If You Let Me Play: Inclusivity in Parkour & Sports

The Battle of the Sexes

“The more you know about history, the more you know about yourself and the more you can shape the future.” – Billie J King

In 1973, Billie J. King faced off against Bobby Riggs in a notorious historical sporting event dubbed “The Battle of the Sexes.” This mens-vs-womens exhibition tennis match was outrageous in its visual fanfare and publicity with openly sexist commentary broadcast across public television leading up to the event.

“Hell, we know there is no way she can beat me,” Riggs remarked, despite being almost 30 years older than King, “She’s a stronger athlete than me and she can execute various shots better than me, but when the pressure mounts and she thinks about 50 million people watching on TV, she’ll fold. ***That’s the way women are.”***

The physical and emotional inferiority of women was a publicly held and promoted belief, “I’m not only interested in [winning for the] glory for my sex,” Riggs continued, “but …to set women’s lib back twenty years, to get women back into the home, *where they belong.”*

What happened?

King beat Riggs, sweeping the match in three sets, and it became one of the most impactful moments for women in sports and society. It drew massive attention to the issue of equity and gender in sports and inspired a generation to take action.

Your Mom Was Told She *Couldn’t.*

For many people reading this, 1973 is 50-something years ago and no more than a line in history. For my mother, 1973 was her senior year in high school and an incredibly defining time in her life.


Theresa Shank, Number 12, goes up for a shot in a 1975 game against Towson State. Shank played for the Mighty Macs of Immaculata College, a tiny women-only school in Pennsylvania. The team won the first three women's college basketball national titles, beginning in 1972. (Immaculata University for AP)

She was a self-proclaimed tomboy who balanced basketball with ballet. She loved science, astronomy, and the outdoors, and planned to go into forestry and the natural sciences. While she was strong, intelligent, beautiful, she did not believe it. Her childhood experiences taught her that she was viewed as having 'less value' as a woman and human—all because she was engaged in non-gender-conforming activities (sports and sciences).

If you're missing context: Only 7% of students participating in high school sports in the 1970s were women; Only 2% in college. The cultural climate, as the Kings-Riggs match reflects, **discouraged women enjoying sports and sent a clear message that participation in sports would result in public shaming, humiliation and emotional abuse, and being considered less valuable as a woman, mate, and human.**

My other still got on the court and played, despite the her *family, friends, coaches, and community* telling her she didn't have the strength, ability, intelligence, and value because she was a woman. She applied to college and earned a degree in education, dove into astronomy, and picked up computers and video games for fun. She didn't let

a backwards societal expectation stop her from pursuing her interests and dreams, or define her worth.

Unfortunately my mothers experiences aren't unique to her generation. In 2020 our government, major companies, organizations, and communities are often led by people who grew up in a time where women were viewed as less than men; our parents, teachers, mentors, bosses, and friends all have been apart of this experience, and often knowingly or unknowingly, pass their biases along.

IF YOU LET ME PLAY

*"I will learn what it means to be strong **if** you let me play sports."*

Participation in sports has numerous benefits. Through games and training, we learn about human nature and how to navigate social relationships. We practice dealing with conflict, designing solutions, and taking risks. Identity is formed, as well as friendships. Women in particular also benefit from higher levels of confidence and the likelihood of earning better grades as well as lower levels of depression and being less likely to be involved in an unintended pregnancy.

Despite this, American society has continued to resist women's participation in sports. It is easy to write off a sexist tennis match from 50 years ago as ancient history, but between 1990-today, we have numerous examples of how far we have not progressed.

IF YOU LET ME PLAY | NIKE | 1995
In 1995 Nike aired a landmark commercial called "If you let me play," highlighting benefits to participation in sports for women. In its language though it reflected the attitude persisting in society.***"If"*** you let me play' **was an acknowledgement of the gendered gatekeeping that existed.** Fathers, coaches, commentators–**there was still the question of *if* women should even be allowed to play.**

'Sports and strength were designated as male arenas.' ***If*** you let me play recognized that any woman who dared to venture in was risking a lot more than just winning and losing a game—she was challenging a social construct.

LIKE A GIRL | ALWAYS | 2004

Twenty years later in 2014 Always releases their #LikeAGirl campaign in an effort to reclaim the phrase. The video opens with adult women as well as adult and youth men demonstrating what it meant to run, throw, and fight 'like a girl.' Their demonstrations

reflect the story we hold and often pass on as a society–that sports and strength aren't for girls. *Like A Girl* revealed the persisting unspoken belief of women being weaker.

It was an advertisement I also deeply related to. **To this day, every major academic, athletic, and professional accomplishment has been subtly undercut by the addition of three small words: "You're smart, good, strong… *for a girl.*"**

Women still experience in sports that their status is secondary to men and that their participation 'doesn't really matter.' according to a 2002 study by McClung and Blinde. There is also fear of social ostrasiation—with many girls facing name calling and belittling for being seen as too strong "butch," "masculine," "dyke," etc.

While there have been many organizations and movements dedicated to including women in sports, there is still a great deal of cultural de-conditioning that has to occur today.

Women in Parkour

The North American Womens Parkour Gathering in Toronto. 2013. Anya Chibis

When I found Parkour in 2007, I was concluding a successful high school athletic career. I lettered in all my sports, participated in national competitions, broke records,

and was coaching younger students. I was fortunate to have supportive coaches that never made me feel inferior due to being a woman. I was treated, most of the time, as an equal by my male team-mates and respected as a leader in the larger community. My parents also gave me an empowered (and priveledged) childhood—reminding me that I was strong, smart, and beautiful.

At the same time I knew women on teams in other towns, in other eras, who were put down, treated as second-tier, under- or un-funded, ignored, and so forth, sometimes not just for their gender but their race and orientation as well.

Having played in whole, healthy, and empowering spaces, my early experiences in parkour stand out in painful, stark contrast.

In 2007 the discipline was still new in the States. The sport was loosely held together and defined, with culture varying vastly depending on where and with whom you were training. In-person communities were primarily established in major cities, with limited access to coaches and leadership.

Back then I frequently found myself outnumbered at events, often being the only woman amongst 50-60 participants. I navigated cat-calling and sexual harassment. I was treated differently, being regularly reminded that as a woman I was weaker and less capable.

There was a New York Times article around 2009 or 2010 interviewing a female practitioner at the time who reiterated herself that girls couldn't cat pass. I remember (and still to this day sill see) video commentary online that praise girls looks over their abilities. At one point became the target of negative, aggressive commentary (name calling, threats of sexual assault) when I had an article posted on American Parkour in an effort to speak up and out about some of the cultural issues needing to be addressed in regards to gender.

In 2011 I attended a national jam on the east coast when, walking down the street in a large group of male practitioners, a couple of them began catcalling random female passerbys. "Hey yo ma, wanna come on over here? Wanna get pregnant?" I remember watching the two girls across the street pick up their pace and walk faster, knowing just how scary and uncomfortable it probably was. I was one of three girls there that weekend, and it was such a jarring, ugly experience that I never went back to that community and still remember it to this day.

After a while, I started to pull back. I stopped showing up to jams and large group training and opted to work on my movement solo. I refused to share videos and didn't

participate in online discussions. **I wanted to play, the same way my mom wanted to play, but didn't know how to get onto the 'court' and not feel defeated before the game began.**

Breaking Barriers Together

"Breaking down barriers… is a part of who a female athlete is."

It is so valuable to have female role models of a wide range of body types, abilities, colors, ages, and backgrounds. We also shouldn't underestimate the power of having spaces where women and girls can get onto the playing field more easily, that feel safe and welcoming, and have quality leadership.

I think back to my early experiences in parkour and **how invaluable it would have been to have female mentors and role models to look up to as I struggled with my movement, body image, and self within the sport.** I think about how powerful and enriching those experiences in high school were, and with my family, where I got to be apart of an inclusive and respectful community. **It was easy for me to show up and focus on overcoming the other obstacles of my physical and mental training when I knew I would be met kindness, support, and equality.**

A lot has changed over the last decade in the Parkour community. Today many communities in the United States run regular womens meetups and have female coaches. There are thousands of videos online of women running, jumping, and climbing, with both men and women giving praise and critique on the skills. Major events have popped up worldwide, including the North American Womens Gathering, which runs every July and draws in women from 25+ different states, of all ages and

abilities, as well as She Can Trace and Wam Jam and the Copenhagen Girls Gathering. Conversations, presentations, posts, and articles are being written and discussed on how to build more inclusive experiences and involve more women. **There is a persistent interest among leadership in doing and being better as a sporting community.**

However, there is still a lot to be done. Many gyms lack female leadership and fail to connect and retain girl students. The majority of all jams worldwide are organized by men without significant input from women, and I've seen far too many educational events in recent years fail with no excuse to bring in female coaches. There is an unresolved debate of equal prize money for emergent competitions and experiences with sexism and harassment are still being reported by female practitioners.

An Inclusive Community

I want to zoom out here and somehow bring this to a close for now. I've focused deeply on my and the female experience within sports and parkour, but what women experience is not unique. I have always held to be true that Parkour, and **sports in general, should be a celebration of all human beings and abilities,** but I also recognize we do not live in a world or hold experiences that reflect that.

As I said earlier, **It's important to recognize that we unknowingly inherit so many of our biases and ideas of self from our parents, role models, communities, and media.** Our generation today has been raised and formed by mothers and fathers, teachers and mentors, public figures and personalities that were **taught the inferiority of the female sex, as well as the inferiority of people of color, people of older age, and people with disabilities.**

While we have come far, we can not deny there is still racism, sexism, ableism, and ageism in sports, and massive barriers to participation for these populations. Some of these barriers we can see but many more are embedded in the way our cities, systems, and communities think and function–often operating well beyond the bounds of the sporting activity itself.

We need to work together as a community to unpack and address the biases and assumptions that all of us hold around practice and performance. We need to make adjustments to the spaces we play in, when we play, how we play, and how much it costs to play–not just financially but emotionally as well.

It's not quick or overnight. For those oppressed, underserved, or under-resourced communities, trauma runs deep and is daily felt. I don't have an immediate solution.

There is no ‘do these 10 things’. On a large scale we need acknowledgement and allyship, as well as awareness and education.

However, I do want to offer a few things that individuals and small organizations can start doing today in an effort to invite more people into our community.

- Using and share more diverse images and videos
- Storytelling and storysharing experiences, and seeking out stories from those who might be withholding their stories due to being silenced in the past. Listening and validating stories that are reported.
- Establishing new community agreements in partnership with *all* community members (all genders, color, able-bodyness, age). Make sure there are people at the decision making table that are the same as those being impacted by those decisions.
- Self educating and facilitating conversations around anti-sexism, anti-racism, anti-ageism, and anti-ableism in your networks.
- Cultivating diverse leadership, especially among coaches and mentors. Specifically reaching out and encouraging participation and engagement. Ensuring that diverse leadership is actually teaching diverse groups.
- Inviting diverse coaches to events.

These are small things you can start doing today, and there is a great deal of work that really needs to be done. But, big or small, we can all contribute to creating a community that respects and celebrates people of all dimensions of diversity.

Whats Being Done?

You can also support organizations and events that have emerged to support moving towards a more inclusive community. There has been some amazing efforts (and always happy to add to this list if you are running a program or offering resources!).

- Parkour Visions (PKV) has its **annual Movement For All fund,** coming up this December 1, supporting regional and national programs for under-served populations including an Adaptive Parkour Program, Fearless Parkour for Seniors, Free classes in communities, and youth programming targetting low income and at risk populations. Monthly donors support these and other programs on the rise.
- **ALL BODIES AND MINDS**: I also have seen organizations such as Move to Inspire and Urban Movement launching Adaptive Programs for individuals with disabilities. PKV will be also releasing an open-source curriculum and teaching resources for people interested in starting their own program in early 2020! Espirit Concrete is bringing together mental health with movement through their program development. In 2017 I worked with the Movement Creative to design and build an Adaptive Parkour Obstacle Course with the NYC Department of Transportation.

- **ALL AGES**: PK Move is pushing research and programming for seniors in parkour. Parkour over 40 is an online group sharing videos and content for those pushing the practice into older ages. Forever Young, a program of Parkour Dance Company, also helped lay some incredible groundwork for seniors in parkour. Parkour Generations Americas ran an 8-day course focused on improving body awareness and increasing fall prevention.
- **ALL GENDERS**: There is the See & Do Movement started by Julie Angel to capture and normalize women in parkour in the media, as well as her larger body of photo, video, and written work addressing ageism and diversity. The North American Womens Gathering will be hosted in San Francisco in 2020, and initiatives like She Can Trace from Parkour Generations, WamJam in Australia, and Girls Gathering in Denmark all strive to increase female and gender diverse participation in parkour.
- **ALL COLORS**: Obsidian Gathering was a black pride jam that ran in 2017 to celebrate black practitioners and encourage civic engagement–with hopefully another running soon!
- **ALL BACKGROUNDS**: There are also online groups such as Parkour Instructors for Underprivileged Youth. Parkour Visions was awarded a $50,000 grant to run free and lowcost parkour programming for at-risk youth between 2018-2019 in Seattle. Similarly, they run donation based classes, as does The Movement Creative in NYC, with commitments to ensuring no one is denied access and opportunity to move due to financial restraints.
- **MORE RESOURCES**: Platforms like Art of Retreat have presentations every year dealing with some aspect of sexism, racism, ableism, or ageism–Alice Popejoy, Chrischelle Borhani, Julie Angel, Natalia Boltukhova, Kasturi Torchia, Nancy Lorentz all delivered incredible presentations and facilitated dialogues around some element of inclusivity (and I'm sure I'm missing several). The facebook group Parkour Research is a place where you can engage in dialogue with the community and access a list of research as well.

As David Zirin wrote in a Peoples History of Sports – *"If we challenge sports to be as good as they can be–a force to break down walls that divide us, a motor for inclusion–they can propel us toward a better world, a world worth play in–and worth fighting for'."*