THE ROLE OF ATHLETE AS CONTRIBUTOR TO SOCIAL STATUS
IN SCHOOL AGE AND ADOLESCENT FEMALES

by

WILLIAM A. LINDSTROM, JR.

(Under the direction of Michele Lease, Ph.D.)

This study sought to describe the relation between athletic participation and social status for females through two methods: a historical review and an empirical study. Within the historical review, the research addressing females, athletics, and social status was traced from the seminal works of the 1960’s to the current status of social perception. Within the empirical study, the relation between athletic ability and social status for females was analyzed using peer nomination methods in an elementary school sample. To a moderate degree, social status for girls was related to peer-rated athletic skills. Further analyses revealed that girls perceived a stronger relation between athletic ability and social status than boys. Based on evidence provided in the historical review and empirical study, it was argued that the relation is increasing, and athletic ability is becoming a more significant predictor of social status in females.

INDEX WORDS: Social status, Athletic ability, Social preference, Perceived popularity, Peer nominations, Sociometric, Gender
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For Christian.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

This study sought to describe the relation between athletic participation and social status for females through two methods: a historical review and an empirical study. It was the author’s intent to briefly summarize the historical research describing the relation, and to follow that description with a study of the current magnitude of the relation among elementary school females, in order to examine the association between the constructs. Based on a number of factors apparent over the second half of the twentieth century, including increasing participation, expanding involvement in aggressive sports, and emerging female role models, it appeared possible that participation in athletics is becoming a more significant predictor of social status for females.

Initially within the historical review, the developments in female sports over the past 40 years were described, with a focus on those factors suggestive of an increasing influence for athletic participation as a social status determinant for females. A review of the research relating athletic participation by females to various methods of assessing social status followed, from the seminal works of the 1960’s to the current status of participation and social perception. Including populations ranging from the elementary to high school grade levels, both emerging research themes and indicators of progress made in the acceptance of the female athlete as a viable role for achieving peer acceptance were described.

The empirical study attempted to more directly address the possibility of an increasing relation between athletic ability and social status for females by analyzing
such a relation for an elementary school sample. Using peer nomination methods, the
authors empirically addressed the question, “Is athletic ability becoming a more
significant predictor of social status for elementary school females?” It was hypothesized
that given females’ increased participation in athletics, athletic skills were becoming a
more significant predictor of social status for females.

Abstract

Despite its importance for boys, athleticism has been considered irrelevant as a
predictor of social status for girls. Since Title IX, however, there has been a steady
increase in female participation in a broadening range of events, and role models have
emerged, suggesting that the predictors of social status for females might be changing.
Within the review, the history of research addressing females, athletics, and social status
was traced from the seminal works of the 1960’s to the current status of social
perception. A specific focus was given to emerging research themes, as well as the
progress that has been made in the acceptance of athlete as a viable role for achieving
high social status for elementary to high school females.
CHAPTER 2
THE ROLE OF ATHLETE AS CONTRIBUTOR TO SOCIAL STATUS IN SCHOOL-AGE AND ADOLESCENT FEMALES: FROM PRE-TITLE IX TO 2000 AND BEYOND

Children gain peer acceptance by excelling at something valued by other children, and there is much evidence that athletic skills are valued by other children. (Evans & Roberts, 1987, p. 23)

Research across disciplines over the past 40 years repeatedly has identified athletic ability as one of the most significant criteria for achieving high social status for boys (Adler & Adler, 1998; Coie & Dodge, 1988; Coleman, 1961; Holland & Andre, 1994; Thirer & Wright, 1985; Williams & White, 1983). However, a relatively small number of studies have examined the role of athletic participation in determining social status for females over the same period. Over that time, the results were fairly consistent in indicating the influential roles of grooming, socioeconomic status, and physical appearance (Adler & Adler, 1998; Goldberg & Chandler, 1989), but minimal influence of athletic participation on social status for girls.

Despite the stability of the findings, a closer look at the historical developments of females in athletics suggested the possibility of an increasing relation with social status. Though there has been some debate regarding the benefits of its passage, Title IX of the Education Amendments in 1972 dramatically increased the opportunity for young girls to participate in interscholastic athletics. Subsequent growth in participation quickly led to additional indicators of an increasingly influential social role for the female athlete. Female participation quickly spread from those sports identified as
appropriate for females due to their “graceful” and “aesthetically-pleasing” presentation of participants (Metheny, 1967) to sports that required behaviors more often associated with the masculine stereotype, such as running, jumping, and aggressive competition. Particularly over the past few decades, female athletes in “sex-inappropriate” (Metheny, 1967) sports such as soccer, basketball, hockey, and softball had success in Olympic and other international scale events, creating a cohort of highly successful female athletes who were exposed by the media as role models that were competitive, yet able to maintain their femininity. In addition, the increases in females participating in nontraditional sports were found in all ages, from school age to the professional level (National Federation of State High School Association, 2002; Womens Sports Foundation, 2001). Such evidence suggested the possibility that the perception of females who participated in sex-inappropriate sports was changing and that participation in athletics was becoming a more significant predictor of social status for girls.

The goal for this review was to describe female athletic participation and its relation to social status over the past 40 years. First, the evolving participation and social developments of females in athletics that have occurred since Title IX (1972) were briefly described. Second, this review traced the history of research relating athletic participation to social status in females, from the seminal works of Coleman (1961) and Metheny (1967) in the 1960’s to the current status of participation and social perception of female athletes. Indicators of both stability and progress in the acceptance of the female athlete as a viable role for achieving social status in the elementary to high school grade levels were addressed. Research findings were presented in defined eras: Pre-Title IX (1972): Foundations for Research; Post-Title IX: 1973 to 1990; and Post-Title IX: 1991 and Beyond.

Females in Sports from 1961 to 2000: A Backdrop of Change

During the past 40 years, evidence of an increasingly influential societal role for the female athlete was prevalent. Society developed from an era where competitive
participation by girls was discouraged (Metheny, 1967) to the current status of professional and international recognition. Within the following review, three indicators of change are presented: expanding participation, broadening sport participation, and an increase in the number of role models. The vast increases in participation within recent decades reflected an overwhelming shift from an avoidance of competitive activities to a growing enthusiasm to be involved in athletic endeavors. The domain of broadening sport type served as evidence of an increasing willingness to venture into highly competitive and aggressive sport domains. Further, a growing number of role models encouraged continued growth, as well as provided evidence of the female in athletics as the norm, as opposed to the exception.

*Expanding Participation*

Prior to the social changes brought about by the shifting political climate of the 1970’s, the role of athlete held minimal influence in the female social world. Participation in athletics at the secondary and post-secondary levels was primarily limited to non-competitive play days and sports days (Metheny, 1967). In the 1970’s, socio-political and cultural changes sparked new perceptions of the role of women in the United States, and the athletic domain was a major benefactor. In addition to the Women’s Movement (Kane, 1987) of the period, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 generated legal changes that reached the athletic world. Though there was no explosion of female sports participation, educational institutions began a lengthy process of providing equal opportunity for females to pursue athletic endeavors, and, as a result, interscholastic athletic teams for girls appeared across a wider variety of sports. The ramifications of the increased opportunities became evident in the 1990’s. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, female participation in high school athletics “increased by 623 percent” from 1971 to 1993 (National Center for Education Statistics, 1996, p. 3). The growth continued, with a new record mark set for the school year of 2000-2001 (National Federation of State High School Association, 2002).
A Broader Array of Sports

In an influential work on the social perception of sport, *Connotations of Movement in Sport and Dance*, Metheny (1967) used the social climate of athletics to generate a representation of the unspoken rules that appeared to govern women’s participation in sport. According to these rules (with some stipulations made based on socio-economic status, race, and level of competition), females were excluded from sports that involved bodily contact, used forceful movements, and required long distances. Sports such as wrestling, boxing, weightlifting, and longer races were thus considered inappropriate, while events such as tennis, golf, and figure skating were acceptable.

Since that time, legal and social developments have led to a dramatic increase in the participation of females in sports identified by Metheny (1967) as “sex-inappropriate.” Changes were evident at the scholastic, Olympic, and professional levels. According to the National Federation of State High School Association (2002), as of 2000, basketball was the most popular female sport, followed by such nontraditional activities as outdoor track and field, volleyball, fast pitch softball, and soccer. Events added in Olympic competitions included such nontraditional sports as ice hockey, weightlifting, triathlon, taekwondo, water polo, soccer, and softball. In addition, the 1990’s involved the emergence of professional sports leagues in nontraditional female sports such as basketball and soccer, allowing this newer class of female athlete to choose competitive athletics as a career (Womens Sports Foundation, 2001).

Increasing Numbers of Role Models

Whereas the increases in participation occurred gradually over the past 40 years, the visibility of the female athlete increased dramatically in the 1990’s. In the past, it was common for authors (e.g. Eder & Kinney, 1995; Kane, 1988) to refer to the lack of visibility of female role models as a significant obstacle to the development of an athletic contribution to social status. During the late 1990’s, however, the development of professional leagues and increased participation in high profile international events such
as the Olympics resulted in a tremendous growth in the visibility of the competitive female athlete.

Numerous successes of women’s athletic teams in “sex-inappropriate” sports in the United States garnered a tremendous amount of media coverage during this period. In well-attended and often nationally televised events, the United States women won gold medals in softball, basketball, and soccer in the 1996 Summer Olympics, won the gold medal in hockey in the 1998 Winter Olympics, and won the World Cup of soccer in 1999 in front of 90,000 attending fans (Womens Sports Foundation, 2001).

With these accomplishments and the development of professional leagues came commercial exposure and financial opportunities through endorsements. Whereas young females prior to this time were limited mostly to sex-appropriate female athletes and male athletes as role models, young females of the 1990’s were able to see female athletes accepted, revered, and even paid for their accomplishments in arenas of aggressive and physical competition.

The growth in participation, acceptance, and influence of the female athlete over the second half of the twentieth century was undeniable. However, within this backdrop of growth and change, research assessing the influence of athletic participation as a determinant of social status was not producing findings reflective of the changing times.

Relation Between Social Status and Athletic Participation

The following is a review of the research findings relating athletic participation and social status in each of three eras: Pre-Title IX [1972]: Foundations for Research, Post-Title IX: 1973 to 1990, and Post-Title IX: 1991 and Beyond. The findings were used to indicate the influence of the role of athletic participation in the social status system of females for the described era. However, within the reviewed studies, definitions of principal terminology have not always been consistent, and methods of determining the relation between athletic participation and social status have varied widely. Due to the differences between studies, four domains of research findings were
considered within each era: (a) peer-perceptions of social status and athletic variables, (b) self-perception of social status and athletic variables, (c) integrated methods that did not involve separate assessments of social status and athletic variables, and (d) related issues. In addition, the majority of studies assessed the contribution of being a successful athlete, whereas others addressed simple participation. Where significant, the differences were specified.

The first domain addressed the relation between social status as rated by peers and athletic participation (to be called peer-perception studies). The studies of this category were linked by a methodology examining correlations between peer ratings of social status of individuals within the peer group and various types of assessments of athletic participation and ability. Such research assessed social status through methods such as using “like most” and “like least” nominations (Coie, Dodge, and Coppotelli, 1982), and assessed athletic variables using peer nominations (Boivin & Begin, 1989; Newcomb & Bukowski, 1983) or coaches’ ratings (Buhrmann & Jarvis, 1971).

The second domain addressed was the relation between self-perceptions of social status and various methods of assessing athletic participation and ability (to be called self-perception studies). The studies of this category were linked by a methodology requiring an individual to assess their personal perception of their own social status. The self-ratings were then correlated with various ratings of athletic ability and participation (Weiss & Duncan, 1992; Rose, Larken, & Berger, 1997).

Whereas the previously described peer- and self-perception categories relied on separate assessments of social status and athletic participation, the research of the third domain assessed the relation between athletic participation and social status through direct questions with underlying assumptions. Because the third domain did not assess social status and athletic participation separately, it was termed integrated methods. Such research included remembrance preference studies, popularity criteria studies, and relationship preference studies. A large number of studies termed remembrance
*preference* studies mimicked the methodology established by Coleman (1961). Specifically, significance of status roles was determined by asking students, “If you could be remembered here at school for one of the three things below, which one would you want it to be (p. 29)?” Respondents ranked provided options, such as athletic star, high academic achievement, participation in extracurricular activities, and being a part of the popular crowd. Within Coleman’s study and the multiple ensuing replications, athletic participation was typically referred to as “being good at sports” (Buchanan, Blankenbaker, & Cotton, 1976), “being an athlete” (Thirer & Wright, 1985), or “athletic star” (Feltz, 1978; Williams & White, 1983; Kane, 1988; Holland, 1994). *Popularity criteria* studies also typically used methodologies similar to Coleman’s (1961), who gathered student responses to the question, “Which of these items is most important in making a girl popular with the boys (girls) around here (p. 47)?” Like the previous remembrance preference question, respondents were required to rank provided options. *Relationship preference* studies addressed the relation between athletic participation and social status by asking individuals who they would most prefer to date, with choices including non-athletes, athletes, and athletes who participated in specific sports (Kane, 1988).

The final domain discussed, related issues, included research on other topics relevant to females in sports and social status. Such studies included research on *sport appropriateness, goal orientation,* and *role conflict.* In *sport appropriateness* studies, social perceptions of individuals regarding females in various sports were used to assess which sports were considered socially acceptable for female participation. *Goal orientation* studies addressed the differing motivations behind participation in sports according to gender, whereas *role conflict* studies addressed the seeming incompatibility between feminine behavior and athletic behavior. Thus, within each time period, the review addressed the varied types of evidence indicative of the existing relation between athletic participation and social status for females.
Pre-Title IX: Foundations for Research

Relevant findings regarding the relation between athletic participation and female social status prior to the passage of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 were limited to one peer-perception study conducted by Buhrmann and Jarvis (1971) and one integrated methods study conducted by Coleman (1961). Studies addressing self-perception and related issues from the period typically failed to include the appropriate age groups or an athletic variable, as did the majority of the research utilizing peer nomination methods (Bonney & Powell, 1953; Kuhlen, & Lee, 1943; Smith, 1950).

Peer-perception

Research regarding peer-perception during this era included a study by Buhrmann and Jarvis (1971) on athletes in rural high schools. They assessed the correlation between athletic ability as rated by coaches and social status as rated by peers. They reported a primary finding that indicated that female athletes exceeded non-athletes on all measures of status assessed. The results, however, were not supported in later research regarding the contribution of athletic participation to social status for high school females.

Integrated methods

Coleman’s (1961) seminal work entitled The Adolescent Society: The Social Life of the Teenager and its Impact on Education provided a thorough insight into the social experience of the American adolescent in the educational setting. Coleman addressed the factors related to social status through integrated methods, specifically remembrance preference and popularity criteria studies. When asking individuals how they preferred to be remembered, or what criteria were important to attaining high social status, participants were provided with options that Coleman perceived to be most salient in the high school culture. Although an option regarding athletic participation was provided for males, it was deemed irrelevant for females and not included. The significance of the findings to the current study lay in two specific areas: (a) Coleman’s methods established methodologies that would later be imitated on multiple occasions, and (b)
Coleman’s choice to not include an athletic option for females was later supported by multiple follow-up studies that indicated the athletic role held minimal significance as a predictor of status for girls at the high school age level. Thus, while the results of Buhrmann and Jarvis (1971) suggested athletic participation was an influential determinant of the social status of high school females, Coleman believed athletic participation was an irrelevant factor.

*Post-Title IX: 1973 to 1990*

The woman athlete is no longer unusual, no longer a freak, and she plays her games with greater knowledge, grace and skill than perhaps any of her predecessors. If she has yet a distance to go in gaining public acceptance and a commensurate reward, the way is at least and at last open to her. (Heistand, 1982, p. 324)

From 1973 to 1990, the visibility of the female athlete escalated, and an increasing amount of research reflected a growing interest in the role of females in sports. Research findings, however, failed to indicate progress in the influence of the athletic role within the female social status system. Studies during this period included those described as peer-perception studies and integrated methods studies. In addition, the research regarding related issues increased and included such topics as sport appropriateness, role conflict, and goal orientation.

*Peer-perception*

During the period from 1973 to 1990, research studies commonly assessed determinants of social status using peer nomination methods. The majority of the studies, however, did not include an assessment of athletic prowess (Cantrell & Prinz, 1985; Coie et al., 1982; Green, Vosk, Forehand, & Beck, 1981; Ladd, 1983; Vosk, Forehand, Parker, & Rickard, 1982) and several included only male subjects (Dodge, 1983; Coie & Kuperschmidt, 1983). A large number of other peer-nomination studies included preschool aged participants or younger (Goldman, Corsini & deUrioste, 1980; Masters & Furman, 1981; McGuire, 1973; Peery, 1979; Rubin & Daniels-Beirness, 1983; Wasik,
Three particular studies, however, included athletic participation as a variable, involved females, and addressed the relevant age group. All involved elementary and middle school children, and findings tended to suggest that physically competent children of both genders enjoyed greater social status (Evans & Roberts, 1987).

Boivin and Begin (1989) used peer nominations to assess the relations between peer status, self-perceptions of social competence, and teacher-perceptions of social competence in 9- and 11-year-old children. The scale used to assess social competence included a domain related to athletic ability. The findings indicated a relatively strong relation between ratings of athletic ability and social status. The authors concluded that (a) popular children in general had higher self-perceptions of athletic ability than average children, and (b) others rated popular children as more competent athletically than average children. Gender interaction findings revealed no differences for males and females, suggesting self-perception of athletic competence was positively related to peer status for both males and females.

Gross and Johnson (1984) and Gross, Johnson, Wojnilower, and Drabman (1985) used a battery of athletic skill tests and peer social status ratings to determine the relation between athletic ability and social status in children aged 9 to 13 and 7 to 13, respectively. In both studies, the findings indicated that social status was significantly correlated with the majority of athletic skill measures for both males and females. The results should be considered only in the context of a limited population, however. Both samples were composed exclusively of children who had chosen to participate in a sports fitness summer camp and likely valued athletic ability to a greater degree than the average child. Overall, findings from studies during this period using peer nomination ratings as indicators of social status revealed a moderately strong contribution of athletic ability to achieving high social status for elementary and middle school-aged children.
Integrated methods

In contrast to the peer-perception studies, the vast majority of research using integrated methods included individuals of high school ages. The exception was a study in 1976 by Buchanan et al. who used the popularity criteria methodology with elementary school children. The results of that study supported the earlier reported findings of a moderate contribution of athletic participation to social status in elementary school. When asked the question, “Which of the following would make you popular among your friends?” and provided the options of athletic skill, good looks, academic ability, and family wealth, females selected athletic skill second only to strong academic ability.

Whereas findings indicated a moderate contribution of athletic participation to social status for females in the elementary school age, high school findings using integrated methods from the period of 1973 to 1990 consistently suggested minimal significance for the role. Popularity criteria research included three follow-up studies of Coleman’s (1961) work, with the exception that they included an option related to athletic participation. Feltz (1978) reported that the criteria of “in the leading crowd” and “leader in activities” were the primary predictors of status when rated by females, whereas the new option of athlete placed fifth of seven roles. When males ranked the importance of activities for females to achieve status, the role of athlete tied for next to last place with “having the right family background.” Thirer and Wright’s (1985) replication found that males placed the role of athlete fourth of five in making females popular with males, whereas females placed it as the least influential predictor. The authors concluded that, even with Title IX, peers of both genders did not value athletic performance for female adolescents. Goldberg and Chandler (1989) also evaluated popularity criteria in high school students. For girls to be popular with boys, boys ranked the role of “outstanding athlete” as least likely to aid status, whereas females ranked “outstanding athlete” as third of five. Though the authors reported the greater
percentages indicated an increasing influence for athletics, format differences from the previous studies, such as utilizing a 5-point Likert scale instead of a forced choice format, limited the ability to directly compare the results.

Other findings using integrated methods addressed remembrance preference. Whereas Coleman failed to include an athletic option for females, the follow-up studies repeatedly included “athletic star” (Feltz, 1978; Kane, 1988; Thirer & Wright, 1985; Williams & White, 1983) or “outstanding athlete” (Goldberg & Chandler, 1989). When provided the option of “athletic star” or “outstanding athlete,” participants chose it as the least significant role for which they would like to be remembered in three studies (Feltz, 1978; Kane, 1988; Thirer & Wright, 1985) and the third least significant of four choices in another (Williams & White, 1983). In the sole exception, Goldberg and Chandler (1989) presented findings in which “outstanding athlete” placed second of four options when addressed to high school females. However, the previously mentioned methodological differences limited direct comparison.

One of the more significant developments in the research regarding the role of athletics in female social status in the 1980’s was the consideration of Metheny’s (1967) sex-appropriate and sex-inappropriate sports. In an example of a relationship preference study, Kane (1988) reported results that suggested that sport type played a significant role in high school social status. The findings indicated that males preferred to date females who participated in sex-appropriate sports, and females preferred to be friends with females in sex-appropriate sports. Kane concluded “social acceptability of female sport participation remains heavily influenced by traditional views of what is considered ‘appropriate’ feminine behavior” (p. 263). In a second study, Kane (1987) used pictures and varied the information given to participants about the pictures, and found participants rated females labeled as sex-appropriate athletes as more attractive than sex-inappropriate female athletes. Kane reported there was an “enormous difference” (p. 108) between the attractiveness ratings of the sex-appropriate versus sex-inappropriate female athletes.
Related issues

Sport appropriateness, role conflict, and goal orientation research also emerged as significant areas of study during this period. The majority of the research addressed the high school age, though the sport appropriateness research included a study regarding elementary school aged children and two studies addressing adult perceptions of females in sports.

Whereas Selby and Lewko (1976) reported sport appropriateness results that indicated that elementary school females had more favorable attitudes toward females in sport than did males of similar ages, research including the adult population suggested an increasing acceptance of female athletes when compared to the perceptions of Metheny’s (1967) era. Snyder and Spreitzer (1983) used surveys administered to adults to determine changes “in the social acceptance of female participation in sports” (p. 3) from 1972 to 1981. The results indicated that the public saw participation in sex-appropriate sports (e.g., swimming, tennis, gymnastics) as acceptable, while having reservations regarding female participation in sex-inappropriate sports (e.g., track, basketball, and softball). They concluded that overall, attitudes toward the female athlete appeared to be improving. Hoferek and Hanick (1985) also included adult respondents and reported that the general consensus indicated participation in sports neither detracted from nor enhanced feminine qualities. Therefore, whereas Kane’s (1987, 1988) work indicated that traditional views of feminine behavior persisted in high school ages and limited the positive status effects of participation in nontraditional sports, findings reported by Snyder and Spreitzer (1983) and Hoferek and Hanick (1985) suggested that general attitudes of adults towards female athletes were improving.

During the period from 1973 to 1990, role conflict studies emerged, with conflict defined as “when the role expectations placed upon an individual are incompatible making it impossible for the person to conform to both sets of expectations at the same time” (Sage & Loudermilk, 1979, pp. 88-89). Based on sport’s emphasis on competition, aggression, and strength, it was assumed that the role of athlete was contradictory to the
traditional female role of nurturer, caregiver, and homemaker. Thus, it was assumed that athletic participation would lead to internal difficulties for female athletes.

Findings in the role conflict literature regarding females in athletics did not support that assumption, however. Assessing female high school athletes and non-athletes, Desertrain and Weiss (1988) concluded role conflict was not a significant concern. Anthrop and Allison (1983) presented findings that suggested similar results when studying high school female athletes. In addition, Anthrop and Allison concluded that the females in their study had little difficulty with how they saw themselves and had self-perceptions that accommodated for both femininity and athleticism. Thus, during this time period, it appeared that portions of society maintained a negative view of females in sports, but the athletes themselves were comfortable with their roles as females and athletes.

In 1986, Jackson and Marsh adopted a slightly different research method in their study of role conflict. The sample included women power-lifters, female high school athletes, and female high school non-athletes. The measure they used for sex-role identification allowed for separate measures of masculinity and femininity, negating the assumption that gender-role identity must be a single, bipolar variable. Like previous studies, the finding of role conflict was minimal. The groups did not differ on the scale of femininity or other areas of self-concept. The authors concluded that “female athletes can be more masculine without being less feminine, and female athletic involvement can have positive benefits without producing any loss in femininity or self-concept” (Jackson & Marsh, 1986, p. 198). The method of considering masculinity and femininity as separate constructs shed light on how it might be possible for female athletes to be aggressive and competitive, but also maintain a “feminine side” in line with social stereotypes.

Overall, the levels of role conflict found in female athletes participating in both sex-appropriate and sex-inappropriate sports were far less significant than researchers
expected. It should be noted that the studies reviewed focused on female athletes in high school who likely had participated in sports for several years, allowing time to process and resolve issues they experienced. It was also possible that athletes willing to defy traditional stereotypes had support sources such as family and friends that encouraged their growth.

The final area of study regarding related issues of athleticism and social status addressed goal orientation in high school students. Following Feltz’s (1978) suggestion that males and females differed in their motivation to participate in sports, several studies during the decade of the 1980’s pursued the construct of goal orientation. According to the findings of the period, the “meaning of sports participation is not the same for both genders” (Desertrain & Weiss, 1988, p. 580). Desertrain and Weiss (1988) noted that whereas the enjoyment males experienced from sports was directly related to the success they experienced as measured by wins, females enjoyed participating just as much when losing. In addition, females were more likely to report that their “personal performance was more important than the final outcome of the competition,” whereas males focused on winning as the success criteria (Desertrain & Weiss, 1988, p. 580). In 1989, Duda examined goal orientation among a group of high school students and reported findings that suggested females were less likely than males to perceive sport as a means to improve social status. Overall, the evidence supported the notion that males were more likely to use sports to enhance status among peers, whereas females were less likely to consider status as an outcome of participation.

In summary, an analysis of the developments of the period from 1973 to 1990 revealed that the contribution of athletic participation to female social status as judged by multiple methods changed very little from its minimal role prior to Title IX. The results supported a stagnant social system in which athletics held moderate influence at younger ages, but gradually deteriorated with age. Across various types of studies, including peer-perception and integrated methods studies, findings consistently indicated a moderate
contribution of athletic participation/ability to social status in elementary school, whereas findings repeatedly suggested minimal contribution at the high school level. Comparisons across the age groups were tenuous, however, due to contrasting study methods used with the different age populations. The majority of studies addressing the elementary school levels were peer-perception studies, whereas the studies focusing on the high school populations typically used integrated methods. By the close of this era, the amount and type of research regarding females in athletics and the effects on social status were increasing rapidly. The growth continued into the following decade with persistent replications and broadening theoretical frameworks.

Post-Title IX: 1991 and Beyond

With continued growth in the emphasis of sports for women in the United States (particularly with the success of American women in the 1984 Olympic Games and all of the accompanying publicity), a marked change in the criteria for female adolescent popularity relative to being an athlete may be at hand. (Thirer & Wright, 1985, 170)

With the dramatic increases in visibility and participation in the 1990’s, the possibility of a more influential status for the role of athlete in the female social structure appeared possible. Whereas a portion of the peer-perception studies of the previous decades included an athletics-related variable, the studies of the 1990’s typically did not. However, relevant self-perception studies emerged during this period. Such studies used self-ratings of acceptance by peers (Weiss & Duncan, 1992) and degree of social acceptance (Rose, Larken, & Berger, 1997) to assess social status. Consistent with previous periods, the majority of studies continued to assess social status through integrated methods. Finally, related issues studies of the period addressed sport appropriateness and goal orientation. Across the methodologies, the research findings for the relation between athletic participation and social status in the high school, middle school, and elementary school populations were surprisingly consistent with the results of earlier decades. Thus, while female athletes were making great strides in participation
and opportunities for sports variety were broadening during the 1990’s, the research of the decade did not indicate a concurrent shift in the social status realm.

**Self-perception**

While relevant *peer-perception* literature appeared to decrease during the 1990’s, research addressing *self-perception* of social status and athletic participation materialized. Such studies assessed social status through the perception of the owner of that status and correlated the result with various measures of physical competence. Two studies assessed the elementary school age group, and results indicated strong contributions of physical competence to self-perceptions of social status. In 1992, Weiss and Duncan utilized self-ratings and teacher-ratings of both physical competence and acceptance by peers to determine the relationship between physical skills and peer acceptance. According to the findings, a child’s “being good and believing that he or she is good in sport is strongly related to being successful in peer relations and perceiving acceptance by his or her peer group” (p. 184). In a study looking at students aged 8 to 12, Rose, Larken, and Berger (1997) reported results suggesting that poor coordination for both genders was associated with low self-perception of social acceptance, physical appearance, scholastic competence (mostly due to girls), and self worth (mostly due to girls).

**Integrated methods**

*Integrated methods* studies during the 1990’s followed the historically prevailing methods of *remembrance preference*, *popularity criteria*, and *relationship preference* studies. The exception was an ethnographic study of the social status system of elementary schools (Adler & Adler, 1998).

An examination of the findings reported from *remembrance preference* studies revealed no changes from previous decades. Both Holland and Andre (1994) and Goldberg and Chandler (1992) reported results indicating an insignificant role for athletic participation for high school and middle school females, respectively, in how they preferred to be remembered. However, Holland and Andre (1994) reported findings that
indicated females in smaller schools were more likely to want to be remembered as an athletic star than females in large schools, providing corroboration for Buhrmann and Jarvis’s (1971) earlier finding that high school athletes in small high schools exceeded non-athletes on all measures of status.

Table 2.1

*Summary of Studies Reflecting “How One Wants to be Remembered”*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study Authors</th>
<th>Ranked Choices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coleman (1961)</td>
<td>Leader in activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feltz (1978)</td>
<td>Most popular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feltz (1978)</td>
<td>Leader in activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Williams &amp; White (1983)</td>
<td>Most popular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thirer &amp; Wright (1985)</td>
<td>Brilliant student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kane (1988)</td>
<td>Leader in activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goldberg &amp; Chandler (1989)</td>
<td>Outstanding student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&amp; Andre Holland (1994)</td>
<td>Brilliant student</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to remembrance preference, Goldberg and Chandler (1991, 1992) addressed the issue of *popularity criteria*. The authors reported results with both middle and high school populations during this period that were consistent with previous decades. Their 1991 findings for the high school female population revealed that the option “being a member of the leading group” was deemed most influential by both
genders for females attaining higher social status, with little influence for the role of “outstanding athlete” (p. 218). In their 1992 findings, the authors did not mention the role of “star athlete” (p. 41) as a significant predictor of social status for middle school females.

*Popularity criteria* were also assessed in the elementary school population during the 1990’s. Chase and Dummer (1992) were able to replicate the 1976 findings by Buchanan et al. on academic and athletic ability as popularity criteria for elementary school girls. When rating what girls felt would make them popular, the significance of “being good in sports” maintained its position as the second most influential criterion. The stability of the findings for the role of athlete in this age group was impressive, and contrasted with the findings for the older populations. Though the evidence came from only two studies, it pointed to the role of athlete as being more accepted socially among the elementary school age group, though not to the extent for males (see Table 2.2).

Table 2.2

*Summary for Buchanan et al. and Chase and Dummer for Females*

| What Would You Most Like to Do in School? |
|--------------------------------------------------|-------------------|
| **Study Authors**                               | **Ranked Choices** |
| Buchanan et al. (1976)                           | Good grades       |
|                                                 | Be popular        |
|                                                 | *Be good in sports* |
| Chase and Dummer (1992)                          | Good grades       |
|                                                 | Be popular        |
|                                                 | *Be good in sports* |

| What Would Make You Popular/Well-liked Among Your Friends? |
|----------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|
| **Study Authors**                                        | **Ranked Choices** |
|                                                          |                   |
|                                                          |                   |
Buchanan et al. (1976)  Good grades  *Good in sports*  Good looks  
Have money  
Chase and Dummer (1992)  Good looks  *Good in sports*  Good grades  Have money  

In addition to their assessment of *remembrance preference*, Holland and Andre (1994) addressed *relationship preference*, and presented results indicating that high school males more often selected females in sex-appropriate sports than sex-inappropriate sports for dates. Incorporating the Holland and Andre findings with the previous results suggested that participating in sex-inappropriate sports failed to enhance social status to the extent that participating in sex-appropriate sports did.

Finally, in a thorough evaluation of the social culture of elementary school students, Adler and Adler (1998) identified the factors significant for achieving popularity and status for both males and females during the late 1990’s. Whereas athletic ability was noted as the most critical characteristic for males in achieving status, no mention of athletic ability was made for females. Instead, important factors for females in achieving popularity included family background, physical appearance, social development, and academic performance, domains traditionally valued for females.

**Related issues**

Research fitting the category of *related issues* during the 1990’s included studies regarding *sport appropriateness* and *goal orientation*. The results from the *sport appropriateness* literature up until 1990 suggested a transition in the opinions of adults regarding the social acceptability of females participating in sports that were previously considered nontraditional. Pederson and Kono (1990) reported similar results when replicating studies by Snyder and Spreitzer (1983) and Hoferek and Hanick (1985). Including undergraduate males and females responders, Pederson and Kono asked, “In your opinion, would participation in any of the following sports enhance/detract from a girl’s/woman’s feminine qualities (p. 785)?” Providing evidence for an increasing acceptance of female sport behavior, the authors reported “that participation in sports by
women does more to enhance femininity than detract from it, except for basketball” (p. 789).

Prior to 1990, goal orientation studies were typically limited to the high school population. In 1998, however, White, Duda, and Keller (1998) included children aged 10 to 12 in a follow-up to Duda’s (1989) study and reported findings that suggested that youth sport athletes were primarily task-oriented, with no significant differences between males and females. The differences that occurred across gender, however, included that males were more likely to perceive the function of sport to be “to increase social status and popularity” (p. 482), whereas females were more likely to perceive sport as a means towards mastery and physical fitness. When integrated with the findings of Desertrain and Weiss (1988) and Duda (1989), it appeared evident that female goals related more closely to the development of life-long skills, whereas male participation was more often focused on external benefits such as status attainment.

Overall, the decade of the 1990’s represented a time of tremendous growth in the number of female athletes, the successes they experienced, and the exposure they received in the media. Participation rates rose, athletes achieved great success on international stages, and the media embraced the new stars. Females participated in a greater variety of nontraditional sports. The progress, however, did not translate into growth as an influential determinant of social standing for middle and high school females. High social status remained tied to traditional factors such as appearance, being a part of the leading group, and being a leader in activities.

Conclusion

Research over the past 50 years indicated that the role of athlete has contributed little to the social status of females beyond the elementary age group, and it has failed to increase in influence with the growing participation of females in sports. Within the studies including samples of middle and high school students, traditional factors such as appearance, being a part of the leading crowd, being a leader in activities, family
background, social maturity, and academic performance maintained their influence. Thus, the research revealed an unchanging social system that failed to tie social status to athletic participation for females.

Through integrating the results across ages from elementary to high school, a relation between age and influence of athletic participation appeared evident. Results involving younger samples pointed to the possibility that athletic ability played a greater role in social status in the preadolescent years. When combined with the findings for the adolescent population, the trend of decreasing significance for athletic ability to social status was apparent, and coincided with the ages in which males and females became more interested in cross-gender relationships. It appeared, then, that the significance of the role of athlete to social status was strongly related to a developmental trajectory, and dwindled in significance as girls grew older and traditional social pressures were applied.

Many studies reported that females in athletics also tended to value multiple roles, suggesting that athletic participation was less significant as a singular determinant of the identity of females than it was for males. For example, Goldberg and Chandler (1991) reported that high school female athletes were much more likely than non-athletes to desire to be remembered for more than one role in school. In addition, with one exception (Goldberg & Chandler, 1989), the option of “leader in activities” repeatedly placed either first or second (Coleman, 1961; Feltz, 1978; Holland & Andre, 1994; Kane, 1988; Williams & White, 1983) of four choices in remembrance preference studies. Further, Buhrmann and Jarvis (1971) reported findings that indicated female athletes who attained high social status tended to be more active in multiple arenas of the school (e.g., social, academic, and athletic), suggesting that well-rounded individuals achieved higher social status than athletic specialists. The studies also indicated that goal orientations of female athletes remained focused on social opportunities, learning new skills, and personal growth, as compared to the competitive, social-comparison objectives of their male counterparts. In summary, it appears that a large portion of the females
participating in athletics might have chosen to do so because they simply were involved in a large number of activities, a phenomenon related to Goldberg and Chandler’s “multi-dimensional self-identity” (1991, p. 213). The evidence did not suggest this as a typical pattern for all females, but a possibility for athletic females.

The inferences made throughout the review, however, were limited by contrasting methodologies. The authors attempted to synthesize large amounts of information across multiple disciplines. Though attempts were made to extract supported conclusions from studies regardless of methodology and population, integrating such results provided a far less consistent picture than drawing conclusions across studies using consistent methods and populations.

Future research should continue to follow female athletic participation and its developing relation with social status, as indicators are suggestive of an imminent transition in social status criteria. A number of issues should be addressed. First, correlations reflecting the relation between female athletic participation and social status in future research should allow a more accurate assessment of the changing relationship between the constructs. Second, as participation in female sports becomes more competitive, a change in the female goal orientation for sport participation from a mastery approach to a performance approach is possible and should be assessed. Third, evaluation of role conflict for females in sports might be more likely to identify difficulties for females in the early teenage population than at younger or older ages. During early adolescence, peers are more influential, and athletic participation deviates from traditional gender roles valued by children at this age. Finally, further research on the influences of female participation in sports during early adolescence, with a focus on factors resulting in attrition as well as male perceptions of female athletes during this critical developmental period, is needed.

Nevertheless, the female athlete has emerged as a salient force in the popular culture of the United States, and her influence will likely continue to grow as young
females develop greater sports interest now that they have role models to follow and higher levels for which to aspire. Should the social status criteria adjust to reflect the changes within athletics, the benefactors will be young females who will have attained an additional method of achieving positive peer status, leading to a greater number of individuals given peer permission for self-acceptance.

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CHAPTER 3
ATHLETICS AND SOCIAL STATUS AMONG
ELEMENTARY SCHOOL GIRLS
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Abstract

The presented study examined the question “Is athletic ability becoming a more significant predictor of social status for elementary school girls?” The following types of peer nomination measures were collected: (a) athletic ability, (b) like-most/like-least, and (c) most popular/least popular. To a moderate degree, social status for girls was related to peer-rated athletic skills. Due to the presence of a gender biased nomination pattern, the authors examined the relation between athletic ability and social status as nominated by boys and girls separately. The analyses revealed that girls perceived a stronger relation between athletic ability and social status than boys, with findings holding across majority White and majority Black schools. It was argued that the relation is increasing, and athletic ability is becoming a more significant predictor of social status in females.

Athletics and Social Status Among Elementary School Girls

Athletic ability has been consistently identified across disciplines as one of the most significant criteria for achieving high social status for boys (Adler & Adler, 1998; Coie & Dodge, 1988; Coleman, 1961; Holland & Andre, 1994; Thirer & Wright, 1985; Williams & White, 1983). Research results regarding criteria significant for achieving
high social status for girls, however, have been consistent in indicating strong influence for grooming, socioeconomic status, and physical appearance, but minimal influence for athletic ability (Adler & Adler, 1998; Goldberg & Chandler, 1989). Since the adoption of Title IX, however, there has been a steady increase in girls’ participation in athletics, and highly visible role models have emerged (National Federation of State High School Association, 2002; Womens Sports Foundation, 2001). As a result, it is possible that athletic ability is becoming a more significant predictor of social status for girls. Thus, the present study examined the relation between athletic ability and social status for elementary school girls.

An Emerging Role

During the past 40 years, society has developed from an era where competitive participation by girls was discouraged (Metheny, 1967) to the current status of professional and international recognition for female athletes. Though there has been some debate regarding the benefits of its passage, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 generated legal changes that reached the athletic world. Educational institutions began a lengthy process of providing equal opportunity for girls to pursue athletic endeavors, and, as a result, interscholastic athletic teams for girls appeared across a wider variety of sports. The increased opportunities became evident in the 1990’s. The number of participants in girls’ athletics at the high school level grew dramatically over the past 40 years, and reached a record mark as of 2001 (National Federation of State High School Association, 2002). In addition, girls increasingly participated in sports that were historically considered inappropriate (nontraditional) for females due to involvement of bodily contact, forceful movements, and long distances (Metheny, 1967), such as basketball, softball, and soccer. Such events also were added in Olympic competitions (e.g., ice hockey, weightlifting, and soccer), and professional sports leagues emerged in nontraditional girls’ sports such as basketball and soccer (Womens Sports Foundation, 2001). Whereas female role models in athletics were rare prior to this time, young girls
of the 1990’s were able to see female athletes accepted, revered, and even paid for their accomplishments in arenas of aggressive and physical competition.

The growth in participation, influence, and acceptability of the female athlete over the second half of the twentieth century was undeniable. Such growth was boosted in the past 20 years as increased focus on health-related issues such as exercise and nutrition emerged. Within this backdrop of dramatic growth and change, however, research assessing the influence of athletic ability as a determinant of social status for girls was not always producing findings reflective of the changing times.

Relation to Social Status

Since the passage of Title IX, the majority of research on the relation between athletic ability and social status was conducted with high school populations. Findings failed to suggest athletic ability played a significant role in predicting high social status among adolescent girls (Feltz, 1978; Goldberg & Chandler, 1989, 1991; Holland & Andre, 1994; Kane, 1988; Thirer & Wright, 1985; Williams & White, 1983). Fewer studies addressing the contribution of athletic ability to social status for girls in elementary school were conducted. In the few that addressed that population, results regularly revealed a moderate level of influence for athletic ability. These previous research findings for elementary school children relied on self-ratings, qualitative descriptions, or used peer nominations. In the current study, the authors were interested in peer perceptions of athletic ability and social status, making the previous studies using peer nominations particularly relevant. However, when past studies used the peer nomination method, the authors failed to report results separately for boys and girls. For example, past studies tended to report that gender did not moderate the relation between status and athletic ability. In contrast, the current study relied on peer nominations of athletic ability and social status and reported results separately for boys and girls.

Studies conducted with elementary school age populations have tended to suggest that physically competent children of both genders enjoyed greater social status than their less physically competent peers (Evans & Roberts, 1987). One method of research that
indirectly addressed the contribution of athletic ability to social status in girls involved self-ratings of physical competence. In 1992, Weiss and Duncan utilized self-ratings of physical competence and acceptance by peers to determine the relation between physical skills and peer acceptance. According to the findings, a child’s “being good and believing that he or she is good in sport is strongly related to being successful in peer relations and perceiving acceptance by his or her peer group” (p. 184). Rose, Larken, and Berger (1997) reported results that corroborated the findings of Weiss and Duncan (1992). Their findings indicated that poor coordination for both genders was associated with low self-perception of social acceptance, physical appearance, scholastic competence (mostly due to girls), and self worth (mostly due to girls).

A similar method of research using self-ratings to assess the contribution of athletic ability to social status involved ranking of what criteria would make oneself popular (Buchanan, Blankenbaker, & Cotton, 1976; Chase & Dummer, 1992). When Buchanan et al. asked elementary school children whether they would rather be popular, make good grades, or be good in sports, both boys and girls preferred to make good grades. When asked the question, “Which of the following would make you popular among your friends?” and provided the options of athletic skill, good looks, academic ability, and family wealth, girls selected athletic skill second only to strong academic ability. Sixteen years after the 1976 study by Buchanan et al., Chase and Dummer (1992) replicated those findings. That is, the significance of “being good in sports” maintained its position as the second most influential criteria.

Peer nomination methods have been used over the past 40 years to examine the determinants of peer status. The majority of such studies, however, have not included an assessment of athletic prowess (e.g., Cantrell & Prinz, 1985; Coie, Dodge, & Coppotelli, 1982; Green, Vosk, Forehand, & Beck, 1981; Ladd, 1983; Vosk, Forehand, Parker, & Rickard, 1982) and several included only male subjects (e.g., Dodge, 1983; Coie & Kuperschmidt, 1983). A large number of other studies using peer nomination techniques
Three particular studies using peer nomination techniques to determine social status have included an assessment of athleticism and have included girls of elementary school age. First, Boivin and Begin (1989) used peer nominations and 9- and 11-year-old children in their study that examined the relation of self-perceptions, peer perceptions, and teacher perceptions across five domains, including a domain related to athletic ability. The Perceived Competence Scale (Harter, 1983) was employed to assess children’s sense of social competence across the domains. Teacher ratings were also obtained for children across three of those domains. Peer social status was determined as in sociometric research, using peer nominations of classmates they liked the most (i.e., like-most) and liked the least (i.e., like-least). A social preference variable was obtained by standardizing peer nominations of like-most and like-least within each classroom, followed by subtracting the like-least score from like-most score for each individual (Coie & Dodge, 1983). The authors reported a relatively strong relation between self- and teacher-rated athletic ability and peer-rated social preference. They concluded that (a) popular children in general had higher self-perceptions of athletic ability than average children, and (b) teachers rated popular children as more competent athletically than average children. Gender interaction findings revealed no differences for boys and girls, suggesting self-perception of athletic competence was related positively to peer status for both boys and girls. However, results were not reported separately for boys and girls, so it was not possible to directly compare the strength of the association between social status and athletic ability for boys versus girls.

Two earlier studies, however, assessed the correlation between peer-nominated social status and athletic ability separately for boys and girls. A study performed by Gross and Johnson (1984) with children aged 9 to 13 and a subsequent replication
(Gross, Johnson, Wojnilower, & Drabman, 1985) with children aged 7 to 13 used a battery of athletic tests to provide a measure of athletic skills for each child. To determine social status, peers were rated by their same-sex age group using such questions as “How much do you like to play with this child?” and “How much do you like to work with this child?” In both studies, the authors reported that social status was significantly correlated with the majority of athletic skill measures for both boys and girls. The results should be considered only in the context of a limited population, however. Both samples were composed exclusively of children who had chosen to participate in a sports fitness summer camp and likely valued athletic ability to a greater degree than the average child.

In contrast, Adler and Adler’s (1998) ethnographic study addressing elementary school boys’ and girls’ popularity suggested differing results. Whereas athletic ability was noted as the most critical characteristic for boys in achieving status, no mention of athletic ability was made for girls. Instead, important factors for girls in achieving popularity included family background, physical appearance, sophisticated social skills, and academic performance, domains traditionally valued for girls. One major difference from the previously noted studies could account for the contrasting findings. Social status in the Adler and Adler study was equated with perceived popularity (i.e., degree to which the child is socially prestigious and visible) as opposed to social preference (i.e., degree to which the child is liked/disliked by peers; Lease, Kennedy, & Axelrod, 2002), as in studies conducted within the sociometric status literature.

Overall, few studies have been conducted to assess the relation between social status and athletic ability in the elementary school population for girls as well as boys. The results of those few studies have been inconsistent depending on the way athletic ability and social status have been assessed. To further address the issue in a method contrasting with previous research, the current study attempted to discern the relation of athletic ability and social status through peer nominations of both constructs (i.e., social
preference and perceived popularity), with results reported separately by gender, as well as through report of results for both majority White and majority Black schools.

Current Study

The historical developments of girls in sports suggested that athletic ability might be becoming a stronger determinant of social status for girls. Thus, the current study attempted to assess the degree to which athletic ability is related to social status for both elementary school-age boys and girls, according to the peer group. Within this objective, three specific issues were addressed: (a) the relation between peer-reported athletic ability and peer-reported perceived popularity versus the relation between peer-reported athletic ability and peer-reported social preference; (b) possible differences in boys’ and girls’ perceptions of the contribution of athletic ability to social status in girls; and (c) possible differences in boys’ and girls’ perceptions of the contribution of athletic ability to social status in girls across majority White and majority Black schools.

Faced with defining social status, the authors referred to two separate research traditions -- psychology-based sociometric status and sociology of education -- that have differing conceptions of popularity (Rodkin, Farmer, Pearl, & Van Acker, 2000). Research in the sociometric tradition typically has involved peer nominations of children as like-most and like-least to assess a child’s social preference among peers, whereas researchers in the sociological tradition have tended to use qualitative methods to assess a child’s perceived popularity among peers (Adler & Adler, 1998; Coie et al., 1982; Lease et al., 2002; Newcomb, Bukowski, & Pattee, 1993; Rodkin et al., 2000). Perceived popularity also has been measured in quantitative studies with most-popular and least-popular peer nominations (Parkhurst & Hopmeyer, 1998; Lease, et al., 2002). Social preference and perceived popularity have been shown to have distinct behavioral correlates (Parkhurst & Hopmeyer, 1998; Lease, et al., 2002). Both were assessed in the current study. Thus, three variables were involved in the analyses: (a) athletic ability was assessed through peer nominations of individuals who excelled in outdoor games and activities, and (b) social status was assessed through peer nominations, using both
sociometric (like-most and like-least) and sociological (most popular and least popular) definitions.

The possibility of gender patterns was also considered within the analyses. Previous research has documented the existence of gender differences in perceptions of girls participating in athletics. For example, in a study of children in grades three to nine, Selby and Lewko (1976) reported that girls had more favorable attitudes toward girls in sports than did boys of similar ages. Similarly, Snyder and Spreitzer (1976) reported that female athletes received more encouragement to participate in sports from female friends than from male friends.

As participation by girls in sports continues to increase, several possibilities emerge regarding a changing relation to social status. It is possible that both girls and boys are increasingly willing to value the athletic skills of their female peers. Historical evidence (Adler & Adler, 1998; Coie & Dodge, 1988; Coleman, 1961; Holland & Andre, 1994; Thirer & Wright, 1985; Williams & White, 1983) has suggested boys value athletic accomplishments above all other variables when assessing the social status of other boys. As girls receive greater opportunity to participate and achieve in the athletic domain, perhaps the common ground of sports will result in increased social value of girls’ athletic abilities for both boys and girls. It is also possible, however, that boys will continue to hold to traditional predictors of female status, such as grooming and socio-economic status (Adler & Adler, 1998), whereas girls will gradually incorporate athletic skills into the equation of factors contributing to social status. Whereas previous research indicated boys place tremendous value on athletic achievements of boys, findings also indicated they have been more rigid in basing girls’ popularity on traditional predictors (Selby & Lewko, 1976; Goldberg & Chandler, 1989). Should girls begin to include athletic ability in the predictors of social status while boys continue to limit the social status of girls to traditional factors, it is possible that athletic ability could become more influential through the early school age years. A subsequent decrease in influence during
adolescence would be likely, however, due to the heavy impact of opposite sex perceptions on social status in teenagers.

In the current research, then, the strength of the relation between *athletic ability* and social status was assessed, with considerations made for gender biases in nomination patterns. Specifically, we examined the following questions: (a) Is there a relation between *athletic ability* and social status for girls? (b) Is there a gender bias in nomination patterns of *athletic ability*? (c) Does the relation between *athletic ability* and social status for girls differ when boys are the raters versus girls? and (d) Is the relation between *athletic ability* and social status for girls consistent across majority White and majority Black schools? It was hypothesized that given girls’ increased participation in athletics, athletic skills would be a significant predictor of social status for girls, at least as rated by girls.

Method

Participants

Analyses included data collected from 453 elementary school students whose ages ranged from 9 and 13 years. They included students from 22 fourth, fifth, and sixth grade self-contained classrooms from three rural elementary schools in the southeastern region of the United States. Fifty-one percent of the participants were girls. School records identified 62% of the sample as “White;” 36% as “Black;” and 2% as “Asian,” “Hispanic,” or “Mixed.” The ethnic compositions of the three schools were highly homogenous: 91% of the participants were in classrooms/schools in which their ethnic group was in the numerical majority. Class sizes ranged from 18 to 28 members.

Procedure

During the spring of the school year, parental consent forms were sent home with students. Both parental consent and child assent were required for study participation. Of 606 possible participants, active consent/assent was obtained for 516 (i.e., 85%). In order to avoid problems with limited range, data from 4 of the 26 classrooms was eliminated from this study because they had (a) fewer than 15 participating students,
and/or (b) a two-to-one ratio of one gender to another or greater. A total of 453 participants remained.

Data was collected during the late spring of the school year. Researchers read the group-administered questionnaires aloud in each classroom. Nonparticipating class members were asked to draw or read quietly at their desks, and some classroom teachers permitted nonparticipating children to go to the library. To minimize fatigue, participants completed questionnaires in two one-hour sessions on consecutive days. They were told that their responses to the questionnaire items would be confidential and were encouraged to cover their answers with a cover sheet. Teachers were encouraged to schedule a structured, academic activity immediately following the sessions so students would be engaged and have minimal opportunity to discuss the questionnaire. A small gift was distributed to all children by the researchers at the end of data collection each day, regardless of whether they participated.

Measures

The following types of peer nomination measures were collected: (a) athletic ability, (b) sociometric popularity, and (c) perceived popularity. To identify children perceived by others as having good athletic ability, each child was requested to nominate three peers from their classroom who they perceived as being “very good at outdoor sports and games.” To determine sociometric popularity, each child was requested to nominate three peers who they liked the most (“Who do you like to play with the most?”) and three peers who they liked the least (“Who do you like to play with the least?”) (Coie et al., 1982). To determine perceived popularity, each child was requested to nominate three peers who they perceived as the most popular (“Who are the most popular students?”) and three peers who they perceived as the least popular (“Who are the least popular students?”) (Lease et al., 2002).

The social preference variable was derived by standardizing peer nominations of like-most and like-least by gender and classroom, and subsequently subtracting like-least nominations from like-most nominations for each individual (Coie & Dodge, 1983; Coie
et al., 1982; Peery, 1979). The perceived popularity variable was derived by standardizing peer nominations of most-popular and least-popular by gender and classroom, followed by subtracting least-popular nominations from most-popular nominations for each individual (Lease et al., 2002). Scores were standardized by both gender and classroom due to the fact that class sizes varied in distribution of boys and girls and social status nominations tend to be given to same-gender peers. The social status and athletic ability nominations participants received were coded in two ways: (a) the number of nominations received from classmates, regardless of gender (gender-nonspecific; GNS) and (b) the number of nominations received from same-gender classmates (gender-specific; GS).

Though the use of single items to assess social status and athletic ability might seem tenuous, this has been an accepted practice within the sociometric literature (Coie & Dodge, 1988; Coie et al., 1982; Hartup, 1983; Newcomb & Bukowski, 1983). Hartup (1983) reported that using nomination techniques has “well-established” concurrent validity in the sociometric literature. Peer nominations have been shown to be as effective as ratings of independent observers (e.g., teachers) in identifying children’s behaviors (Serbin, Lyons, Marchessault, Schwartzman, & Ledingham, 1987; Serbin, Marchessault, McAffer, Peters, & Schwartzman, 1993). Finally, the reliability of the responses is increased through the use of multiple peer raters.

Results

The following results include analysis of GNS and GS correlations. Initially, we attempted to determine the relation between athletic ability and social status for girls. To accomplish this, the athletic ability-GNS and social status-GNS variables were correlated for girls, as well as boys. Secondly, the data was examined to determine if a gender-biased nomination pattern of athletic ability was present. Third, as a result of the presence of a gender nomination bias, we attempted to determine if the relation between athletic ability and social status for girls differed when boys were the raters versus when
Correlations Between Gender-Nonspecific Nominations for Athletic Ability and Gender-Nonspecific Nominations of Social Status

To examine the relation between peer-perceived athletic ability and social status, athletic ability-GNS was correlated with social preference-GNS and perceived popularity-GNS. The correlations between athletic ability-GNS nominations and social status-GNS measures were significant for both girls and boys. For boys, social preference and perceived popularity were strongly correlated with the number of athletic nominations received from classmates (see Table 3.1). To a lesser degree, athletic ability was related to social status indices for girls, as well. However, the correlation between athletic nominations and social preference nominations was higher for boys than girls ($z = 2.83, p < .01$, two-tailed). The same finding held for perceived popularity, with the correlation for boys being higher than the correlation for girls ($z = 4.44, p < .01$, two-tailed). As such, the results indicated that athletic ability was more strongly related to social status indices for boys than girls, although athletic ability and social status were positively and significantly related for both genders.

Examination of a Potential Gender Bias in the Number of Nominations Received for the Athletic Item

Here we wanted to determine if participants nominated peers for the athletic item in a gender-biased fashion. It seemed possible that participants might nominate both boys and girls equally, but it also seemed possible that participants might typically nominate same-gender peers, or that both boys and girls might tend to give their
Table 3.1

Correlations Between Gender-Nonspecific Athletic Ability and Gender-Nonspecific Social Status (N = 453, 229 girls, 224 boys)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Athletic Nominations</th>
<th>Social Preference</th>
<th>Perceived Popularity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>.35**</td>
<td>.42**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>.56**</td>
<td>.70**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: ** p<.0001

nominations to a particular gender. Gender differences were found in the nomination pattern, with boys giving 91% of their nominations for the athletic item to boys and only 9% of their nominations to girls. In contrast, girls gave 52% of their athletic nominations to boys and 48% of their athletic nominations to girls (see Table 3.2). This gender nomination pattern essentially was the same in majority Black and majority White schools.

Table 3.2

Percentage of Nominations for Athletic Item Given to Same and Cross-Gender Peers (N=453, 229 girls, 224 boys)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nominator</th>
<th>Participant Nominated</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>.48</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Correlations Between Gender-Specific Nominations for Athletic Ability and Gender-Specific Nominations of Social Status

Given the gender-biased nomination pattern observed for the athletic item, we attempted to determine if the relation between athletic ability and social status for girls differed when boys were the raters versus when girls were the raters. To do this, we reran the correlations using gender-specific nominations of athletic ability and gender-specific nominations of social status. Gender-specific results revealed that girl-raters viewed the relation between athletic skills and social status for girls as stronger than did boy-raters (see Table 3.3). Ratings of girls by girls indicated significant correlations ($p < .0001$) between athletic ability and social status measures of social preference, $r = .36$, and perceived popularity, $r = .47$, but ratings by boys of girls indicated a significant correlation ($p < .05$) only for the perceived popularity status variable, $r = .14$. Thus, the results indicated that boys perceived athletic ability and perceived popularity to be significantly, but weakly, related for girls, but did not perceive girls’ social preference to be related to their athletic ability.

Unsurprisingly, ratings of boys by both boys and girls indicated significant correlations between athletic ability-GS and social preference-GS, as well as between athletic ability-GS and perceived popularity-GS, with all correlations being significant at the $p < .0001$ level.

A comparison of the correlations revealed that girls associated athleticism and social status indices for girls to a similar degree to which they associated the two variables for boys. Specifically, the correlations between girls’ athletic ability-GS and social status-GS, as rated by girls, did not differ significantly from the correlations between boys’ athletic ability-GS and social status-GS, as rated by girls (social preference: $z = 0.75, p = NS$, two-tailed; perceived popularity: $z = 1.30, p = NS$, two-tailed).
Table 3.3

Correlations Between Gender-Specific Athletic Ability and Gender-Specific Social Status

Nominations (N=453)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Athletic ability</th>
<th>Social preference</th>
<th>Perceived Popularity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>From boys</td>
<td>From girls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>From boys</td>
<td>From boys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>From girls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys (N = 224)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys from boys</td>
<td>.52**</td>
<td>.37**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys from girls</td>
<td>.39**</td>
<td>.42**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys (N = 229)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls from boys</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls from girls</td>
<td>.28**</td>
<td>.36**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: * p<.05  
** p<.0001

Bold type indicates a gender-specific correlation between athletic ability from one gender and social status as rated by the same gender.

Boys, however, were significantly more likely to associate athleticism and social preference for boys than for girls (z = 5.03, p < .01, two-tailed). Likewise, boys were significantly more likely to associate athleticism and perceived popularity for boys than for girls (z = 7.89, p < .01, two-tailed).

We also compared the strength of the correlations across the two differing indices of social status. For the girl sample, the correlation between athletic ability-GS and perceived popularity-GS, as rated by girls (r = .47) was higher than the correlation between athletic ability-GS and social preference-GS, as rated by girls (r = .36; t (226) = - 2.05, p < .05, two tailed). Gender-specific nominations by boys of girls, however, failed to reveal a significant difference between the strength of the correlation of athletic ability and social preference, r = .10, and the correlation of athletic ability and perceived popularity, r = .14 (t (226) = -0.54, p = NS).
When considering the boy sample, however, the correlation of athletic nominations with perceived popularity nominations was significantly higher than the correlation of athletic nominations with social preference nominations when considering both boy-nominators ($t(221) = -4.68, p < .01$, two tailed), as well as girl-nominators ($t(221) = -2.65, p < .01$, two tailed).

Thus, whereas girls were more likely to associate perceived popularity with athletic ability in girls than social preference with athletic ability in girls, boys failed to distinguish the two social status measures in girls. In contrast, boys and girls were more likely to associate athletic ability with perceived popularity in boys than social preference. Overall, such results suggested that the qualitative difference between the social status measures, with social preference defined as the degree to which the child is liked/disliked by peers, and perceived popularity defined as the degree to which the child is socially prestigious and visible, is a relevant distinction when considering the relation between social status and athletic ability.

Correlations Between Athletic Ability and Gender-Nonspecific Social Status in Schools with a Particular Racial Majority

Gender-nonspecific correlations.

Next, we examined whether the relation between athletic ability and social status was consistent across majority White and majority Black schools. Correlations relating athletic ability-GNS to social status-GNS measures in both majority White and majority Black schools indicated significant results for girls and boys (see Table 3.4). Strong correlations for boys in majority White schools and majority Black schools indicated the number of athletic nominations received from classmates was related to both social preference and perceived popularity. Again, to a lesser extent, athletic ability was also related to social status for girls in both Black and White majority schools.

The correlations suggested a consistent pattern of findings across majority White and majority Black schools. For girls, the correlations between athletic ability-GNS and social status-GNS indices were not significantly different from each other across the
Table 3.4

*Correlations Between Gender-Nonspecific Athletic Ability and Gender-Nonspecific Social Status Nominations in Majority White Schools (N=274) and Majority Black Schools (N=179)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Status</th>
<th>Majority White Schools</th>
<th>Majority Black School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Boys (N = 132)</td>
<td>Boys (N = 92)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GNS Social preference</td>
<td>.53**</td>
<td>.61**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GNS Perceived Popularity</td>
<td>.73**</td>
<td>.66**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Girls (N = 142)</td>
<td>Girls (N = 87)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GNS Social preference</td>
<td>.34**</td>
<td>.37*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GNS Perceived Popularity</td>
<td>.39**</td>
<td>.49**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note:  
* p<.01  
** p<.0001

majority White and majority Black schools (*social preference*: z = .2482, p = NS, two-tailed; *perceived popularity*: z = .90, p = NS, two-tailed). However, it should be noted that the correlation between *athletic ability*-GNS and *perceived popularity*-GNS for girls in the majority Black school was notably high in a qualitative sense when compared to other correlations for girls (*r* = .49).

Like girls, the correlations between *athletic ability*-GNS and social status indices for boys were not significantly different from each other across the majority White and majority Black schools (*social preference*: z = .87, p = NS, two-tailed; *perceived popularity*: z = -1.00, p = NS, two-tailed).

*Gender-specific correlations.*

The purpose of the next set of analyses was to compare gender-specific nomination patterns within the two differing social contexts. As was found in the
combined findings, results indicated that girl-raters viewed the relation between *athletic ability* and social status for girls as stronger than did boy-raters (see Table 3.5 and Table 3.6). Ratings of girls by girls indicated significant correlations between *athletic ability*-GS and social status measures of *social preference*-GS and *perceived popularity*-GS in both majority White and majority Black schools. Notably high was the correlation between *athletic ability*-GS and *perceived popularity*-GS in majority Black school girls as rated by girls ($r = .54$). In contrast, ratings by boys of girls in both contexts indicated no significant correlations. Thus, while girls appeared to perceive a significant relation between *athletic ability* and social status in girls from majority White and majority Black schools, ratings of girls by boys suggested boys perceived minimal-to-no relation between *athletic ability* and social status.

Once again, ratings of boys by both boys and girls indicated significant correlations between *athletic ability*-GS and the social status measures of *social preference*-GS and *perceived popularity*-GS, with all correlations reaching a significance level of $p < .0001$.

Table 3.5

*Correlations Between Gender-Specific Athletic Ability and Gender-Specific Social Status*

*Nominations in Schools with a Majority White Population (N=274)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Athletic ability</th>
<th>Social preference</th>
<th>Perceived Popularity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>From boys</td>
<td>From girls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys from boys</td>
<td><strong>.54</strong></td>
<td>.28*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys from girls</td>
<td><strong>.44</strong></td>
<td><strong>.36</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Girls (N = 142)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Boys (N = 132)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>.11</strong> <strong>.13</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>.23</strong> <strong>.37</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Boys (N = 132)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>.54</strong> <strong>.28</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>.44</strong> <strong>.36</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Girls (N = 142)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>.11</strong> <strong>.13</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>.23</strong> <strong>.37</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Girls (N = 142)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>.54</strong> <strong>.28</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>.44</strong> <strong>.36</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Girls (N = 142)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>.11</strong> <strong>.13</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>.23</strong> <strong>.37</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Girls (N = 142)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>.54</strong> <strong>.28</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>.44</strong> <strong>.36</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Girls (N = 142)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>.11</strong> <strong>.13</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>.23</strong> <strong>.37</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3.6

Correlations Between Gender-Specific Athletic Ability and Gender-Specific Social Status
Nominations in Schools with a Majority Black Population (N=179)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Athletic ability</th>
<th>Social preference</th>
<th>Perceived Popularity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>From boys</td>
<td>From girls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys (N = 92)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys from boys</td>
<td>.49**</td>
<td>.52**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys from girls</td>
<td>.32*</td>
<td>.50**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls (N = 87)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls from boys</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls from girls</td>
<td>.35*</td>
<td>.34*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: * p<.01
** p<.0001

Bold type indicates a gender-specific correlation between athletic ability from one gender and social status as rated by the same gender.

A comparison of the correlations revealed several interesting findings. In majority White schools, ratings by girls of girls revealed correlations of athletic ability-GS to social status-GS that were not significantly different from girls’ ratings of the same correlations for boys (social preference: z = 0.09, p = NS, two-tailed; perceived popularity: z = 1.41, p = NS, two-tailed). In majority Black schools, the same finding emerged (social preference: z = 1.28, p = NS, two-tailed; perceived popularity: z = 0.19, p = NS, two-tailed). Thus, as was found in the gender-specific ratings by girls in the combined group, girls in both majority White and majority Black schools associated athleticism and social status in girls to a similar degree to which they associated the two variables in boys.

Boys in majority White schools, however, were significantly more likely to associate athleticism and social status within boys than within girls, regardless of the social status index examined (social preference: z = 4.04, p < .01, two-tailed; perceived
popularity: \( z = 6.71, p < .01, \text{two-tailed} \). The same finding held for boys in majority Black schools (social preference: \( z = 2.93, p < .01, \text{two-tailed} \); perceived popularity: \( z = 4.27, p < .01, \text{two-tailed} \)). Therefore, boys in both majority White and majority Black schools perceived a stronger association between athleticism and social status in boys than in girls.

Finally, comparisons of the gender-specific correlations for girls across majority White and majority Black schools were conducted. The correlations between athletic ability-GS and social status indices for girls as rated by girls in majority White schools were not significantly different from the correlations between athletic ability-GS and social status indices for girls as rated by girls in majority Black schools (social preference: \( z = 0.25, p = \text{NS}, \text{two-tailed} \); perceived popularity: \( z = -1.04, p = \text{NS}, \text{two-tailed} \)). Similarly, the correlations between athletic ability-GS and social status indices for girls as rated by boys in majority White schools were not significantly different from the correlations between athletic ability-GS and social status indices for girls as rated by boys in majority Black schools (social preference: \( z = 0.15, p = \text{NS}, \text{two-tailed} \); perceived popularity: \( z = 0.22, p = \text{NS}, \text{two-tailed} \)). Thus, the relation between nominations for athleticism and nominations for social preference or perceived popularity did not differ significantly between the majority White and majority Black schools.

Discussion

Contributions

When examining the results relating athletic ability and social status as rated by both genders, it appeared that athletic ability and social status were more highly associated for boys than girls. A gender-biased nomination pattern was found, however. When requested to identify a classmate as athletic, boys overwhelmingly identified a male classmate. Girls, however, identified a female classmate as often as a male. Due to this nomination bias, additional analyses were conducted to identify the differences in the way in which the genders perceived the relation between athletic ability and social status
for both boys and girls. Evidence consistently revealed that boys and girls had similar views on the relation between athletic ability and social status in boys, but contrasting perceptions of the relation in girls. When considering the perceptions of particular genders, findings suggested that girls were significantly more likely than boys to connect athletic ability in girls with high social status. Furthermore, girls associated athleticism and social status in girls to a similar degree to which they associated athletic ability and social status in boys. In other words, girls appeared to perceive athleticism to be similar in importance to social status in girls as they perceived it to be in boys.

Consideration of the contrasting methods of assessing social status revealed that the distinction between social preference and perceived popularity was relevant when either boys or girls were nominating boys, with perceived popularity identified as more strongly related to athletic prowess than social preference. When nominating girls, however, boys failed to distinguish between the two social status measures. As when they nominated boys, girls were more likely to associate perceived popularity with athletic ability than social preference.

The pattern of results across the majority White and majority Black school contexts were similar. First, whereas girls in majority White and majority Black schools appeared to perceive a significant relation between athletic ability and social status in girls, ratings of girls by boys suggested boys perceived little-to-no relation between athletic ability and social status. Second, girls in both majority White and majority Black schools perceived athletic ability to contribute to the social status of girls to a similar degree to which girls perceived it to contribute to the social status of boys. Finally, the relation between athletic ability and social status for girls, as rated by boys or girls, did not differ across the two school contexts.

Overall, the results suggested an overt distinction between boys’ and girls’ perceptions of the relation of athletic ability to social status. The nomination bias clearly indicated that boys overwhelmingly considered boys when asked to name an athletic
peer, whereas girls’ nominations were split equally between boys and girls. Why did this nomination bias occur? The possibilities likely involved (a) gender differences in activities considered, (b) valuation of athletic participation, and (c) assessment of ability within valued activities.

First, when requested to identify individuals who excelled at “outdoor sports and games,” it could be the case that the majority of boys, and many girls, thought of activities such as football, baseball, and basketball, sports in which boys predominantly participate. Therefore, visible male athletes may have been easier to recall, and thus received the nominations of most boys and a large portion of girls. It is possible that the remaining girls, however, were able to consider girls involved in the traditionally male-dominated sports (e.g., basketball and soccer), or considered girls involved in less visible activities. Historically, girls have participated in physical activities held outside of school, such as horseback riding, dance, and gymnastics. Close friends, having knowledge of these less visible activities and their classmates’ prowess in them, may have considered such activities when deciding who to nominate.

Second, it is possible that the types of activities valued by the nominators played a role in which peers were nominated for the athletic item. Sports typically valued by boys tend to coincide with sports valued by society, as evidenced by professional leagues, high visibility, and peer recognition for outstanding ability. Thus, nominations from both boys and girls would be expected. The activities valued by many girls, however, are less visible and pervasive. Horseback riding and skiing, for example, are often associated with higher social standing among girls, at least in an upper socio-economic status school environment (Adler & Adler, 1998). It could be that boys placed less value on the skills required by such activities than they did more traditional male sports.

Finally, it is also possible that boys gave the vast majority of nominations to male peers because they believed boys to be superior athletes when compared to girls. To
obtain the nominations of boys, a girl might have to participate in a sport valued by boys, as well as be able to compete successfully with boys.

Conclusions and Future Directions

Previous studies examining the contribution of athletic ability to social status (Boivin & Begin, 1989; Gross & Johnson, 1984; Chase & Dummer, 1992; and Weiss & Duncan, 1992) did not present explicit correlations between peer-rated athletic ability and social status. Thus, it is difficult to use our results to determine whether athletic ability is gaining a more predictive role of social status in girls. Despite the contrasting methods, the strength of relation reported by previous studies appeared relatively similar to the strength of the relation found for girls, as rated by both genders, in the current study. However, our results clearly showed that boys and girls perceived this relation differently, yielding unique findings. A comparison of each gender’s perception of the relation of athletic ability to social status suggested girls perceived a stronger association for girls than did boys. Such a finding, when viewed within the context of the historical developments of girls in sports (increasing participation in a wider variety of sport types) suggested the possibility that girls perceive the relation to be changing for girls. Further studies addressing the relation between female athletic ability and social status in the future might allow a more accurate assessment of the changing relationship between the constructs.

Similarly, a significant question that remains is whether or not boys will accept this new role for girls. The current study revealed a substantial gender nomination bias that showed that elementary school boys think primarily of boys when considering athletic ability. Future research should take this bias into account when assessing the relation between peer-rated athletic ability and social status. It would also be interesting to determine if sport type plays a role in both boys’ and girls’ perceptions of the relation of athletic ability and social status in girls.
Finally, further research addressing the influences on female participation in sports during early adolescence would be beneficial. Sources of motivation (e.g., social, fitness, or competitiveness), factors resulting in attrition, as well as male perceptions of female athletes during this critical developmental period in our society could be assessed as the role of female athlete becomes more salient.

With time, it is hoped that both boys and girls will learn to accept and celebrate the individuality of their peers, whether those characteristics reflect societal expectations or not. Although it remains to be seen if social status benefits are imminent for girls participating in sports, it seems likely that increasing numbers of girls will pursue athletic interests. In the very least, the monopoly the male gender has held on the benefits of sports participation – physical fitness, teamwork, leadership, conflict resolution, and social skills – appears to be ending. Perhaps in the future, girls participating in sports will receive social status benefits as well.

References


The research over the past 50 years initially indicated that the role of athlete held little authority in determining social status for females, and ensuing findings have failed to reveal an increase in influence with the growing participation of females in sport. The majority of the studies used samples of middle and high school students, and found that traditional factors such as appearance, being a part of the leading crowd, being a leader in activities, family background, social maturity, and academic performance have maintained their influence. Thus, the research revealed a stagnant social system that failed to reward females for athletic achievement.

The empirical findings of this study suggested the possibility that females, at least, perceived an increasing relation between athletic skills in females and social status. The findings indicated that males at this age level associated athletic ability with social status for females to a small degree, though not to the extent of females. The large nomination bias, as well as the differing correlations across gender nominators, suggested that future evaluations of the relation between athletic participation and social status should consider the differing perceptions of females in sports by gender.

The revealed moderate correlation also supported the historical evidence of a developmental trajectory. An integration of previous research results across ages from elementary to high school revealed a relation between age and influence of athletic participation. Results involving younger samples typically indicated the possibility that athletic ability played a greater role in social status in the preadolescent years. The empirical findings of this study, addressing the population of fourth through sixth
graders, supported the speculation. As the included empirical study failed to address the variety of participatory activities of the subjects, no findings were available to integrate with previous evidence of Goldberg and Chandler’s “multi-dimensional self-identity (1991, p. 213).”

Overall, a synthesis of the current and historical findings was suggestive of cracks in the rigid social status system that has historically relied on traditional factors as predictors of high social status. The empirical findings of the current study suggested that, at least in this particular population of fourth through sixth graders, females perceived a relatively high relation between athletic ability and social status. The attained correlations were strong when considering previous research, despite the fact that historically elementary school children have shown a greater tendency to associate athletic participation and social status.

The most glaring limitation of the current empirical study was the lack of previous correlations of similar constructs. Their absence prevented a direct assessment of increases in the strength of athletic participation as a determinant. Thus, while the attained correlations were greater than expected given the research history of the topic, concluding an increase in the influence of athletic participation was only speculation. A second limitation involved the subject ages. A more influential finding would have been to discover such a correlation at the middle or high school levels given that historical evidence suggested a trend of decreasing significance for athletic ability to social status with increasing age.

Future research should continue to follow female athletic participation and its developing relation with social status, as indicators were suggestive of a possible transition in social status criteria. A number of issues should be addressed. First, correlations reflecting the relation between female athletic participation and social status in the future will allow a more accurate assessment of the changing relationship between the constructs. Secondly, as participation in female sports becomes more competitive, a
change in the female goal orientation for sport participation from a mastery approach to a performance approach is possible and should be followed. Third, further research on the influences on female participation in sports during early adolescence, with a focus on factors resulting in attrition as well as male perceptions of female athletes during this critical developmental period, is needed. Finally, a significant question that remains is whether or not males will accept this new role for females. The current study indicated through the nomination bias that elementary school males think of males first when considering athletic ability.

When considering whether males will learn to accept the female athlete as a part of an evolving social society, it was helpful to refer to the observations and comments of Eleanor Metheny (1967), who confronted the topic long ago. In a speech to the North Central Regional Conference of the Athletic and Recreation Federation of College Women in March, 1964, she reminded the audience that men ultimately voted for women to be able to vote, and added that women athletes in Olympics have never seemed to have a problem getting attractive escorts. In summation, she stated, “If we look at the facts of history, we will discover that men go right on marrying attractive young women – no matter how adventuresome they may be (154).”