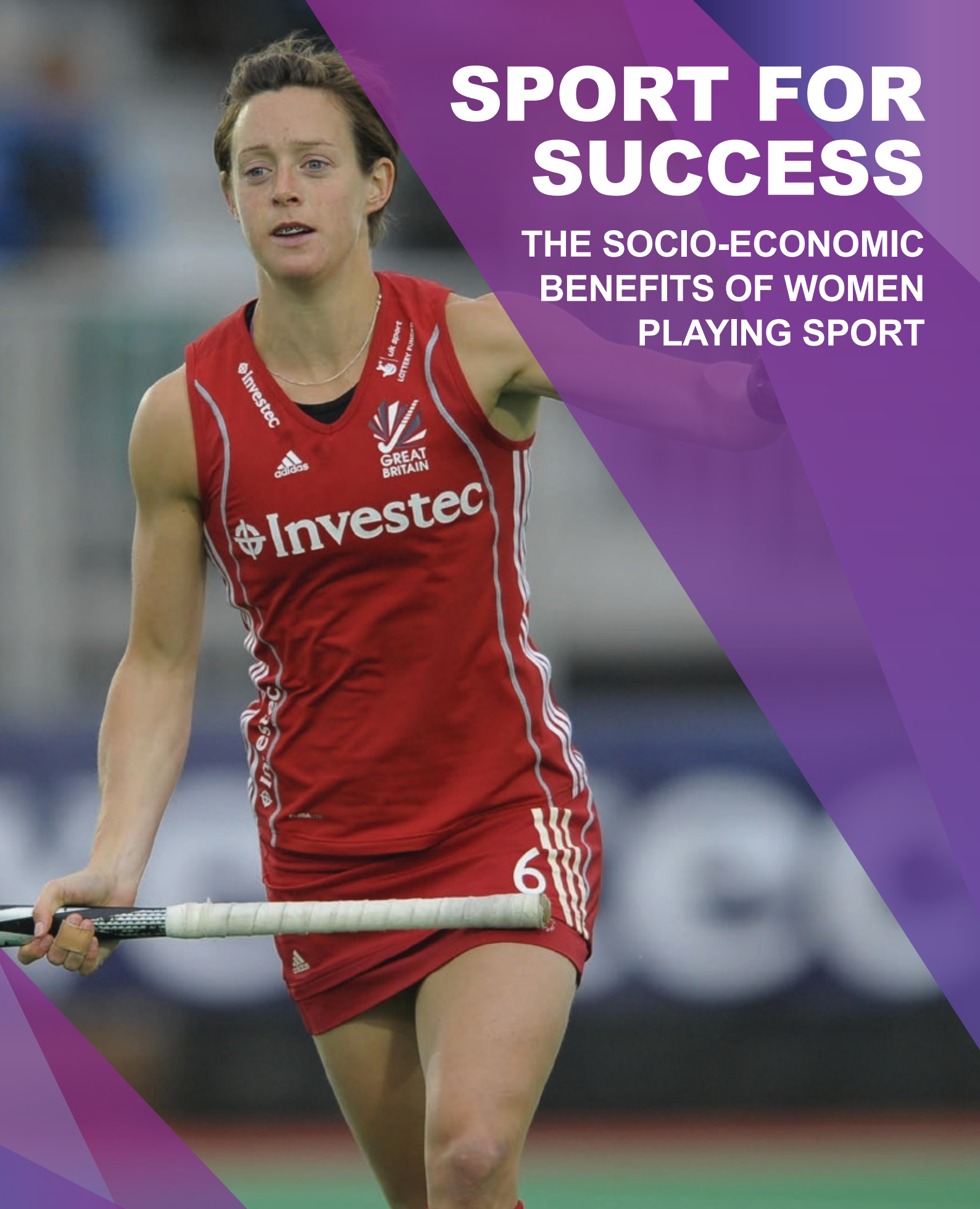


SPORT FOR SUCCESS

THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC
BENEFITS OF WOMEN
PLAYING SPORT



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Forewords

From Investec

We are incredibly proud to support women's hockey from grass roots to elite level. Our longstanding commitment to sports through various sponsorships derives from a belief in the values and benefits of sport. Passion, integrity and commitment are values cultivated through sport, which benefit individuals not just on the field of play but in their personal and professional development. Like our GB Women's hockey ambassadors, at Investec we strive for exceptional performance in our fields of Private Banking, Corporate Banking, Asset Management and Wealth & Investment.



In this year, an Olympic year, we have joined forces with Women in Sport to fund brand new research into the benefits of taking part in sport for women. The health benefits of leading an active lifestyle are widely known and researched, but it is the socio-economic gains that we wish to explore further and the elements within sport that drive them. By further understanding the role of sport in helping women to achieve more and further their potential, we hope to draw further support for bringing sport into more women's lives.

Raymond van Niekerk, Investec Global Head of Marketing

From Women in Sport

At its best, sport has the enormous ability to empower women and girls. At its best, sport has the enormous ability to empower women and girls. It builds the skills and the confidence that help all of us to cope with life's challenges, and to succeed. Should we be surprised then, to find clear evidence of a positive relationship between participation in sport and physical activity on the one hand, and professional and academic achievement for women and girls, on the other?



We are grateful to Investec for affording us this opportunity to present new research to promote these benefits, which go beyond the commonly cited and well-evidenced health benefits of playing sport. This report presents the case for women and girls' participation in sport and the impact this will have through the less documented socio-economic benefits that sport brings, from educational attainment through to career progression.

Four years on from London 2012, it's never been more important to address the huge gender gap that still persists between the participation levels of men and women; boys and girls. The relatively low number of female sporting role models and the still too limited sponsorship and media coverage of women's sport does little to help make women playing sport part of the norm for our society.

Progress is being made and we applaud the notable pioneers like Investec who are investing in women's sport and helping to raise its profile. We firmly believe that sponsorship plays an essential role in the development of sport for women and girls as well as making women playing sport more visible and 'normal'.

We hope that this work will help make the case for greater levels of media coverage and for more brands to take up the valuable sponsorship opportunity that women's sport has to offer. We hope more brands will wake up to the idea that playing a role in helping women realise their full potential is an investment well worth making.



Introduction

The idea of a gender gap, where men do more or better than women, whether in the world of work, sport or other forms of performance, is a well-known challenge. In the UK and globally, there remains a persistent inequality in sport between the rates of participation for women and men throughout the life-course, as well as a huge disparity in terms of the financial investment and media coverage in each. So why does it matter that women and girls are less likely to be active and take part in sports? And could addressing this have any impact on the gender gap that exists in other areas including the world of work?

We believe that sport and physical activity has more to offer than the well-known and evidenced individual health and wellbeing benefits. Last year, Women in Sport commissioned a study by The Young Foundation into the health and economic value of women's participation in sport to the UK, *From Barriers to Benefits*. This research, funded by Sport England, found that the benefits are significant: from reducing the burden on the NHS to boosting academic performance and returns in the workplace. Increasing the contribution of the sports industry itself would also deliver positive financial impact with increased female participation leading to a rise in consumer spending and employment.

In this next phase of work with our partner Investec, our aim has been to further explore whether playing sport has positive outcomes for women's educational qualifications and employment, and what might be behind this in terms of experiences at the level of the individual. We want to explore the connection between women's sports participation, professional progression and the economic benefits that inevitably accrue from women being in a better position to drive growth and maximise their own and their organisation's potential. We want to understand the role of sport in helping women to achieve more, and thus contribute more, in their careers.



We want to understand the role of sport in helping women to achieve more, and thus contribute more, in their careers.



Introduction

Methodology

In approaching this work, we developed a number of different hypotheses about the impact of sports participation in women's and girls' lives. In order to explore these fully, we used a variety of research methods and combined quantitative analysis (to see the big picture) with individual depth interviews (to dig deeper into the dynamics and issues at play).

Overall, our research consisted of five key elements:

- Desk research building on *'From Barriers to Benefits'* report
- Secondary analysis of a large ongoing national survey (Understanding Society)¹ to explore the correlation between physical activity and sport participation with qualification level, career progression and leadership skills
- Primary quantitative research via a survey of 1,000 female business executives²
- Interviews with a cross-section of women who play regular sport, ranging from elite Olympic sportswomen to ordinary enthusiasts, to understand the impact that sport has had in their education and careers. These have been used to create a series of short illustrative case studies
- Interviews with (male and female) business leaders to understand the role of sport for them personally and in the workplace.

In our exploration, we used a wide definition of sport, which encompasses a broad range of physical activity including going to the gym, jogging as well as playing team sports.



Looking at the big picture

Of women who play sport three or more times a week, almost half (48%) have a degree or 'other' higher degree. By contrast, amongst non-sports playing women, only 24% have a degree.





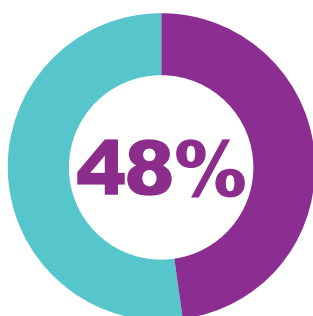
Playing sport and educational achievement

An important prerequisite for professional success is often good qualifications. Our analysis uncovered an important correlation: women who play sport have higher levels of educational qualifications than women who do not play sport.

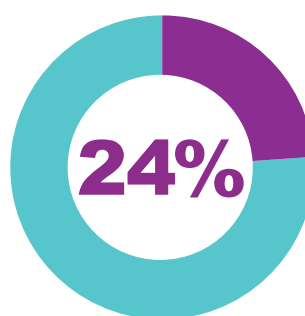
- Of women who play sport three or more times a week, almost half (48%) have a degree or other higher degree. By contrast, amongst non-sports playing women, less than a quarter (24%) have a degree or other higher degree.
- We also found that, amongst this group of committed regular sports participants (women who play sport three or more times a week), only 5% have no qualifications. This compares to over a quarter (27%) with no qualifications amongst women who do not play at sport at all.

These findings support evidence from our earlier *'From Benefits to Barriers'* report. This highlighted an actual causal link between motor skills and cognitive and behavioural

development.³ Whilst true for both boys and girls, it appears that the relationship between academic performance and sport is stronger for girls. A longitudinal study of students in the US showed that girls exposed to a significant amount of physical education (defined as 70 – 300 minutes/week) had better academic results than those that did the least exercise (0 – 35 minutes/week).⁴ No such effect was found for boys. It is thought that this may be because boys are generally more fit than girls, so the physiological effects of exercise on their performance are relatively less significant. The report also found evidence that participating in sports can help undermine negative gender stereotyping over academic aptitude in 'gender-challenged' subjects, such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM).⁵ And in recently published research from Sheffield Halam University, the social benefits of participation in sport include improved educational performance worth £5million.⁶



Percentage of women who play sport three or more times a week and have a degree or equivalent



Percentage of non-sports playing women who have a degree or equivalent

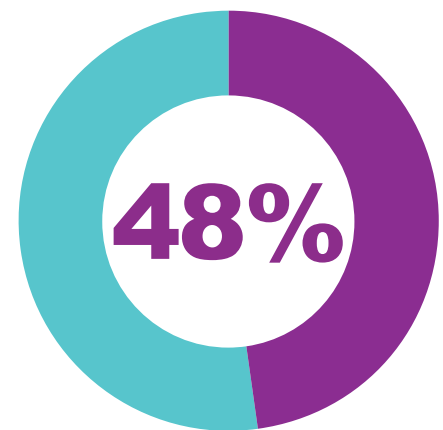
Sports participation and employment status

Our analysis found an important connection between participation in sport and achievement in the workplace: women who play sport are more likely to be in senior management roles than those who do not.

- Of women who play sport, almost half (45%) are in management roles; amongst women who do not play sport, not even a third (30%) of this group are managers.
- A significant majority (77%) of managers play sport to some extent compared with almost four in ten women who work in semi-routine/routine roles or who have never worked, who do not participate in sport at all.
- Interestingly, it does not appear that frequency of participation has a major impact. Our analysis found that, although the women who play sport most often (three times a week or more) are the most likely to be in management and professional roles (49%), this is not significantly more than those who play less frequently.
- The correlation between playing sport and likelihood to be in a management or professional role is consistent across all ages, but is most striking for younger age groups. As one might expect, in the lower age brackets, women are less likely to be in management positions overall. However, we found that, amongst those aged 16-24, women who engage in sport at least once a week are significantly more likely to be in a management role than those who do not play any sport. These are important findings as they suggest that sport can be linked with positive outcomes for women just starting their careers.

These findings were supported elsewhere in our research. From our YouGov survey of 1,003 female business executives, we found that almost half (48%) surveyed take part in sport/ exercise once a month or more. This compares favourably with figures from the general population⁷ where only two in five women take part in physical activity at least once a month.

Studies in other countries uncovered comparable trends. In the US, Gallup interviewed former student-athletes (ranging in age from 22 to 71) about their lives and compared their responses with a cohort of non-student-athletes who graduated from the same institutions. Gallup found that whilst, only 9% of female former student-athletes were not in work, amongst female non-athletes, the proportion in this position was higher – almost double at 17%.⁸



From our survey of 1,000 female business executives, we found that almost half (48%) take part in sport/exercise once a month or more.



Women who play regular sport showed higher levels of confidence

Physical activity and skills development

Having identified important positive connections between playing sport and women's achievement in education and employment, we went on to analyse whether taking part in sport and physical activity was correlated with skills which might contribute to this success. The analysis showed a further strong positive connection.

- Women who play regular sport showed higher levels of confidence. A quarter of women who play sport three times a week or more, said that the statement 'I am confident that I could deal efficiently with unexpected events' was exactly true for them, compared to just 19% of women who do not do any sport at all.
- This greater level of confidence for women who play sport regularly was evidenced across all age groups – even though data shows that sports participation drops with age.
- Women who play regular sport are also more motivated to achieve long term goals. Those women who don't play any sport show different attitudes here.

Exploring being active and personal

Whilst this association of sport and physical activity for women with positive outcomes in education and the workplace is already significant and valuable, it is important to ask how far these outcomes can be attributed to participation in sport. Is it that women, who are driven and ambitious and therefore likely to succeed in work, are also likely to take part in sport as another outlet for their achievement (i.e. there is a correlation but no causality); or does the playing of sport/participation in physical activity somehow build the skills that can contribute to successful careers?

To answer this fundamental question, we dug deeper into our analysis using our interviews with women at different stages of their career to understand what is going on at the level of the individual and what impact being active had brought to these women as they seek to achieve to their full potential.

Sport as training for body and mind

Through our interviews, we saw that women's relationship to being active does not follow a standard path – women can engage with sport in different ways. Some, perhaps encouraged by parents from an early age, grow up 'sporty' and see sport as an important part of life. Others became active later, sometimes when an opportunity presented itself by chance.

Participation in sport helped women to form their character and their outlook, giving them skills and attitudes which improved their ability to respond to the challenges around them.

“But sport does give you confidence and that can sometimes be an issue, particularly in male dominated careers.”

progression



All women acknowledged that once playing, sport had brought them many benefits. It was a source of great enjoyment and satisfaction in its own right. But participation in sport had also helped to form their character and their outlook, giving them skills and attitudes which improved their ability to respond to the challenges around them and make the most of the opportunities they encountered, both in and outside the workspace.

It is hard to unpick how far the development of these different skills can be directly or solely attributed to playing sport, but it does seem that doing something as part of being active, for example pushing oneself to go further, can ‘train’ the body and the mind to be adept at doing this in other situations, as one of our business leaders commented: *“I suppose all those things are skills that you can develop through sport – perseverance and pushing through. Clearly those things can be replicated and create patterns that are set down in your brain.”*

Our work shed new light on the development of a range of skills and attributes which are transferable beyond the field of sports and exercise.

Playing sports and skills development

Playing sport can help develop certain skills that can lead to successful careers. Some of these benefits, for example a mechanism to help manage pressure and stress, are more well-known. Others, such as strong self-confidence and a desire to be the best, are more obviously linked to leadership. Playing sport to nurture these attitudes may represent a particular advantage for women, particularly those earlier in their careers, to ensure they can make the most of their working lives ahead of them.

Growing confidence

Confidence is a fundamentally important attribute for success – it is about having self-assurance and being able to trust in one’s ability. Sport has much to offer here, in particular for girls and women, who may have less faith in themselves. As acknowledged in a number of our interviews, confidence can be an issue in more male-dominated careers in particular.

“If you can give women the boost you get from having done sport, having been really successful at that, I think that can be really, really helpful. I’m sure it’s beneficial for men as well, but when people talk about challenges for women in the workplace, I think that sport is one of the things that really helped me overcome those.”





In the case study below, Hannah MacLeod, elite hockey player, highlights the role sport played in building her self-confidence.

Hannah is a member of the Great Britain hockey team and is hoping to be selected for the Olympics in Rio. She also runs her own company with a partner, focusing on nutrition.

Hannah loved sport as a child, with football her first love. But there were no girls' football teams and she wasn't allowed to play on the boys' teams. She was introduced to hockey aged 13 in a PE lesson and her teacher encouraged her to join a local club. Hannah moved to a national league club aged 17 so that she could play at a higher level.

Hannah decided she wanted to attend Loughborough University as she heard it was good for sport. When a teacher told her she didn't have a chance getting in, she proved them wrong. Playing hockey has helped Hannah to build her self-confidence and self-belief. *"I was incredibly shy, such a shy child... But when I went to play hockey, it was the one time that I felt like I could say what I wanted to say, I didn't feel pressure to conform in any way ... I think that enabled me to realise that I could do what I wanted to do. I didn't need recognition from anywhere else."*

Hannah thrived in the sporty culture at Loughborough University and played hockey throughout her undergraduate and post-graduate studies. She was offered a contract with the GB hockey team a month after finishing her PhD.

As an elite athlete, Hannah feels very lucky to be able to combine running her company, with her professional life in hockey. Her job is flexible and not client facing, so she is able to work from a hotel room almost anywhere in the world. Hannah asserts that playing sport has provided her with a lot of skills for business, beyond just confidence, including the ability to listen to others and make informed decisions.

Once Hannah stops playing hockey, she hopes to continue coaching as well as growing her business. But for now, Hannah is focused on the 2016 Olympic Games.

Self-knowledge

Through sport, women can learn to attribute their success to their own skills rather than luck. As one of our interviewees, observed, it is part of the valuable process of gaining self-knowledge.

“You just know where your limits are. You are confident you know what your body can do and what you are capable of. When things get tough, you know you have a reserve to draw on. It was enormously useful for me as a person. Really empowering.”

Taking on challenges

Our women found that being active can bring with it a sense of achievement that carries through to the workplace. For those women leaving education and entering the workplace, it gave them a ‘safe space’ to test themselves. It helped women to feel they were ready to face challenging situations, having already done so much, as one of our female business leader interviewees commented: *“I think it helped me, when I was in my 20s and 30s and doing a lot of running and competing. It makes you feel more in control of your overall life. And I think that has a huge knock on effect, or it did for me, on how you feel about taking on bigger things at work. It’s all connected: If you feel in control of most aspects in your life, then you are able to perform in many ways, in a stronger, more positive way.”*





1 in 4

One in four female senior decision makers agreed that playing sport has helped them to build confidence in their work/career

These assertions are echoed at a macro level. As highlighted earlier, women who played sport three times a week or more, were more likely to show confidence in dealing efficiently with unexpected events than those who do not do any sport at all. In our YouGov survey of female senior decision makers, one in four surveyed who have ever taken part in sport agreed that playing sport has helped them to build confidence in their work/ career, with higher levels of agreement amongst young women, those in higher socio economic groups and those on a higher income. So participation in sport is acknowledged to have provided an important boost by those at the start of their careers as well as those who have already achieved a great deal.



Developing a growth mindset

A critical dimension to confidence and success for women in business is being ready to engage in learning – it shows the individual has belief that they can improve. We found that making progress is an important part of sport: participants often need to cast a critical eye over their performance and evaluate what needs to be changed to improve. This needs to happen at work too. As one female business leader commented, *“In order to proceed at work, you have to perform. I do think it’s particularly important that women understand that about performance. Dealing with knocks and getting back up again.”*

Playing sport helps with ‘failing well’ and responding positively to constructive criticism. In an interview for Fast Company⁹, Beth Brooke-Marciniak, global vice chair, public policy at EY, who was one of the first Title IX basketball scholarship recipients at Purdue University, asserts, *“Athletes know that you win some and lose some. If they have a setback in the workplace, don’t land the job, or lose a sale, the world doesn’t end—you figure out what went wrong, how to do better next time, and keep going. Athletes are used to being critiqued—sometimes harshly—on their performance and often seek constructive criticism to improve. They understand that feedback helps them get better—it’s not an indictment of them as people or employees.”*

In the case study below, Yemisi describes how, through her hockey training, she has learnt not only self-discipline, but how to take on board feedback from her coaches, even though it may be a struggle at the time.

Yemisi is in her first year studying psychology at Nottingham. She plays hockey for Beeston Club and for her University. She trains most nights during the week with matches at weekends.

Encouraged by her parents who also played, Yemisi first took up hockey when she was 10. Although not initially keen, she grew to love it. She says hockey was a welcome release from school work and when she was stressed or feeling under pressure. Although it took up time, it taught her discipline and that if you put the work in, you get the rewards. *“Just the fact that you have to get up and go training or you’re going to let down the team. Now if I know if I have to get up to study, I just do it. I’m used to early mornings. I’m used to pushing myself quite hard.”*

Yemisi is ‘100% sure’ that the benefits and skills she has gained from hockey will feed through into her future professional life. As well as self-discipline, she believes sport has taught her valuable lessons about respect. *“With sports like rugby, hockey and netball, you might be fuming inside but you have to calm yourself down. Even if you think the coach is wrong, you have to learn to respect their decisions.”*





“What underlines all my thoughts about my work is that I want to be really good. I don’t want to be mediocre. I want to be the best.”

Stimulating ambition

In our interviews we found that playing sport can nurture a desire not just to keep learning, but also to excel. This sentiment was captured by a comment from one former athlete, just starting out in her career, *“What underlines all my thoughts about my work is that I want to be really good. I don’t want to be mediocre. I want to be the best.”*

Dealing with competitive situations

Competition is present everywhere and often an important part of work. As one business leader observed, *“Life is competitive. Whether you like it or not, there’s an element of competition pretty much in everything you are going to do. Will you get your project done? Will you be better than another company to win that business?”* Coping well and even thriving in competitive situations is only really possible with strong self-confidence as a platform from which to go forward.

Competitive spirit can be hard for some women to develop or leverage effectively. At a basic level, playing competitive sport gives women a chance to rehearse being in these pressured moments and learning how to cope and do well. The same female business leader went on to comment, *“[Sport] gives you a healthy framework for thinking about competition. Sport is an ideal way to build up getting used to those kind of situations.”*

Team working

Working in a team has always been an important part of the workplace, but the emphasis on team work is accelerating¹⁰. Companies are changing the way they are organised, often abandoning functional silos and instead bringing employees into cross-disciplinary teams that focus on specific customers, products or problems. As a result, teams may now be more fluid, global and virtual, making it important to know how to quickly and effectively work with others and be able to make the most of their contribution and one's own in different contexts and for a wide variety of activities.

Sport helps people learn what it feels to work together. As one business leader observed, *"Being involved with sports is one of the earliest situations where you'll really have to work closely in a team for a particular goal. You all have to, in a very short amount of time, work cooperatively. That's on a very small scale what all companies or all teams in business and in any kind of project are really doing. They come together and divide up responsibilities in order to get to a common goal. You have to understand that you need people in defence, or people who are on the offensive. Not all people should be doing all things. Sport gives you a really good opportunity to do these sorts of things as part of the course."*

Our interviewees highlighted different aspects to working in a team that playing sport supports, building on the confidence described above.

Integrity

Interviewees found that playing sport requires them to be themselves and have integrity both on and off the field. When participating, an individual has to be authentic. It is not possible to pretend, in particular about something you are not capable of. This personal integrity is fundamental both for being part of a team and also a leader of others, as one female business leader observed, *"I believe you have to stay authentic [in leadership], otherwise at some point it has to end in tears. If you are playing individual sport or are in a team, you can't pretend that. And that gets you to the end whatever that end is – win or lose. When you're with the team, you're contributing as yourself to the team. There's something about learning that you don't need to pretend to be anything that you're not."*

Sport also requires you to take responsibility for your actions as one interviewee observed: *"You are absolutely accountable for your actions in sport, in a team in particular and you put yourself out there and if you mess up or if you get things wrong, you don't hide it, you don't blame someone else because you won't last very long. You take responsibility, you learn from it and you don't do it again. I don't see that very often in business but that's how I will always want to be in business."*





Embracing diversity

Working in a team can mean interacting with people from different backgrounds and disciplines. Regardless of this diversity, the team needs to be able to come together to successfully deliver on their task. One interviewee observed that rowing has helped her to work well with people with whom she would not normally socialise. *“I think in business and the same for rowing with my team, there are people there who wouldn’t be my friend in normal life, but you have to make it work because if you don’t have synergy and partnership with each other, how are you going to have it to compete against the rest of the world?”*

“I believe you have to stay authentic [in leadership], otherwise at some point it has to end in tears. If you are playing individual sport or are in a team, you can’t pretend that.”

Motivating others

Our women interviewees also found that playing as a team provided them with the opportunity to understand how to get the best out of people, working together to achieve a better final result. One interviewee went on to observe, *“I wasn’t the strongest in the team by any means and I wasn’t the fastest, but what I could do was get people to work well together...I could get the best person to row really well and the worst person to row really well.”*

Sport can help with working together not just in times of success but also when the situation becomes more challenging. As one business leader said, *“When you are doing really well as a team and you are winning a lot of your games, there’s a fantastic mentality and comradery. The more interesting thing is to be part of a team which isn’t doing so well and understanding how you can steer or group together to improve what you do.”*

Harriet, mid 20s, works in strategy consulting. She studied at Oxford University where she first took up rowing, later going on to join the Oxford women’s boat race crew. No longer a rower, Harriet now runs regularly.

At school, Harriet didn’t particularly enjoy sport. She didn’t excel at the traditional sports like tennis, netball or football and she felt there was an unspoken choice to be made between focusing on academics or sport.

All this changed when she went to Oxford. Here she found a culture where people could simultaneously be successful as athletes and students. Harriet’s tall, athletic build meant that she was naturally well suited to rowing. Soon after trying it out at an undergraduate freshers’ event, Harriet got involved in the development programme and started to train more seriously.

Despite the early mornings and rigours of training, Harriet loved rowing for the team aspects, competition and satisfaction of personal achievement. She also acknowledges that it made her more productive and focused in her studies.

Harriet believes strongly that she gained many important personal assets through rowing which she applies in her work. These include teamwork skills, confidence, and ‘sheer determination’.

“When you’re in a rowing team, it’s very much about getting the best out of every single member of the group. It’s not good enough – or even possible - to be successful on your own, so it’s being very aware of how your actions affect those around you and thinking what you can do to get the best out of others.”

Today, Harriet no longer rows due to injury and the time pressures of work. Instead, she runs regularly for fitness, to relax and to give herself space – all things she finds important in the context of her busy and often pressured lifestyle.





Assertiveness

When working in a team, part of the challenge is to ensure a balance between co-operating with others and balancing personal priorities and principles. The case study from Harriet (below left) illustrates how sport can help here. In addition to the valuable stamina she learnt through her gruelling rowing practices, Harriet acknowledges that she gained skills improving not only her individual performance but her ability to perform with others. She has become confident at making sure her perspective is taken on board.

Effective communication

Underpinning these aspects to team work is effective communication. In our interviews, many of the individuals we spoke to referred to this skill both implicitly and explicitly. It was acknowledged that the experience of playing sport can help one get better at expressing and receiving opinions in different types of situations. *“The way you have to communicate with people is really important. You have to communicate differently with the coach on the pitch, as you do with the other players and with the umpire. You learn body language.”*

Strengthening personal motivation

In our interviews, women recognised that playing sport can push them into being self-disciplined in a more focussed way.

Sarah, mid 40s, is a successful businesswoman and founder of a UK based global insight consultancy. She's an enthusiastic mountain biker and cyclist. She also enjoys occasional running and yoga.

Sarah grew up in a small village. As a child, she wasn't particularly 'sporty', but just loved to be outside playing with friends and on her bike. She played a bit of sport at school as well as at home where her parents had a table tennis table, but this was always for fun rather than 'sport for sport's sake'.

As a business owner and working Mum, Sarah sees the regular sport she's involved in now as an important way to let off steam and keep a balance as well as a way to have fun, often with friends. Sarah is not overly interested in the competitive side of sport, but does believe that participation can help to build the stamina and tenacity that are important assets in her work:

"The concentration required for mountain biking is quite technical. And also perseverance - there's a huge mental element to it... You have to be fairly self-motivated and very focused at times. I suppose all those things are skills that you can develop through sport."

Sarah and her business partners now work to promote a healthy, active workplace for all their employees too.

Commitment to goals

Playing sport can also be associated with commitment to plans for the future – a critical element to career ambition and success. Through playing sport, women get experience in setting themselves targets, planning how to reach them and then staying the course, whether alone or as part of a team. This was also evidenced in the quantitative analysis highlighted earlier, where an important correlation was found between motivation to achieve long term goals and levels of sports participation.





Displaying persistence and resolve

Commitment to goals translates also into the day-to-day organisation of time and energy. Particularly true for elite sport, but present even at other levels, we heard from many women about the effort and determination required to juggle commitments. This can be extended beyond not compromising performance to actually improving it.

Monica has raced for the Great Britain rowing team between 2008 and 2014, winning a number of medals at international levels while travelling the globe. Now in her late 20s, Monica has recently retired from elite rowing after sustaining an injury and is now the Operations Manager at Women Ahead, a social enterprise that supports the development of women in sport and business.



Monica started rowing when she was 16 and began training in earnest during her A' levels. She trialled for the National team in her first year at Loughborough University and got her first GB vest that year, this ignited her passion for the sport and was the start of her international rowing career. Whilst at university and achieving a degree in Sport Science, Monica went on to win a gold medal in the 2009 Under 23 World Championships in the Czech Republic and again in 2010 at the World University Rowing Championships in Hungary.

Monica admits it was really challenging to balance a promising rowing career alongside her academic work. She puts her success down to rigorous planning, organisation and a diminishing social life - in her own words there was limited time to "faff around". Monica's academic performance increased in-line with her focus on rowing, and she believes this was largely driven by a new found competitive mind-set where performing below her best was no longer good enough.



"Rowing taught me discipline and structure, skills that I transferred into my academic studies. I didn't have time to procrastinate. I had to be really organised. Before rowing took hold of my life, I was less driven, sport taught me to work hard."

Monica believes being an elite athlete has given her a number of skills directly transferable into her work, including the ability to work in a team, to communicate well, and to cope with pressure. Monica still trains most days and strongly believes it pays dividends in terms of her productivity: *"I'm more productive, efficient and effective when I train."*

Managing stress and pressure

Mental wellbeing is rising up the agenda – finding ways to address the challenge of pressured workplaces is increasingly important. In 2014/15 stress accounted for 35% of all work related ill-health cases and 43% of all working days lost due to ill-health in England.¹¹

We found that playing sport, whether alone or in a team activity, helps women to manage potential anxieties they may be feeling at work. In our YouGov survey of senior female decision makers, 42% surveyed agreed that playing sport has helped them stay calm whilst in stressful situations at work (compared to 28% who disagreed).

Puts things in perspective

Sport can create a distance from the unremitting intensity of daily working life. One female business leader commented, *“For me, the biggest thing is that headspace - the psychological benefit. Obviously the physical benefits are huge, but for me, it just creates that disconnect between being on that day to day hamster wheel and being able to have clear thinking and put things into perspective.”*

43%

of all working days lost due to ill health in England are because of stress

42%

agreed that playing sport has helped them stay calm whilst in stressful situations at work





Moment of release

Others went on to describe how being active can provide an escape route when things get tough. *“When I was stressed about stuff, I would store it up and then think about it on my run. So it gave me permission throughout the day not to be stressed. I used to think, don’t be stressed about anything now, anything that’s worrying you, just put it in a balloon and then you can run it out. That’s how I used to deal with stress and I found it very, very helpful.”*

A number of our interviewees acknowledged that women may be more susceptible to stress. One female business leader observed, *“Possibly there are more benefits [of playing sport] to women. It’s not that men can’t get stressed but typically women have to juggle more, particularly working mothers...One shouldn’t underestimate the importance of giving people space to let them do whatever it is that they choose to do as a way of relieving the stress and helping them to manage themselves.”*

In her case study below, Lara talks about how she relishes being able to switch off completely whilst playing netball.

Lara, in her mid-30s, works as a lawyer. She enjoys running and plays netball regularly with different teams.

Lara was very sporty at school, where she enjoyed hockey and tennis. She didn’t play much sport at university as she wasn’t quite good enough to get into the main teams. So she spent a few years doing very little exercise at all. She took up netball from scratch after starting a new job and learnt the rules as she went. She now plays with teams in three different leagues.

Lara says that playing sport helps to build team working skills. It also helps with managing stress ‘hugely’ and makes her more productive at work as a result. In particular, Lara says team sport is a good way to switch off the mind, because you can’t think about anything else when you’re in a game.

“I really love playing a team sport. I love it! It gives you a social aspect and working with a team there’s a much stronger drive to win - not in a horribly competitive way, but just in the best possible way, all of you working together to achieve the same goal. It’s also the only time I find where everything completely switches off. After I’ve finished playing a game I think ‘gosh, I didn’t actually think about anything other than that game, where I was running, who I was passing the ball to, for an hour’. It’s the one time I get to put absolutely everything behind me...I think that’s what I like most about it.”



Being able to combine physical activity and work often means that women work harder when at work as a result

Boosting productivity

So being physically active also delivers a positive impact on productivity. One female business leader commented, *“My job is fairly full-on. There’s always stuff to do, think about and improve, mission, strategy direction... If you let yourself, you could think about it all day long, 24 hours a day. But when I’m training for hockey or playing hockey, I don’t think of that at all. All I’m thinking about is hockey and helping the team win. Just that bit of shut out and refresh helps you come back stronger business-wise.”*

In addition, being able to combine physical activity and work often means that women work harder when at work as a result. One interviewee observed that despite sport taking up a lot of her time, *“I don’t find it has any kind of negative impact on the organisation of my life. Far from it, I suspect it’s a positive impact. I find that if I get out at lunchtime, I’m more productive in the afternoon.”*

“You get the sense that they are broadly happier, more in control of things, and therefore probably coping with life better. So that, I’m sure, ends up making them more productive.”

This view was echoed by business leaders who felt that sporty women were productive at work.

Others talked about the physical resilience that being active nurtures, bringing with it the simple boost of improving health and reducing time off sick.

HARNESSING THE BENEFITS OF WOMEN PLAYING SPORT AT WORK

We found that organisations are recognising the value of having active women amongst their employees and this is feeding through into different aspects of how businesses operate.

Management and recruitment practices

Some business leader interviewees talked about the impact on recruitment and taking a special interest in those women who highlighted sport on CVs or application forms. This interest might be based on personal experience and an understanding of the various benefits that playing sport brings. One leader commented that candidates who participate in sport are more likely to display such valuable traits as being accountable and efficient with minimum supervision. *“They have a different approach to their self-development. The kind of people who do stuff well are the kinds of people who challenge themselves in sport, the kinds of people who put themselves up for leadership positions. Those who have been part of a formal team are often very different from the people who have not.”*

Even amongst those who were not keen sports participants themselves, playing sport was seen to be an important sign that there is more to an individual than their professional expertise. One leader commented, *“I don’t know whether it’s an unconscious bias or whether it’s a conscious reflection, but certainly when I look at someone’s CV, when I see that someone has played sport – irrespective of what sort of standard - it demonstrates that they are looking for different interests that broaden them and that they understand how to work in teams.”*

Potential employers also took being active as a marker of women’s attitudes towards themselves and their investment in their personal physical and mental wellbeing. One business leader commented, *“If I’m employing someone, I employ the whole person, not just their brain. It’s also their body that’s coming into the office as well. They are going to be a better person if they are more balanced and they’re healthy and they have interests outside of work. ‘Sporty’ is effectively shorthand for showing that they are likely to be healthy and taking care of themselves.”*





CLOSING WORDS

Our research has highlighted that women playing sport is associated with positive outcomes. These extend beyond the already well-acknowledged improved health benefits at the level of the individual and wider society. Our wide-ranging analysis has shown that participation in sport has a very valuable role to play in helping women to perform at their best in their studies and at the workplace. We have seen that women who are active are more likely to have better qualifications and be in management roles.

Underpinning this, we have understood how the experience of taking part in sport can help to develop skills and qualities valuable for personal progression, whether academic or professional. What is notable is that skills include those which are known to be particularly useful in leadership and often in areas where women are thought to struggle.

It is about more than just benefits at the level of the individual; the workplace can gain too from the increased effectiveness of their female staff. This has further implications at a macro level: with higher performing organisations, the wider economy also benefits.

For these positive outcomes to be realised, more opportunities for women and girls to be active are needed. This requires support at all different levels, ranging from increased sponsorship of female sports professionals to ensure greater visibility of role models, down to permission to be active during the working day within organisations. It is time to move from barriers to benefits.

Potential employers also took being active as a marker of women's attitudes towards themselves and their investment in their personal, physical and mental wellbeing.

APPENDIX

Interviewees

Women in Sport and Investec would like to thank the following for people for contributing their time as interviewees and supporting this work:

Business Leaders:

- Dupsy Abiola – CEO of Intern Avenue
- Sarah Davies – Co-founder of The Behavioural Architects
- Ali Lucas – WWF, Executive Director of Communications and Fundraising
- Ailie MacAdam - Managing Director, Infrastructure - Europe and Africa at Bechtel Corporation
- Raymond Van Niekerk - Chief Marketing Officer, Investec

Case Studies:

- Hannah MacLeod – part of GB hockey team and also runs her own nutrition research company
- Lara (anon) – lawyer and recreational netball player
- Sarah Davies – (as above) – recreational mountain biker
- Harriet Keane – former rower, Oxford, now strategy consultant
- Monica Relph – former GB rower, now working in a social enterprise
- Yemisi Sofolarin - Psychology Student, University of Nottingham, hockey player

Method used to analyse Understanding Society data

The aim of this secondary data analysis was to examine whether or not there is a relationship between women's participation in sport and a number of outcomes relating to employment status, educational attainment, and personal attributes.

A series of hypotheses were tested using Wave 5 of the Understanding Society dataset, which was released in 2015. The analysis was restricted to a subset of cases; women who are 16 years and over. The sample size varies for different tests according to exclusions for missing data. The sample sizes for each of the hypotheses were:

- Hypothesis 1¹²:
 - Sport participation has a positive effect on managerial level (n=12,287)
 - Sport participation has a positive effect on job role (n=11,155)
- Hypothesis 2: Sport participation has a positive effect on education level (n=22,728)
- Hypothesis 3: Sport participation has a positive effect on self-efficacy variables (n=between 20,587 and 20,654)

The main variable selected as indicative of sports participation is the frequency of engaging in moderate/high intensity sport in the past 12 months, based on a question which asks which of a list of activity respondents have participated in over the previous 12 months. Some examples of the sports included in the high/ moderate intensity activity category include: going to the gym or a fitness class, running, team sports such as football, rugby or netball, racquet sports, boxing, athletics, horse riding and snow sports. The dataset was interrogated using a combination of cross tabulation and regression analyses in order to explore each of the hypotheses.





Sources:

- ¹ This longitudinal survey asks questions about people's social and economic circumstances, attitudes, behaviours and health, building on the British Household Panel Survey data that lasted for 25 years. (A description of the analysis approach used by The Young Foundation to investigate the Understanding Society data is in the Appendix.)
- ² The survey by YouGov was carried out online with fieldwork taking place between 10th – 16th February 2016. The sample was specifically defined to be women working in a certain management level (i.e. one of owner/ proprietor, partner, chairperson, chief executive, managing director, non-executive director, other board level manager/director, other senior manager or director below board level)
- ³ Hansen, K., Joshi, H. and Dex, S. (eds.) (2010) *Children of the 21st Century: the First Five Years*. UK Millennium Cohort Study Series, 2. Bristol: Policy Press.
- ⁴ <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2377002/> (Susan Carlson et al., (2008) Physical Education and Academic Achievement in Elementary School: Data From the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, *Am J Public Health*. April; 98(4): 721–727.
- ⁵ Hanson, S. and Kraus, R. (1998) Women, Sports and Science: do female athletes have an advantage? *Sociology of Education*, 71, pp. 93-110; Hanson, S. and Kraus, R. (1999) Women in Male Domains: sport and science. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 16, pp. 91-110.
- ⁶ <http://www.shu.ac.uk/mediacentre/social-value-sport>
- ⁷ Sport England (October 2014 – September 2015) *Active People Survey 9*
- ⁸ Gallup (2015) *Understanding Life Outcomes of Former NCAA Student-Athletes*
- ⁹ <http://www.fastcompany.com/3057472/why-former-women-athletes-are-more-engaged-in-their-jobs?partner=rss>
- ¹⁰ In a recent report by Deloitte, 'Global Human Capital Trends', based on a survey of more than 7,000 executives in over 130 countries, almost half said their companies were either in the middle of restructuring or about to embark on it; and for the most part, restructuring meant putting more emphasis on teams.
- ¹¹ <http://www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/causdis/stress/>
- ¹² The samples represented here excludes cases with missing data as well as those people who are for some reason not in employment but are not 'unemployed' for example people who are registered as disabled or who are in full time training or education, or who for some other reason do not fit with these descriptions. This is why sample sizes for these queries were substantially lower than sample sizes for the other queries.



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