

Women's innards mystery solved

Kathy Hedberg/Lewiston Tribune

When my grandmother was a girl she learned to play basketball and loved it. Her mother, great-grandma Pearson, however, found out about it and forbade my grandma and her sister to play the game.

"She was afraid it would damage our female organs," my grandma explained to me years later.

Although she always regretted that she was forced to give up basketball, when I was in junior high school and signed up for the basketball team, she and my mother both warned me against it.

"It could hurt your female organs," they said, although they stopped short of an outright ban.

I never fully understood what female organs they were talking about. I assumed they were the interior mechanics of a woman's body that allows her to have babies, but I still didn't get the connection between that and basketball.

It was mainly my legs, arms and head I was using for sports. My innards didn't seem to be overly at risk unless I caught a hard pass in the gut. One just learned to deal with such blows. And if that had affected my future baby-bearing capabilities, well, if that meant scoring some points in a game, then's the breaks.

Girls in my grandmother's, mother's and my era who wanted to play sports had other obstacles to deal with besides their parents' disapproval.

Coaches, for one, sometimes treated girl athletes as baboons incapable of really understanding the game or, at least, unable to reach the physical potential of boy players. Basketball rules, which didn't change until I was a junior in high school, forbade all but the two forwards on the six-person team to run the full court. It was believed girls couldn't take the physical stress.

And nobody back then took the time to explain the finer points of offense and defense that were common currency on boys' teams. Girls' sports, after all, were mainly parlor games and no explanation was necessary.

Baseball was just as bad, proven by the fact that girls played softball while boys got the real deal.

I was always aware of those inequalities but it never occurred to me to fight them. That was just the way it was. If I wanted to play sports, I had to shut up and play by the rules and the rules assumed girls were not as good of athletes as boys.

Fast forward 50-plus years. My granddaughter, Julia May, age 7, is playing soccer on a team coached by a guy who played college soccer and treats them like he's planning to take them all the way to the World Cup. The little girls on this team, inspired perhaps by the USA women's

world champions and their own mothers, such as my daughter, Suzanna, who also was an outstanding athlete, are tough like you wouldn't believe. They run, they kick, they maneuver that ball like it was an obedient puppy and God help the goalie who gets in their way.

Julia May and her teammates are only 7 years old but I wouldn't want to meet one of them in a back alley with their soccer cleats on.

And I think I finally figured out what female organs are: They're the parts of a woman that give her strength, energy and the perseverance to keep doing what she wants to do in spite of the prejudice that has for too long undervalued her gender and the blindness that fails to realize what a magnificent person she is.

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