

The team Lamar coached was the New York Chuckles. The Chuckles were one of the best teams in the city. They called the new, white girl with the red hair and the flashy basketball style - "Fire." She quickly took her place as one of the best on the court. She would join any game that was playing. Everybody soon knew about the fantastic basketball player from Queens. Coach Lamar called Nancy the "queen" of Harlem; she was the player who could "get it all done."

Family Support Is Critical For Female Athletes

Experts say many girls quit sports before they are teenagers due to lack of opportunities and social support. Nancy Lieberman was a gifted athlete. But she had to create her own opportunities. Yes, there are more opportunities for girls these days, but not enough. It was also tough for Nancy that other moms and dads would come to the basketball games to watch their kids play, but not hers. It took a long time for Lieberman's family to appreciate her talents and achievements. Instead of supporting her, they kept trying to talk her *out* of playing basketball. Fortunately, nothing would stop her from realizing her dreams of athletic success. Her coaches and her teams became her new "family."

Even now, more than two decades later, a girl like Lieberman-Cline is the exception, not the rule. Many young girls are likely to quit sports if their families, like Nancy's, don't support what they are doing. That's why is so important for a girl's family to support is particularly crucial if young female athletes are to have a positive sports experience; why it's so important that young girls know, from our reactions and words, that sweating and being agile, powerful, muscular and athletic are "feminine." The love and encouragement of family members can help a young girl enjoy the victories and accept the defeats. The family can, and should, be a part of a child's love affair with sports. Family members can take great pride in her accomplishments. They can provide a shoulder and a hug for the setbacks.

At the same time, the family needs to be careful to avoid putting extra stress on the young athlete, especially just after the game or competition is over. After all, sports are supposed to be fun. All kids need reinforcement and positive feedback about what they are doing.

Being Competitive: It's Okay For Girls, Too!

Nancy Lieberman-Cline had a powerful competitive drive that pushed her to succeed in spite of the obstacles in her way. Sports can teach healthy competitive and cooperative attitudes. The emphasis should be on the inner rewards of competition, such as learning how to make decisions, leadership training, meeting challenges, and working with others. Competitive sports can teach girls to be strategic, to plan ahead, to relax under stress, to concentrate and stay focused. Training for and competing in sports requires a commitment. From this commitment of time and effort, a young girl learns how to set goals, take responsibility and prepare for the challenges of life. She has the opportunity to learn how to accept failure and be a gracious winner while enjoying the thrill of success.

Boys have traditionally been rewarded and praised for their competitive spirit. Shouldn't girls also be allowed to experience the achievements, and the teamwork, and the glory? There are some hazards to placing a child in an overly competitive environment. It should be age-appropriate. It should be either stress-free, or the young person should be taught anxiety-reducing skills. There should be lots of positive feedback. There should be plenty of opportunity for team comradery, to allow girls to enjoy this important social aspect of sports. A lot of kids love sports. Some really love to win. It is important to help both girls and boys learn how to bounce back from losing, as well as how to enjoy the experience of winning in a healthy way. Above all, remember that it is just a game and that keeping it fun is the best way to help ensure that kids - girls *and* boys - keep playing sports.

The Need For Role Models

Since the passage of Title IX in 1972, the number of girls playing sports has gone from one in twenty-five to one in three. Yet some people still cling to the notion that girls are simply not as *interested* in sports as boys. Research by the [Women's Sports Foundation](#), however, proves otherwise: a recent study of pre-adolescent boys and girls (those between the ages of 6 and 9), shows that they are *equally interested* in playing sports.

By age 12, girls are six times more likely to drop out of sports than boys. Why? One of the reasons, say experts, is that girls simply do not receive as much positive reinforcement about their sports participation as boys. Boys get to see male athletes on televised sports; they can see their photos in newspapers and magazines; and there are plenty of books for boys about male sports heroes. Boys learn at a very young age that it is not only okay to enjoy sports but that their success will be supported by their families and society. Girls see far fewer female athletes on television; coverage of women's sports in newspapers and magazines, while increasing, is far less than that given to men's college and professional sports. There are very few books for girls about female sports heroes that girls can read as they grow up; athletes whose success our daughters will want emulate and see as role models.

Books About Female Athletes: Filling The Gap

With this in mind, my husband and I have written a children's book series, *Anything You Can Do... New Sports Heroes For Girls*. The books recount the childhood experiences of elite female athletes, but, just as important, they provide insight into the unique obstacles such women confronted as girls playing sports - issues that, even today, most young girls still face.

Volume One in the series, [A Drive to Win: The Story of Hall of Fame Basketball Player Nancy Lieberman-Cline](#), tells the inspiring story of women's basketball's first superstar, Nancy Lieberman Cline, whose flashy passing during her college career at Old Dominion University two decades ago not only earned her the nickname "Lady Magic" but helped pave the way for the growth of college women's basketball and the subsequent birth of a women's professional basketball league, the WNBA (where Lieberman-Cline coached for two seasons). The following excerpt from the book tells of how, determined to pursue her basketball dreams despite her family's misgivings, Lieberman-Cline went to play for an AAU basketball team in the inner city:

It was a tough time for the young, aspiring athlete. Most of the girls made fun of her, and no one in her family really took her sports seriously. It would have been great to have her parents or grandparents in the stands watching games, like other kids had.

Nancy used to ask her mom all the time about coming to see her play basketball. "Can you take me to practice?" she would ask. "I have a game tonight. Do you want to watch me play?" Nancy would ask her mom. But her mom always seemed to have an excuse. She had to make dinner or stay home with Cliff. It was hard for Nancy that her mom just didn't get it, and didn't want to be there cheering for Nancy.

When Nancy was 13, someone special did come to watch her at a school tournament. He was very impressed with what he saw, and he came to talk to her after the game.

"Nancy, my name is LaVosier Lama, and I coach an A.A.U. team of basketball players in Manhattan. You should come and play with us. We do pretty well in the A.A.U. competitions. Come see us. Play a little ball with us. We're up in Harlem. I can meet you at the train."

Nancy didn't hesitate because she had heard how good these girls were. "Great" she said. "Just tell me which subway to take." And the big, teddy-bear of a man started to laugh.

Nancy started taking the "A" train after school, from Far Rockaway into Harlem. It was still New York, but it was a whole different world. This was the inner city - with all its noise and crowds of people. Her mother had begged her not to go to Harlem all by herself. She was afraid for her young daughter, all alone, and a stranger to that part of New York City.

When she got to her stop, Lamar would be waiting to walk her to the park or the gym. She was always the only white girl there. But, with a basketball in her hands, Nancy felt like she fit right in. Coach Lamar taught Nancy a lot about playing competitive basketball. But, most important of all, he taught her to accept and respect all kinds of people - no matter where they came from.