

Getting girls in the game

BY JODI GILLICH, LEADER-POST DECEMBER 9, 2009



June Zimmer (centre), who initiated the Girls in the Game program, poses with (left to right) Clara Lighthouse, 6, Sophie Lighthouse, 10, Madison Zimmer, 6, and Emily Lighthouse, 8.

Photograph by: Don Healy, Leader-Post, Leader-Post

"We have seen such a change in Ronnie this year as far as confidence to join in with different sports activities at school," wrote parent Marla Exner in an e-mail to June Zimmer. "She was having a very hard time at the beginning of the year at recess because she felt like she couldn't keep up with the other kids.

"By the end of the year she was trying all kinds of activities and recess was something she looked forward to instead of dreaded."

The e-mail is one of many responses Zimmer -- who teaches within the University of Regina's faculty of education's baccalaureat en education program -- has received in regards to her program, Girls in the Game.

In an environment free of judgment, boys and competition, Girls in the Game teaches girls aged five to 10 the skills to play a variety of sports.

Zimmer, a former elementary school phys-ed teacher, noticed many girls tend to withdraw when it comes to participating in phys-ed classes and other sports activities.

"I sort of kept that in the back of my mind for many, many years and I was involved in research projects about girls and sport and phys-ed. Two years ago, we said, 'Let's see what this could be like if we took it in a noncompetitive way and taught skills instead of, 'Go play basketball,' " said Zimmer, who was one of 12 recipients to win a Women in Sport Encouragement Fund grant of \$900 from the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity.

With the program's motto, "Confidence, competence and friendship: Sport really is more than just a game!" Zimmer hopes girls can learn to play sports while gaining confidence, having fun and making friends.

And it's been a hit with parents and daughters alike.

In the program's first session, 30 girls were registered; 160 girls were registered for the most recent session.

During each session, a maximum of 40 girls per class meet once a week for eight consecutive weeks.

"We just have these girls that will run full speed across the gym and tackle a running bag like a real football player would do -- without hesitation, without judgment -- and they're five or six, seven or eight years old," said Zimmer.

"It's just that confidence to know, (a) how to do it., and (b) that nobody's watching, nobody's judging, nobody's looking, and they see me do it too."

Zimmer said that having female role models is another key to getting girls in the game, as the ultimate goal is to get girls involved.

In gym class, boys tend to be more aggressive and might dominate the classroom if they have acquired skills before girls, she added.

"The girls will step back and go, 'You know, I don't actually know how to tackle and no one's going to show me. I don't know how to run, no one's taught me that technique,' so they really feel initially slighted," said Zimmer.

For more information, contact the University of Regina's Recreation and Athletic Services office at 585-4371 or ras@uregina.ca.

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