Girls and sport - increasing participation through to the Upper Sixth

Vignettes from five high-participation schools explain the most striking finding in HMC’s 2015 survey of pupil involvement in sports and competitive fixtures.

Douglas Robb (Gresham’s)

Sport is an integral part of education at Gresham’s and Gresham’s girls’ love of sport is fostered in many ways from Year 3 to Year 13.

The girls enjoy a full fixture programme that gives each the opportunity to take part in traditional team sports including hockey and netball. They also enjoy regular games sessions and are encouraged to take part regardless of their sporting ability. To ensure that each girl has the opportunity to take part in something they enjoy, we offer an alternative sporting programme which includes activities such as Zumba, Pilates, street dance, body-pump, fencing and horse riding.

The school firmly believes that by taking part in and enjoying any physical activity beyond the classroom, girls develop better self-esteem and experience higher mental awareness in the classroom. Gresham’s girls learn valuable lessons from healthy competition and participation in sport including respect, rules and the importance of teamwork.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, many of our girls, both former and current, have competed at local, national and international levels in sport, and act as an inspiration to their peers and role models for younger pupils. Great pride is taken in their sporting achievements, and the school regularly celebrates success. The school’s professional coaching staff, some of whom have competed at national and international level, also contribute enormously to the girls’ determination to do well on the pitch. And it is on the pitch where the girls come together and make lasting friendships.

Top Tips

- Offering flexibility in terms of sporting opportunities is key for successful participation.

Louise Hall, Director of Sport, Fitness and Wellbeing, Benenden School

The holistic programme of Sport, Fitness and Wellbeing at Benenden provides an outstanding range of physical activities and associated opportunities. This helps us to meet our overall school aim of giving each pupil a complete education in which she fulfils all that school life has to offer so that she leaves us as a confident, positive young woman truly prepared for her future.

We strongly believe in imparting the importance of a lifetime habit of physical activity (hopefully many more than they enjoy and are good at), and we appreciate the importance of accruing long-term habits with respect to maintaining an active and healthy lifestyle. We want pupils to be happy, inspired and proud of their achievements, whilst also taking responsibility for themselves.

Top Tips

- Be creative and innovative with your curriculum/curriculum programme, ensuring variety without excessive competition.
- The development of the Student Sports & Exercise Committee and Parents’ Sports Forum has been extremely influential in enabling effective two-way communication between the department, pupil body and parents.
- The sports are Lacrosse, Netball, Tennis, Squash, Hockey, Swimming, Athletics, Trampoline, Racquets, Cricket, Judo, Karate, Fencing and Badminton.

Our aim is that everyone participates regularly in activity and can access competition if they wish, but also that our top teams are consistently successful in competition.

We do recognise, however, that team sport is not for everyone and that modern fitness disciplines or less mainstream sports might prove more attractive to some girls. This is reflected in our compulsory Year 7-13 PE curriculum. Although more rigid in the younger years, we develop skills and expose girls to different experiences; it is flexible in terms of options-based offering on the girls progress.

We offer 14 different sports with coaching clubs, and recreational and competitive opportunities. Our annual calendar sees more than 1,000 sports fixtures, with teams from A to F level involved.

Our Inter-House programme is wide-ranging, targeting all year groups in many of these sports, as well as introducing other activities, and we also offer a plethora of pool-based and exercise and fitness classes. Furthermore, extensive opportunities are provided for girls to benefit from guest speakers, workshops and theoretical lectures that support practical performances.

Ruth Mercer (Godolphin & Latymer)

Sport is central to success at Godolphin and Latymer – encouraging each girl to build valuable, lifelong skills as well as enjoy their time at school. We don’t just pay lip service to this: we actively promote sport, with girls being encouraged to learn to fail, not just to win, and to develop a wide range of interests and talents. Participation in sport and other extracurricular activities is praised as much as academic success.

Our girls need to be able to approach the future with confidence and resilience that will enable them to be happy and successful, resilient in the face of adversity and willing to persevere when necessary, appreciative of their worth as individuals but also very much aware of the importance of being able to work effectively with others.

How, specifically, does this relate to sport? We believe that sport and fitness being important and lasting health and wellbeing benefits for every single girl, not just the ultra-sportswoman. In team sport, the girls learn valuable social lessons and to work collaboratively. They make split-second decisions, and they learn about what makes a good coach and a good player. They make friends.

In team and in individual sports, they learn how to work towards a goal, to master basic and fundamental skills first in order to progress; they later learn to take setbacks in their stride and to be resilient.

Given this powerful rationale, it is imperative that we provide opportunities for each and every girl to enjoy sport. At girls throughout the school take part in varied activities and many in extracurricular activities. In each year group, we run multiple squads, and all girls who wish to play, for example, netball or hockey, can do so. There are six netball teams in Year 7 that compete with each other and with other girls in our development clubs, and play matches internally. Over 100 Year 9 girls participate in extracurricular hockey and a similar number in netball. In Year 10, we run six U15s netball teams and two U15s hockey squads while the PE department adopts a highly inclusive approach so that all girls feel that participation, as well as competition, is beneficial. House matches and activities provide a range of extra- and non-competitive opportunities.

Top Tips

- Simple things such as allowing girls to travel to and from school in PE kit and to wear their kit in other lessons helps encourage participation and reduce self-consciousness about appearance during and after sport – they don’t even think about it.
- Sporting blogs, tweets and our sports portal encourage parental involvement and allow participation and success to be celebrated.

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We recognise that all girls, but especially those in older year groups, enjoy variety in sport. Popular choices include rock climbing (via a climbing wall), tennis, dance clubs, strength and conditioning, basketball, volleyball, tennis, dance, netball, badminton, gymnastics, indoor hockey, fencing, rock boxing and martial arts clubs.

We can also offer more from Year 9 upwards, which is very well-supported. Most activities are led by the fully qualified staff, but a number are led by the girls themselves.