresponding take up of such sports. The poll was limited to the 125 GSA *senior* schools - 89 responses were received to part 1 of the poll equating to a 71% completion rate. Response for the more detailed part 2 was lower as expected, with 57 schools responding, equating to a completion rate of 46%. Collectively these schools educate over 54,000 students. In both samples, respondents came from all GSA regions and from both small and large schools in terms of pupil roll. The samples were therefore considered representative of all GSA schools. The results are displayed in Figures 1 and 2 below:

Figure 1: % of GSA schools offering opportunities for girls to play male dominated sports



The results clearly show that the vast majority of GSA schools offer cricket and football, and a sizeable proportion offer rugby. Moreover, an impressive number of schools offer students the opportunity to play cricket and football against other schools. Compared to the national average highlighted by England Football, this suggests that GSA schools collectively offer football to more than twice as many girls proportionately. Similar national figures are not available for cricket and rugby, but we might expect a similar pattern. In terms of participation, Figure 2 shows that significantly more girls participate in cricket in GSA schools compared to the national average. More specifically, a girl is nearly 5 times more likely to play cricket at a GSA school than another type of school. A girl at a GSA school is 30% more likely to play football. For rugby the participation levels are similar.

Figure 2: % of GSA pupils (age 11-16) playing male dominated sports at school



GSA %s have been weighted by pupil numbers and relate to girls in year 7-10. Data for “All Schools” is from Childwise Monitor Report 2022 and equates to ages 11 to 16.

These are significant differences and show clearly that girls’ schools do buck the trend in terms of girls’ participation in male dominated sports. The reasons behind these findings were out of scope of the study, but anecdotally girls’ schools suggest barriers such as menstruation and sports kit are less pronounced in girls’ schools. Furthermore, official data from DfE (GSA, 2021) show that girls in girls’ schools are significantly more likely to study STEM subjects, particularly male dominated subjects such as physics and maths. It would be reasonable to infer that male dominated sports are likely to follow a similar pattern. Finally, a recent study by AQR international (AQR International, 2021) showed that girls in girls’ schools are more confident than girls in co-education schools, which might be another contributing factor. Research from the University of Birmingham (Dr Appleton, 2017) found that young female footballers reported higher levels of confidence, self-esteem, well-being and motivation, than girls who play no sport at all.

For girls in girls’ schools there is much to celebrate in these results, but clearly there is still much work to do for girls nationally when it comes to sport (both male dominated sports and sport more generally). However, with fantastic sporting successes from teams such as the Lionesses at the European Championships 2022 and increasing numbers of women role models in sport, such as Dina Asher Smith openly talking about barriers such menstruation (The Guardian, 2022), we remain hopeful in inspiring the next generation of women in male dominated sports and sports more generally.

If you have any questions relating to the findings in this paper, please send them to research@gsa.uk.com

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