

Leadership Development among High School Girl Athletes

Runzhuo Ding *

Emma Willard school, 285 Pawling Ave, Troy, NY 12180, USA

* Corresponding Author Email: rachelding0702@gmail.com

Abstract. The purpose of this study is to examine leadership development processes in high school girl athlete teams, by zeroing in on the following micro-level team level dynamics. Since this study was conducted using a qualitative research design, the data for this paper were collected through semi-structured interviews with eight varsity and junior varsity high school lacrosse players (in addition to observations of practices, tryouts, and games) at an all-girls private high school. The main conclusion is that the availability of leadership development opportunities is not balanced, because athletes with high prior experience levels and high expectations were much more likely to become leaders and benefit from the roles. Conversely, new or low-skill players often struggle to admin team responsibilities and can be pushed out without the right attention. Furthermore, the research underlines how coaching style is a key determinant in either widening the experience gap or leveling the playing field by providing considered scaffolding for less experienced players. In summary, according to this research, for high school sports to be a site where the full range of opportunities within sport are opened to female representation as leaders programs must go above and beyond existing models that position girls as passive participants and instead actively create (and sanctify) inclusive structures that model and instill all athletes with power despite their starting experience levels.

Keywords: Leadership Development, High School Athletics, Female Athletes, Team Dynamics, Qualitative Research.

1. Introduction

Recent research highlights significant trends and shifting dynamics in high school girls' sports across varsity and junior varsity (JV) levels in the United States. This trend indicates a growing enthusiasm for sports among teenage girls. Overall participation has increased, surpassing 3.4 million in 2023-24, driven by emerging sports such as flag football and wrestling, both of which have seen participation more than double recently [1]. Girls aged 13-17 have shown increased regular participation in sports, with 38% engaging in 2023, the highest level since at least 2012 [2].

Participation in sports provides numerous valuable benefits, especially for girls, spanning physical health, mental well-being, academic achievement, and practical skills essential for lifelong success. Engaging in sports helps girls develop stronger bodies, improve cardiovascular fitness, and reduce the risk of chronic illnesses. Beyond physical wellness, sports also encourage meaningful self-improvement by building confidence, resilience, and emotional strength, all of which positively influence self-esteem and body image.

Team sports specifically offer other crucial life lessons in areas like team management, communication, and collaboration, allowing participants to develop interpersonal skills and leadership qualities essential for thriving in collaborative environments. Furthermore, involvement in sports demands effective time management, as athletes learn to balance rigorous practice schedules with academic responsibilities and personal life, thus mastering valuable organizational skills.

Practically, sports participation can substantially enhance college applications, offering pathways to scholarships and opportunities for professional athletic careers. Colleges often recognize the discipline, leadership, and dedication demonstrated by student-athletes, making them attractive candidates for both academic and athletic programs. Collectively, these benefits illustrate why sports participation represents a critical investment in the holistic development of young women, setting them up for long-term success in various life endeavors.

This benefit has been documented among women participating in athletics at the college level and in the professional athletic world. But what about the effects of athletics for younger women, at the high school level? Do they offer opportunities for developing leadership skills too? And in what ways?

Stereotypes about intrinsic attributes that differ among males and females persist and often women are assumed to be lacking in the attributes required for effective leadership. In such a context of gender skepticism ambitious young women face strong odds trying to achieve success and realize one's ambitions, especially when young males are exposed to learning and social environments that cultivate their confidence and leadership, while pretending that these are simply inborn masculine traits. As with young men, young women also must acquire confidence and skills in leadership, and traditionally young women have not been offered similar opportunities to those of young men.

The growing participation of young women, including high schoolers, in team sports challenges the binary understanding of sex and gender dominant in many areas of life. Philosopher Judith Butler claims that gender is performative rather than biologically fixed. Many sports in which both males and females participate emphasize traits like endurance and speed, demonstrating that these attributes are not determined or predicted by biological sex. In some sports, female outperform male peers with greater endurance. The recent history of women in athletics and many studies show that athletic environments are also critical in developing and constructing what have been assumed traditionally to be both feminine and masculine traits in their male and female participants. Confidence and leadership, ability to work in teams, generally are learned by everyone, males and females, despite the fact that apart from athletics females have historically not been encouraged to develop many leadership skills suitable for success in a competitive, professional world. It has now been established that young women and girls can acquire confidence and firm leadership skills through athletics.

My motivation for writing about girls participating in sports comes from both personal experiences as a female athlete and a belief in the importance of equal opportunities for males and females in athletics and other areas of life. While previous research has shown that participation in athletics have contributed to the development of leadership skills in women, with a focus on professional and collegiate sports, I have been curious about whether and how participation in high school level sports also offer these opportunities to younger women.

My studies have shown that organized high school sports do offer many similar opportunities for younger women to develop leadership as post-high school athletics offer older participants. Having been playing sports for over a decade, I saw how being on a team and playing sports-built confidence, resilience, and leadership skills. In this paper, I discuss how participating in sports contributes to the development of leadership traits among high school girls, a perspective on girls in athletics that has been little discussed in previous research. One of the major findings in this work is that while high school sports definitely provide opportunities for developing confidence and leadership, not all participants benefit from those opportunities equally. Even those directly exposed to the leadership development opportunities in high school athletics – the players themselves – benefit from those opportunities in many different ways. The research suggests that even at the high school level, a time of initial exposure to athletics for many teens, players with prior athletic experience from club play or the athletic history of parents and siblings, players are more likely to enjoy the benefits of leadership development opportunities and they are likely to benefit from them more intensively than less experienced and new players. New players may actually feel overwhelmed by the demands of a team and limit their participation in leadership development opportunities, commit themselves only half-heartedly to the team, and may even withdraw.

2. Background

At East Coast Charter School, a private all-girls high school in east coast, athletics are positioned as a core component of academic experience, albeit with a tone of holistic development rather than competitive intensity. The school offers an average of 15 sports each year including basketball, volleyball, crew, and lacrosse and encourages participation as a means of fostering discipline,

collaboration, and well-being. While the athletic program is well-supported by faculty and administration, it is not geared toward elite college recruitment; only about 35% of student-athletes, most notably from the crew team, go on to play sports at the collegiate level. Interestingly, there is a significant overlap between athletic and leadership participation—many of the school's student leaders are also captains or senior members of sports or dance teams, suggesting that athletic involvement serves as a key channel for cultivating leadership skills and visibility on campus. In this paper, we interviewed several athletes at the school linked to the lacrosse team to examine whether and how playing sports help girls to develop leadership qualities. The research subjects are young girls aged 16-18 in an all-girls private high school in east coast. The research site fields lacrosse teams at two levels, varsity and Junior Varsity (JV) that consist of around 40 players across different years, and 4 coaches in total.

Varsity-level sports are typically more competitive and selective, with many high school girls participating nationwide, as shown in statistics. These require tough tryouts for selection, though there may not be explicit physical qualifications. At East Coast Charter, the sports season lasts about four months and players generally play varsity for at least two years on average. At each level, the team consist of up to 20 people supported by two coaches and four captains, and they compete within a structured sectional league that includes 7-8 schools. During the sports season, the varsity team plays around three games per week.

In contrast, the JV team at the research site is less competitive and more inclusive, designed to encourage athletic development, especially for underclassmen. While tryouts are required for JV, the focus is more on growth and not on competition. Similar to the varsity team, JV team also has 18-20 players, two coaches and 3-4 captains. Due to the competitiveness, intensity and different goals of the program, JV players in many cases tend to be less committed to the game than more experienced varsity players.

3. Literature Review

Participation in sports offers substantial benefits for young women, ranging from physical health and mental well-being to academic and interpersonal skill development [3]. Team sports, in particular, serve as microcosms of collaborative environments, where athletes learn to manage relationships, communicate effectively, and navigate setbacks—skills that parallel those required in professional and civic life [4]. Research on girls' participation in athletics has increasingly emphasized its potential for building leadership, moving beyond earlier concerns about exclusion and gender inequality in access. Programs like Girls on the Move [5] demonstrate that leadership development through sports is most effective when it includes intentional mentorship, gender-conscious facilitation, and opportunities for reflective learning. Similarly, the article "Leader Development for Adolescent Girls" [6] proposes that structured interventions rather than mere participation—are key to cultivating leadership, arguing for an integrated model that combines team experience with explicit feedback and skill-building exercises.

Broader sociological studies further support the claim that sports participation enhances self-esteem and emotional resilience, especially among marginalized populations. For instance, Sabo et al. [7] found that involvement in school sports correlates with stronger physical self-concept and attachment to school for both African American and Caucasian girls—two factors that undergird early leadership potential. Yet, the assumption that sports alone naturally produce leaders requires revision.

Sports also helps individual to build more efficient time management and organizational discipline, as players balance practice schedules with academic responsibilities. Crucially, athletic participation builds self-confidence and resilience, traits often associated with leadership and personal agency [8]. However, women continue to face structural barriers in many professional fields, including underrepresentation in leadership positions and persistent gender stereotypes [9]. Drawing on Judith Butler's [10] theory of gender performativity, this paper considers how athletic environments offer a space where traits traditionally coded as "masculine"—such as competitiveness, endurance, and

authority—can be embodied and redefined by girls. Indeed, physical capacity and leadership potential are not inherently determined by biological sex, and sports settings provide one of the earliest and most visible stages for young women to perform and internalize leadership roles.

Research, however, also highlights that sports participation can be a powerful catalyst for leadership development among girls only when intentional structures are in place. Programs like Girls on the Move [11] show that even brief, youth-centered leadership workshops can boost self-esteem and leadership perceptions among female participants. Similarly, Csabai et al. [12] evaluated the GOALS program, “Girls Organizing and Learning Sport”, finding measurable gains in physical competence, self-esteem, and leadership among participants. Larger-scale studies point to cross-generational impacts: the Play to Lead report [13] from the Women’s Sports Foundation, involving nearly 2,900 women aged 20–80, found that longer sports participation correlates with higher adult leadership roles across racial and socioeconomic groups. Comparative research also reveals that domestic athletes tend to exhibit stronger leadership competencies than their international peers, suggesting cultural dimensions in how leadership is socialized and supported [14]. Collectively, this scholarship points to the importance of daily team interactions, coaching practices, and institutional structures in shaping leadership development, while also identifying gaps in intersectional analysis and long-term tracking of female athletes’ leadership trajectories before and beyond college.

Curiously, the studies focused on the importance of athletes’ development through daily training regimens and consistent play seldom capture details about the micro-level processes through which leadership emerges. Against the background of what is known about everyday life on teams in general, the absence of discussion of a number of issues in the research is notable, especially how girls, especially high school girls, from captains to quiet influencers learn to lead through peer modeling, on-the-spot mentorship, and coach interaction within the early phases of team formation. These dynamics are rarely captured in program evaluations or large-scale quantitative studies like Bearman et al.’s [15] longitudinal data or Berlin and Colditz’s [16] epidemiological review.

While the connection between sports and leadership development is well-established at higher levels of competition [17, 18], less attention has been paid to how these dynamics operate in high school contexts, this paper turns its attention to high school athletics as a formative site for cultivating leadership among girls.

4. Research Design

My observational study and interviews build on a strong data-backed foundation but add nuance by capturing at the micro-level some ways leadership emerges. It provides rich qualitative depth often absent in large scale studies, overviews or evaluation reports. It fills a critical gap by investigating leadership not only as an outcome but as an evolving, observable behavior shaped by socialization, competitive pressure, and peer modeling within team environments.

My interest in this topic is rooted in my own decade-long experience as a female athlete. I have witnessed firsthand how team sports fostered my self-assurance, resilience, and leadership. Yet I have also seen how unevenly these benefits are distributed. This paper aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how high school athletics can serve as a platform for cultivating female leadership, particularly when teams consciously work to create equitable environments for all players—not just the most experienced or confident.

By shifting focus from general claims about sports and empowerment to a more nuanced examination of access, social dynamics, and performance expectations within high school teams, this study adds to the growing conversation about gender, leadership, and youth development. Ultimately, it asks: under what conditions do high school sports truly empower girls, and how can we ensure those conditions are widely available?

I gathered data through interviews with players and observations of team activities at an all-girls private high school in the East Coast, which I call it East Coast Charter School here. This two-part approach provided both personal insights and real-world context about leadership development.

4.1. Interviews

Semi-structured interviews formed the core of our data collection, designed to allow athletes to share detailed experiences in their own words. I conducted individual conversations with eight student-athletes to understand their experiences in their own words. Participants were carefully chosen to represent different perspectives: they came from both the highly competitive Varsity team and the more developmental Junior Varsity (JV) team, and included athletes with varying levels of experience. This mix included players with extensive club sports backgrounds or strong family athletic histories (like Isabella), moderately experienced players, and newcomers to organized team sports.

I identified potential participants who matched these diverse backgrounds and contacted them to explain the study. After obtaining informed consent from the athletes, I scheduled in-person interviews at the school in private settings convenient for the participants. I specifically sought participants who could thoughtfully reflect on their team experiences.

Prior to the interviews, I put together a list of research questions that covers topics including prior sports experience, reasons for joining the team, personal goals, relationships with coaches and teammates, experience developing leadership skills on that team, ways to handle challenges, and so on. All interviewees were asked the same questions to ensure consistency and comparability of the data, and to increase the validity of the research.

4.2. Observations

We also conducted observations during critical periods: the team tryouts, practices, and games.

During tryouts is when coaches evaluate players and form the Varsity and JV rosters for the season. I attended all tryout sessions, expanding over approximately two weeks covering different stages: skills assessment, game simulations, and final team selections. The tryout setting was strategically chosen for several reasons connected to my research goals. First, clear differences in confidence and skill between experienced players and newcomers become highly visible during evaluations. Second, natural leadership behaviors—like experienced athletes helping newcomers or captains organizing groups—often emerge in this high-stakes environment. Third, observing tryouts allowed me to directly witness challenges faced by new players. Also, tryouts experience is critical for all athletes as it is the first exposure to the competitiveness of the team, coach style, and the intensity of the sports. More importantly, the data collected from observations could complement, validate and crosscheck data collected from interviews.

I also observed all practices as they represent the daily routine through which leadership skills are developed. I observed approximately 40 practice sessions throughout the season, each lasting about an hour and half including warm-ups, technical drills, and team discussions. These practice settings provided valuable insights on the development of individual skill levels and qualities as well as their interactions with the entire team. It also shows how leadership operates in less formal ways. For instance, team captains lead warm-ups without a coach present, indicating a certain level of authority over the team. Practice settings are often when the team culture and dynamics are shaped and developed.

Observing games help researchers to understand qualities not visible during practices, especially traits like handling pressure, and dealing with team loss. In the heat of competition with higher intensity, leadership behaviors may become more pronounced. I attended thirteen games during the last season, which allowed me to identify different behaviors, performance and qualities of individual athletes under public scrutiny, which play a critical role in the level of commitment of each athlete in the sports.

5. Findings

This section presents key findings focusing on two central areas of team life: (1) the dynamics of the team environment and (2) the history and prior experience of players, both of which contribute to

the development of leadership traits among female athletes. Several common themes emerged particularly around teamwork, time investment, and the role of background and sport type in shaping leadership development. Although many participants shared similar experiences in team bonding and communal motivation, their individual trajectories reveal critical differences shaped by self-expectation, athletic context, and personal history.

5.1. Teamwork and Shared Experience

Across all cases, participants emphasized the centrality of team cohesion and the emotional weight of shared experience. Athletes often framed their growth not only through individual improvement but through moments of "being in it together"—during drills, travel, or even disappointment.

Lauren, a member of the nationally competitive rowing team, captured this best:

"We're all in the same boat—literally. Like, if one person's off, it throws everyone off. You learn to work together fast."

Rowing, with its synchronized physical demands and zero-tolerance for individualism, necessitates a particularly strong sense of interdependence. Observations in practices in lacrosse as well as in crew, supported this: teammates were often seen correcting each other's form not out of competition but mutual accountability. The coach rarely intervened unless safety was at stake—trusting athletes to self-manage. This illustrates a team structure where peer-driven discipline fosters both leadership and collective efficiency.

Similarly, Mia, a varsity basketball player, emphasized how comfort and familiarity enhanced her connection with her team:

"I've been playing ball with girls like this since middle school—it's just where I feel most like myself."

Mia was frequently observed laughing and offering advice to younger players, positioning herself as a natural social anchor within the team. Her long history with the sport appeared to contribute to her self-assurance and informal leadership.

5.2. The Role of Self-Expectation

While team bonding was a common thread, self-expectation emerged as a crucial differentiator in how leadership was performed and perceived. Some athletes approached their roles with a heightened sense of internal responsibility, while others appeared more passive or dependent on external validation.

Sophia's story reflects this divide. Her experience in team sports was heavily influenced by her aspirations to make the varsity team and become captain. However, her motivation plateaued once these goals were uncertain:

"If I'm not making varsity, what's the point of doing extra stuff? I'm just trying to play and keep up."

Despite having the capacity for leadership, Sophia's lack of self-driven initiative limited her development. During practices, she followed directions but rarely offered help to others or showed engagement beyond required tasks. This passive engagement suggests that goal clarity and internal motivation are prerequisites for leadership emergence in some cases.

In contrast, Lauren's internal drive was evident:

"We have a national regatta coming up. I know my teammates rely on me, and I won't be the one to slow us down."

Her leadership was expressed through self-discipline and consistency. She routinely stayed after practice to refine her stroke and often led pre-row warmups. Coaches mentioned her as someone who "just does what needs to be done without being asked." Her performance was not for recognition, but out of a deep personal standard and team-oriented accountability.

5.3. Sport Type and Athletic Background

Another significant finding is how the type of sport and an athlete's background (family history, club experience, and prior exposure to competitive settings) shaped their leadership expression.

Isabella, who came from a family of athletes and had experience in club-level soccer, displayed a technical and compassionate leadership style. During interviews, she noted:

"I care more about whether I'm being a good teammate and doing the right drills than standing out."

Her observational data supports this, she often offered technical tips to younger teammates, sometimes even pausing her own drill to do so. While less vocal or dominant than others, her style revealed a quiet competence and ethical orientation, likely influenced by the value system instilled through her earlier sports involvement.

By contrast, Mia's leadership was more socially oriented and intuitive. Her comfort with the basketball team and her long-term identity as a player made her a natural connector. She often bridged subgroups, freshmen and seniors, starters and bench players, and used humor and warmth to build rapport.

"We all mess up. But if I can keep the mood chill, we play better."

This insight supports the idea that longevity and familiarity in a sport contribute to a confident and adaptive leadership presence, especially when technical proficiency is already established.

5.4. Background, Pressure, and Standards

Athletes from more competitive or high-pressure environments, such as Lauren, were not only more goal-driven but also experienced stricter standards from coaches and teammates.

"Our coach doesn't care how we feel—just that we're fast, synchronized, and ready."

This environment both cultivated discipline and instilled a sharper sense of leadership-by-example. In contrast, athletes from less competitive environments (like JV teams) had more room for experimentation, but often less consistent leadership development due to relaxed expectations.

6. Analysis

My research, based on interviews and observations with high-school-age girls participating in team sports, suggests that leadership development opportunities are not evenly distributed across participants. Players with prior athletic experience, whether through club teams or familial exposure, are more likely to assume leadership roles, internalize team values, and benefit from the developmental aspects of sports. In contrast, newer or less experienced players often struggle to navigate team demands and may even disengage when they feel overwhelmed or marginalized.

As data shows, athletes with high self-expectation are more likely to internalize responsibility, take initiative, and influence others. These behaviors are core components of leadership. High self-expectation functions as a motivational engine, pushing athletes to act beyond basic compliance. Self-expectation gives athletes the autonomy and psychological ownership necessary for leadership to flourish. It transforms the team setting from a passive environment into a dynamic arena for growth, particularly for young women who are still navigating gendered expectations around authority and visibility. For example, athletes like Lauren were observed initiating drills, staying late to practice, and encouraging peers—all without formal titles or direction. This demonstrates that when girls view themselves as accountable not only to coaches but to teammates and their own internal standards, they begin to perform leadership.

Additionally, girls who came into the team environment with previous sports experience or family exposure were better equipped to lead in ways that were collaborative, confident, and emotionally intelligent. They were more comfortable giving feedback, managing group tension, or supporting teammates after failures—skills critical for leadership but often underdeveloped in youth without early exposure to structured sports or role models. These athletes already possessed an internalized understanding of sports culture and leadership expectations, which helped them model behaviors like

resilience, team-first mentality, and ethical decision-making. In environments where formal training in leadership is rare, this kind of lived experience becomes a substitute form of preparation—especially valuable in high school settings.

Interestingly, at the varsity level, coaching style serves as an equity factor in developing leadership traits, either widen or narrow the leadership development gap. This finding underscores the importance of inclusive team cultures where newer athletes are not only welcomed but actively supported in developing leadership potential. Intentional efforts by team leaders and returning players to mentor and include novices may help democratize access to the transformative aspects of sports [19]. A hands-off coaching style, such as the one observed on the varsity team, allows high-functioning athletes to lead organically—but may leave newer or less confident players behind. Conversely, hands-on coaching, more common on JV teams, nurtures baseline skills but can limit autonomy and initiative if overly prescriptive. Coaching is the primary institutional mechanism for leadership scaffolding. Without intentional strategies to cultivate leadership across experience levels, only already-prepared students will grow. This creates an uneven playing field and perpetuates privilege-based leadership development. Coaches who adapt their styles to student readiness can ensure that leadership potential is more equitably distributed.

7. Conclusion

This study finds that sports participation does foster leadership development in high school girls—but not uniformly. Leadership traits such as initiative, confidence, responsibility, and peer mentorship emerge most clearly among athletes with high self-expectation, extensive prior experience, and access to coaching environments that encourage autonomy while offering appropriate scaffolding. However, these developmental pathways are not guaranteed. Instead, they are shaped by internal motivation, social dynamics, and the design of team structures.

This underscores an important practical implication: sports programs must intentionally equalize the distribution of leadership development opportunities. Coaches and athletic departments should not assume that leadership will emerge organically or only through formal roles like captain. Instead, they must proactively cultivate inclusive environments, where newer or less experienced players are mentored, given voice, and offered scaffolded leadership roles appropriate to their stage of development. Doing so ensures that the long-term personal, academic, and professional benefits of athletics are more widely and equitably shared among young women.

Future studies should explore how these dynamics play out across different divisions (e.g., public vs. private schools, small vs. large programs) and levels of competitiveness. Comparative research could assess whether similar leadership development patterns hold in lower-resourced schools or in co-ed environments. Moreover, longitudinal research tracking athletes beyond high school would shed light on whether early leadership experiences in sports translate into civic, academic, or professional leadership later in life.

In sum, high school sports hold transformative potential—but only if programs are designed to develop leadership intentionally, equitably, and with an eye toward long-term impact. Empowering the next generation of female leaders begins not only with opportunity, but with the structures that ensure all young women are positioned to lead.

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