



Dominic Vijay

A woman achieving high in a sport that requires physical strength, or a man winning in an aesthetic sport, very often come as a surprise. We also differentiate between sporting abilities on the basis of region. For example, an individual of north eastern origin is most often picked for a football team even if his interests lie in another sport. Similarly, a short person is very unlikely to be picked for a basketball team. But it is important to note that while some stereotypes have credibility, others don't. A tall person might play better basketball but we cannot and should not discount the possibility of excellent display skills by a short player. If the process of elimination, during the formation of a team or while playing, is stereotypical some talented and skilled players lose out on the opportunity to achieve.

The need to be accepted and become part of a group, which is a traditional socialisation process, is one of the reasons why young children follow a sport that is 'gender specific.' Most often, it has been noticed, that a young boy fears ridicule and being mocked at if he's seen playing with a skipping rope, which in my opinion is an integral exercise to develop football skills.

Stereotypes are also born out of the general lack of awareness amongst educators as they unconsciously promote stereotypical views of sport and physical education. To get rid of this, it is imperative that every school and its physical education teachers have teams and fitness sessions that are 'all inclusive.' If administrators make sport and fitness compulsory for all, children from varied backgrounds and of different skill levels would get an equal chance to develop a love for the game of their choice. No child will be routed into participation in a narrow range of physical activities. But boosting a child's morale to participate in all sports activities is not enough. We have to take

steps to go beyond that.

While working towards countering gender stereotypes, activities like jumping rope and skipping must be made compulsory for both boys and girls to develop skills in sports. Mixed teams ensure participation of every child; hence a girl on the football team

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is a parity and not a disadvantage. A prime example of disputing gender stereotypes is that of Mary Kom – India's leading woman boxer. Her achievements have soared beyond everyone's imagination and as she continues to dominate the boxing arena, it is commendable to note her determined journey to reach the heights of success.

In my opinion, a long term approach to dispose stereotypes based on body type is an expensive process in terms of time, money and effort. However, this should not be neglected altogether. Through a systematic selection process - with right opportunities, appropriate sports facilities and technical support, every eager student will be given a fair and equal chance to take up a sport of his or her choice. I wonder what Allen Iverson would have done with his talent had he not been selected for the NBA only based on his short stature!

A 'multiple-tier approach' could be put in place to achieve the short term goal of disposing stereotypes. A simple activity would help to categorize the participants into various pools of talent, which eases the selection process. Begin by forming 10 pairs of participants and then demonstrate any skill that they all have to achieve to go one step further into the advanced skills category- for example, the skill of passing a ball to the person on your left with one touch,

only in a circular formation. With every successful pass, the participant moves to the right and continues the activity with the others who are also moving. At the end of such an activity, you have a collective pool of ranges of talent and each child is given an opportunity to participate!

Eradicating all forms of stereotypes or at least attempting to do so may reap cultural and social benefits for all of us. High achieving athletes, who tread on unknown paths, become inspirational role models to follow. They set the benchmark for young sports enthusiasts who look forward to pursuing a sport they love. These athletes become leaders in their field and icons of their time. This will lead to more young children following a sport they love; thereby, receiving encouragement from their caregivers to help them achieve their dreams. Champions are only created through a deep desire that they have in them to achieve the impossible. The next generation of winners will give rise to more like them and a nation will only progress towards higher development.

While there is an evolution in the stereotyping attitudes of society, there is still a long way to go. We cannot discourage an individual from enjoying the benefits that come along with sports and physical education, because our perceptions are distorted. Encompassing the basic and universally recognised cultural, economic, and social rights as a by-product of countering stereotypes should be our bigger picture. To achieve this we should attempt to make a change from the top of a spectrum and not just begin from the bottom down because increased participation will only diversify our talent pool.

Sport helps promote equality objectives like rights and empowerment. Access to spaces where sporting activities can take place will assist students to develop new skills together, gain support and enjoy freedom of expression and movement. It can promote education and leadership, all of which are essential for the development of any society or culture.

*Let's work together to guarantee a successful India!*



*Dominic Vijay has a post graduate diploma in General Management from IIM-K and a diploma in 'Service Strategy' from Wharton. With over 13 years of experience in the field of People Management, Operations, Business Development, Marketing and Sales, Dominic has a vision to become part of a process that creates channels for every individual to excel. It is this vision and his passion for sports and fitness that led him to be a part of LeapStart as Operations Director.*