JOURNAL USA

SPORTS

STRENGTHEN COMMUNITIES

Paralympian redefines "ability"
page 7

Refugees adjust to American life through soccer
page 9

Lacrosse's Native American roots
page 11

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE
VOLUME 16 / NUMBER 10

Published June 2012

Coordinator, Dawn L. McCall; Executive Editor, Nicholas S. Namba; Director of Written Content, Michael Jay Friedman; Editorial Director, Mary T. Chunko; Managing Editor, Ashley Rainey Donahey; Contributing Editor, Mary-Katherine Ream; Production Chief, Michelle Farrell; Designer, Dori Walker; Cover Designer, Lauren Russell

The Bureau of International Information Programs of the U.S. Department of State publishes *eJournal USA*. Each issue examines a major topic facing the United States and the international community, and informs international readers about U.S. society, values, thought, and institutions.

Each *eJournal* is published in English, followed by electronic versions in French, Portuguese, Russian and Spanish. Selected editions also appear in Arabic, Chinese and Persian. Each journal is catalogued by volume and number.

The opinions expressed in *eJournal USA* do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. government. The U.S. Department of State assumes no responsibility for the content and continued accessibility of Internet sites to which the journals link; such responsibility resides solely with the publishers of those sites. Journal articles, photographs, and illustrations may be reproduced and translated outside the United States unless they carry explicit copyright restrictions, in which case permission must be sought from the copyright holders noted in the journal.

Editor, *eJournal USA*
IIP/CD/WC
U.S. Department of State
2200 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20522-0501
USA
E-mail: eJournalUSA@state.gov

Cover photo: ©AP Images

About This Issue

©AP Images

True sportsmanship: Meghan Vogel (right) carries competitor Arden McMath to the finish line in a 3,200-meter race, making sure that McMath crosses first.

Having won the 1,600-meter race an hour earlier at a state meet in Columbus, Ohio, Meghan Vogel was falling behind in the 3,200-meter race. In last place with 20 meters to go, Vogel saw competitor Arden McMath collapse ahead of her. Vogel helped McMath to her feet and carried her to the finish line, making sure McMath crossed ahead of her.

Many young athletes dream of becoming superstars in their sport, but making big bucks in the big leagues is not what sports are all about. In the United States, sports play a major role in community life. Players learn valuable lessons about discipline, teamwork and tolerance that help them succeed on and off the field. This issue of *eJournal USA* explores the integral role of sports in American society and highlights the power of sports to strengthen community bonds that transcend differences.

— *The Editors*

©AP Images

Team spirit: The Washington-Auburn Little League team jumps for joy after winning the Little League Northwestern Regional Championship. Sports bring Americans of all backgrounds together both as players and fans.

SPORTS STRENGTHEN COMMUNITIES

eJournal USA, June 2012, Volume 16/Number 10
Published by the U.S. Department of State, Bureau of International Information Programs

Contents

©AP Images

Strong bonds: Members of the Columbine High School women's soccer team clasp hands on the field in Englewood, Colorado.

©AP Images

MY TAKE

From Outsider to Olympian

With the help of mentors, family and community, Linda Miller goes from sports-shy child to world-class athlete. 5 |

SPOTLIGHTS

Paralympian redefines "ability" 7 |
Refugees adjust to American life through soccer 9 |
Lacrosse's Native American roots 11 |
The new face of fencing 13 |
Volleyball star serves her community 15 |

THE BIG THINK

2

SPORTS IN AMERICAN SOCIETY

Rick Telander, Senior sportswriter for the Chicago Sun-Times

Playing sports helps Americans overcome differences and bond as individuals — player to player — and as communities.

MORE

Photo Gallery

Top American athletes team up with sports enthusiasts all over the world. 17 |

Trivia

Test your sports knowledge! 19 |

PLAY

Sports in American Society

©Getty Images

By Rick Telander

It's hard to imagine a world without play. And if you can imagine such a world, it's not fun to dwell on the image.

Years ago I wrote a book about an inner-city asphalt park in Brooklyn, New York, and the kids and young adults who hung out there during the summer. There were some bad times, but most times were good. Playing basketball held the teenaged community together; the little kids dribbled balls and dreamed of the future; the older men shot and remembered the past. I titled the book *Heaven Is a Playground.* And I called it that because I think it's true. I think the freedom to play is the greatest gift people have.

AMERICAN GAMES AND COMMUNITIES

One of the best things about the United States is how much sports and play are an integral part of everyday life in American communities and neighborhoods. On any Saturday afternoon, people of widely differing backgrounds, professions and religions can be found on the playing fields and in the gymnasiums of their local schools and community centers, playing soccer, American football, basketball, baseball and other sports, while their families cheer on the sidelines. Playing sports has long been one of the ways in which Americans put aside their differences and bond as individuals — player to player — and as communities.

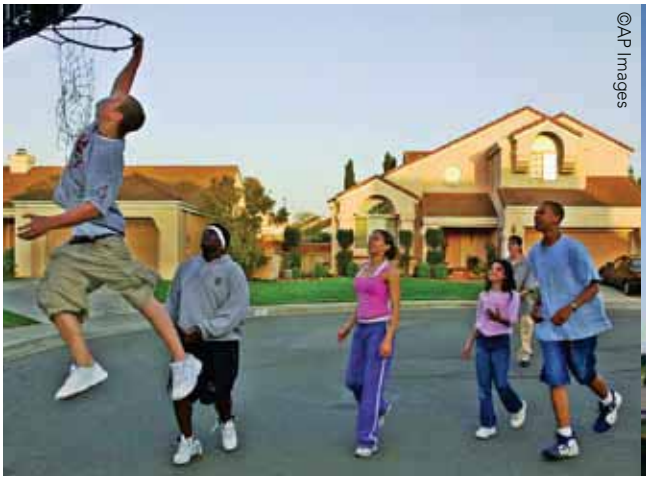
©Getty Images

Raising spirits: The Nantucket High School football team carries their coach off the field after winning a championship game in Massachusetts.

If you have ever seen the way a local team can capture the imagination and passion of a community and help everyone from players to parents to observers feel lifted up, you have seen something beautiful, indeed.

Such an uplifting took place on a large scale in 2009 when the New Orleans Saints of the National Football League won the Super Bowl four years after Hurricane Katrina had flooded and destroyed much of New Orleans. From city cabdrivers to blues singers on Bourbon Street, from bayou restaurant owners to swampland bankers, the Saints' march to the championship — the only Super Bowl crown in the team's 45-year history — brought the people of New Orleans together with a collective sigh of relief and a whoop of joy. We're back! We're better than ever!

The New Orleans Saints are a large, professional team, but the same type of bonding and uplifting goes on regularly in large and small towns and schools across the United States. Grammar school kids in Little League baseball play all over the nation, and invariably there will be an unlikely team that starts winning games, then tournaments, and — before the moms and dads and siblings know it — is on its way to baseball's Little League World Series.



©AP Images

MCT via Getty Images

©AP Images

Left: Getting together: A group of teenagers play a pick-up game of basketball in their Suisun City, California, neighborhood. **Center:** Welcome back to school! Lois Idleman, age 92, supports her local high school team, the Eagles, of Joplin, Missouri. **Right:** At play: Eight-year-old Josh Warp, right, and 6-year-old Ethan Bell battle for the ball at a local soccer match in Havre, Montana.

The boy who lived four houses down the street from me in suburban Chicago — a gangly, goofy kid who rode the school bus with my kids — has now won two gold medals and a silver medal at the 2008 Beijing Olympics and is a favorite to win more medals at the 2012 London Games. His name is Matt Grevers and when he was swimming in high school, the entire swim team went with him to an Illinois state championship. Without his opportunity to swim — and the support he received from fellow teammates and the rest of our community — Matt would have been just a lanky guy with gigantic feet instead of the Olympic athlete and leader he became.

©Shutterstock

According to a 2011 survey of American athletes, aged 5 to 18. Source: Minnesota Amateur Sports Commission, Athletic Footwear Association, *USA Today* Survey, Michigan State

©AP Images

Above: Hometown hero: Matt Grevers waves to fans after winning the 2011 U.S. men's swimming championship in the 200-meter backstroke. **Right:** Joy of the game: Superstar NBA player Michael Jordan had a special clause in his contract saying he could play basketball for free anytime and anywhere he wanted.

LEARNING FROM SPORTS

The ripple benefit of community sports and the pursuit of excellence in sports is hard to overstate. The same can be said of the life lessons that you can learn through sports. In any job, any art, any form of expression, you will get knocked down from time to time. Through sports you learn to rise up time after time, like a spring crop.

When I was in high school, our American football team had a 185-pound (84-kilo) guard. The job of guards is to protect the quarterback — the leader of the offense — and he was routinely called upon to block opponents who outweighed him by 20, 30, even 50 pounds. He did it through sheer determination and dedication and eventually even made the All-Conference team, a hand-selected team of the best players in our district. He was not particularly good at any other sport, not even great physically at football, and he never played at a higher level. But I played the quarterback, and I can honestly say he changed my life by showing me — without trying to — how a person

> The freedom to play is the greatest gift people have.

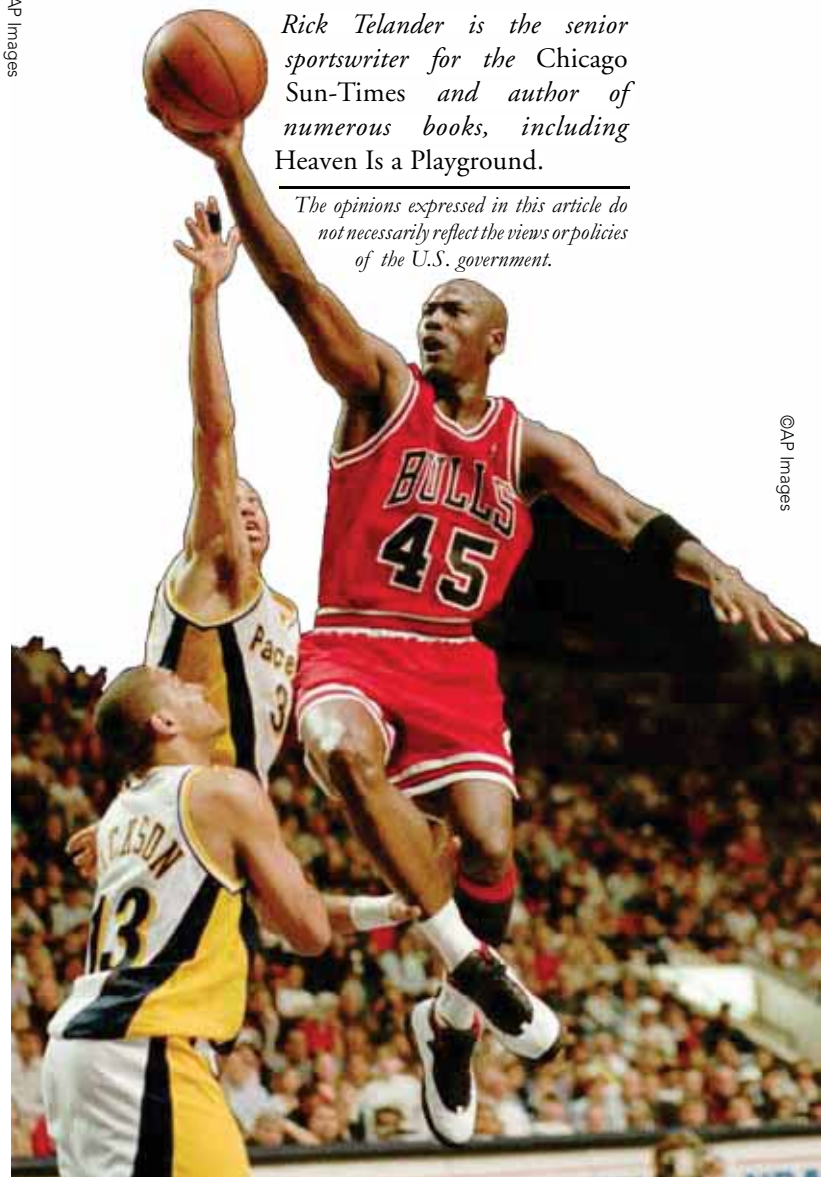
must pick himself up after getting knocked down, re-fasten his chinstrap, and get back in the game.

But resilience and determination aren't the only benefits of playing sports. The great basketball player Michael Jordan had a very unusual clause in his contract with the Chicago Bulls. It was called his "joy of the game" clause. It said that, unlike most valuable professional players, he could play basketball for free anytime and anywhere he wanted — just for the joy of playing.

Playing a sport can make anyone feel the same joy as Michael Jordan — whether they can sink a basketball or not. When the rules are followed and the spirit of the game takes hold, players and onlookers alike become as one. And that is how sports transcend differences and strengthen communities. ■

Rick Telander is the senior sportswriter for the Chicago Sun-Times *and author of numerous books, including* Heaven Is a Playground.

The opinions expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. government.

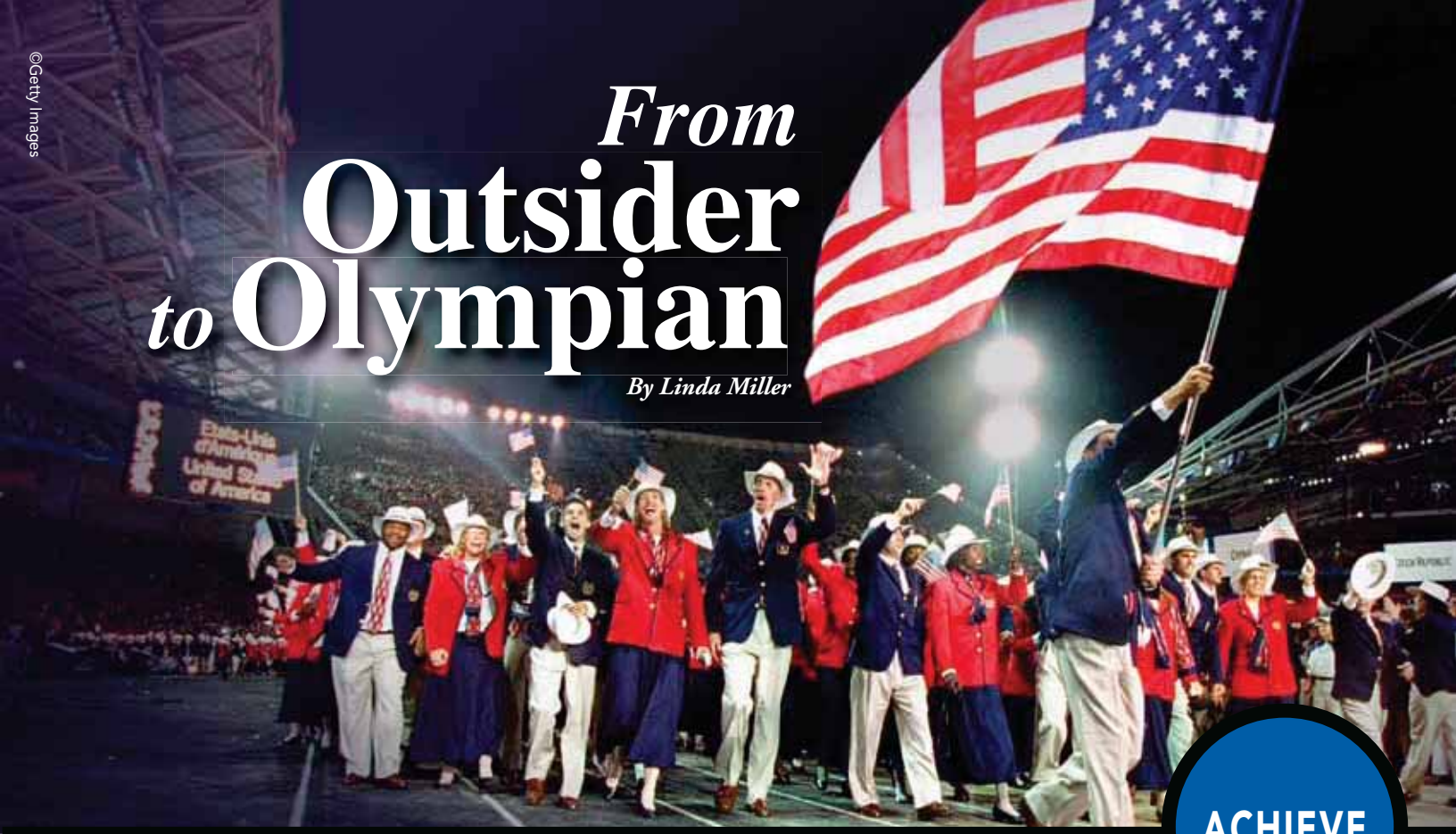


©AP Images

Return to Table of Contents

From Outsider *to* Olympian

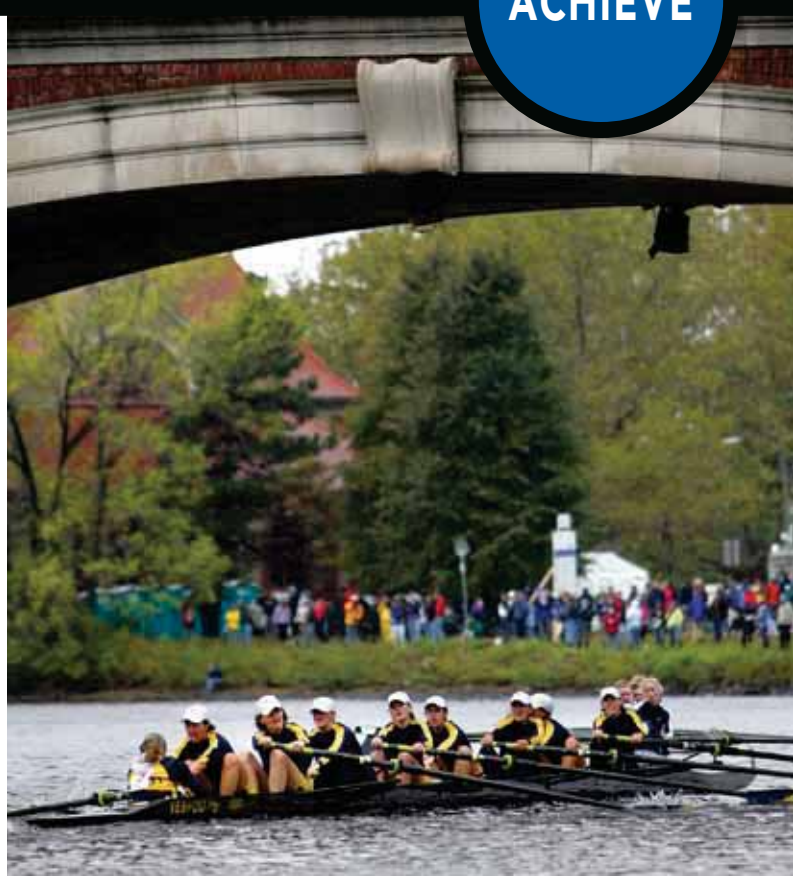
By Linda Miller



©Getty Images

ACHIEVE

Above: Here we go! Members of the U.S. Olympic team parade in the opening ceremonies of the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney — with Linda Miller among them. **Right:** All eyes on us: Crowds gather to watch Trinity College's women's rowing team compete.



©AP Images

Sports were not my thing when I was a kid. Plagued with asthma that frequently sent me to the emergency room, I sat on the bleachers during gym class — excused by a doctor's note. My pleas to play sports with friends were answered with a sympathetic but authoritative "No" from my mother. Clearly, I was not destined to compete in the Olympics against the world's best athletes.

Yet I did anyhow.

Asthma was only the first of many barriers I had to overcome on my Olympic journey. The limits others define for you pale in comparison to the limits you impose on yourself. Self-doubt can be crippling in any arena, especially in sports where every day is a competition with winners and losers. A slump — a prolonged period of performing less than your best — can wreak havoc on your state of mind. You must overcome self-doubt to achieve your dreams, and the people you meet along the way can play a huge role in shaping your success. I was fortunate enough to have mentors who challenged me to rethink my own limits

Courtesy photo

Hometown heroes: Teammates (from left) Linda Miller, Nick Peterson and Mike Porterfield pose with their high school rowing T-shirt at the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney, Australia.

and a community that supported me both at home and away. Without them, I never would have even dreamed of making it to the Olympics.

PUSHING THE LIMIT

My path to the Olympics began in large part thanks to my patient, caring, straight-talking high school rowing coach, Dee Campbell. One day when I was 14 years old, Dee knocked on my door to pick up my sister who had begun rowing a year earlier. When I answered the door — standing nearly 6 feet (1.8 meters) tall — he looked me in the eye and asked if I wanted to row. I explained that I couldn't: I had asthma and my mother wouldn't allow it. Dee wouldn't accept that excuse for an answer and showed me that only I can define my own limits. With his help, I was finally able to convince my mother to let me row.

Another influential mentor was my coach on the University of Washington rowing team, Jan Harville. One summer Jan came to coach me and my partner after we had been moved from an eight-person boat to a two-person boat only one month before the World Championships. Because we had very little experience rowing this smaller boat, no one expected us to do well. Jan, however, taught us we could excel without the pressure of high expectations. She explained that if we tried our hardest, the outcome would take care of itself. In just four weeks, we learned to focus on each stroke of the race, rather than the outcome.

De-emphasizing the outcome was a revolutionary concept to me. Previously, I had believed that winning isn't everything, it is the only thing. Suddenly I focused not on winning, but performing my best regardless of when we reached the finish line. In the end we landed on the podium with bronze medals around our necks, which felt nothing short of miraculous to me (and surprised quite a few other people too). That experience taught me to let go of others' expectations and convinced me of the power of believing in yourself.

Courtesy photo

Linda Miller with her daughter, Eliza, and son, Luke.

STRENGTH IN NUMBERS

Sports also taught me the power of community. When I was training for the Olympics, I lived at the Olympic Training Center in Chula Vista, California — 2,000 miles from my hometown in Virginia. I trained with women from across the country who had been invited to live and train under the coach of the U.S. Olympic team. The days were long and more physically demanding than most people can even imagine. We logged five to six hours of intense training a day, six days a week. We traveled the world together, competing in countries such as Germany, Switzerland, France, Belgium and Australia. Training together day after day — through injury, illness, family tragedy and physical exhaustion — bonded us together for life. Having that powerful sense of community among us gave us the strength to keep moving forward even when we felt we had no strength left.

And even though I was 2,000 miles away from home, my hometown community was with me every step of the way. My high school rowing team proudly posted newspaper articles chronicling my success. When my former coach Dee was interviewed by a reporter from a national newspaper after I won silver in the 1999 World Championships, he expressed great pride in my achievements. And when I earned a spot with the U.S. team at the 2000 Olympics in Sydney, Australia, two of my high school teammates were right by my side.

One day in the middle of the Olympic Village we posed for a photo with our high school T-shirt. Though we were thousands of miles away, the community that nurtured us from the start was with us. All my mentors, teammates and neighbors whose support helped me find the courage to take those first strokes, lifejacket in hand, and keep fighting all the way to the Olympics, were as much a part of the Olympic team that year as if they had worn the uniform. ■

Linda Miller of Washington, D.C., competed with the U.S. women's rowing team at the 2000 Summer Olympics in Sydney, Australia.

The opinions expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. government.

Get the latest from the U.S. Olympic Committee at:

TeamUSA.org

Return to Table of Contents

SCOUT BASSETT:
Defying Odds, Redefining Ability

Runner Scout Bassett wakes up every morning at 4:30. She trains until 8:00 a.m., heads to work, then trains for two more hours.

"When I'm training and competing, I don't feel disabled. All I feel is the freedom of being able to move," she said.

Bassett is training to compete in track for the 2012 London Paralympics: Olympic games for athletes with physical or intellectual impairments.

TOUGH START

Bassett, born in China, lost her right leg in a fire before her first birthday. Shortly after the accident, she was abandoned outside an orphanage.

"The seven years I lived in the orphanage were extremely painful and difficult," Bassett recalled. "I don't have any memories of ever going outside once in seven years."

Fresh air arrived in 1994 when Susi and Joe Bassett, an American couple from Harbor Springs, Michigan, visited the orphanage. The Bassetts arrived to pick up a baby girl they had adopted, but before taking her home they decided to tour other rooms in the orphanage.

In one room, 20 children gathered around a table to eat a snack, but two in particular caught the Bassetts' attention. One little boy performed a song for the couple while another little girl, Scout, gazed silently up at them. Within a year, all three children were members of the Bassett family.

"I didn't know she was missing a leg because she was sitting at a table," Susi Bassett explained. "But I said, 'Well, gosh, that's all the more reason she needs me.'"

REDEFINING 'ABLE'

Bassett says the beauty of sports is their ability to unite people of all backgrounds around a common purpose. Sports helped Bassett overcome the barriers of culture and language with her American classmates.

Alison Hewitt/UCLA Today

At first, however, Bassett spent a lot of time on the bench. While she practiced with her junior high softball, basketball and soccer teams, she rarely played in games.

"I quickly discovered that sports only seemed to magnify my disability," Bassett said. But being sidelined "taught me to never allow someone else's words or actions to dictate my limits."

When she was 14, Bassett received a prosthetic leg designed for sports. She immediately began competing in track. Although she lost her first race, she was inspired by the possibilities.

Above: Redefining "able": Scout Bassett, an amputee triathlete, relaxes on the University of Southern California's campus. **Below:** Going with the flow: Bassett swims without a prosthetic, and she rarely swims less than a half-mile at a time.

Alison Hewitt/*UCLA Today*

Above: Leg up: Bassett may have lost a leg in a childhood accident, but now she has four prosthetic legs: an everyday walking leg, a running leg, a sprinting leg and a biking leg. **Left:** Quick stop: Triathlete Bassett switches from her walking leg to her biking leg.

"It was never about winning or flashing an impressive time. I did it to prove to myself I could overcome my fears and doubts," she said.

Bassett soon discovered the Challenged Athletes Foundation (CAF), an organization that provides opportunities for people with physical disabilities to pursue active lifestyles.

Through CAF, Bassett received financial and emotional support and training to compete in track. Since connecting with the organization, Bassett has medaled in the last four paratriathlon world championships. She also volunteers as the organization's spokesperson.

"I hope my involvement with CAF will empower physically challenged people to fight for their dreams and help to change people's perceptions about what it means to be 'able,'" she said. "I may have lost my leg, but not my courage or will to continue redefining my ability."

RETURNING A CHAMPION

Bassett now has four prosthetic legs: an everyday walking leg, a running leg, a sprinting leg and a biking leg. The different prosthetics have helped Bassett complete numerous triathlons, including the 2011 Paralympic World Championships, which brought her back to China for the first time in 16 years.

Returning to her home country as an elite athlete proved an emotional experience for Bassett.

"Throughout the race, I was lifted and carried by the cheers of the crowd and fans who came out to watch," she said. As she neared the finish line, Bassett broke down in tears of pride and joy. "In that moment, I could not believe I was once an orphan and now about to medal in the world championships." ■

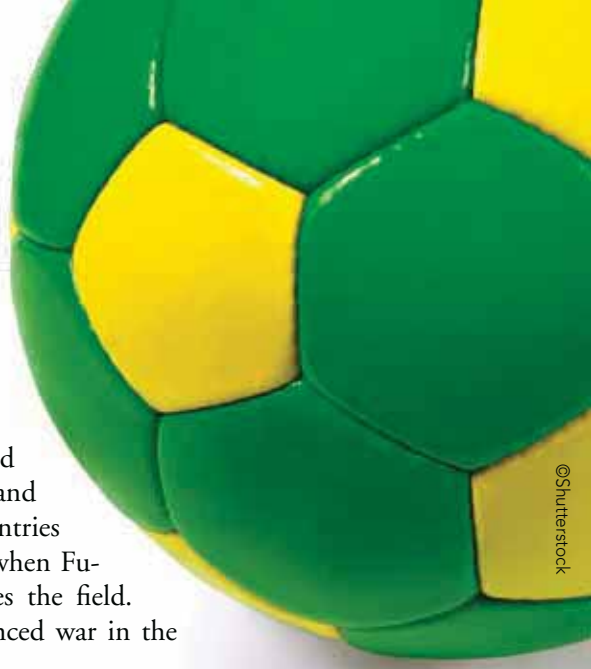
— Mary-Katherine Ream

Watch Scout's inspirational story!

http://goo.gl/JcVmO

Return to Table of Contents

FUGEES FAMILY:
Finding a Home on the Field



©Shutterstock

Luma Mufleh was driving to the grocery store when fate intervened. After missing her turn, she found herself in an apartment complex parking lot in Clarkston, Georgia.

"I saw these kids playing soccer and it reminded me of home, it reminded me of the way I grew up playing soccer in the streets of Jordan," Mufleh said.

When she stopped to watch the game, she learned that the kids were refugees — children displaced from their home countries by war.

She returned the following week, soccer ball in hand, and started Fugees Family, a nonprofit organization that harnesses the power of soccer to help child refugees ("fugees" for short) adjust to life in the United States.

"I expected to be involved in their lives as a coach; never did I think that these kids would become my extended family," Mufleh writes on the organization's website.

DISSOLVING DIFFERENCES

From Burma and Bosnia to Sudan and Somalia, 28 countries are represented when Fugees Family takes the field. All have experienced war in the last 30 years.

"I have kids from Afghanistan that are Sunni and Shiite. I have kids from North Sudan and South Sudan. And when I first started the team, the kids wouldn't talk with each other," Mufleh explains.

It did not take long for soccer to dissolve those differences. To win, teammates had to work together and get along.

"We all had a love for this international sport that transcended boundaries and language and everything," Mufleh said.

All aboard: Luma Mufleh and her Fugees Family pose with the team's bus.

©Getty Images

©AP Images

©AP Images

Top: Get ready: Luma Mufleh gives the Fugees a pep talk before a soccer game in Atlanta, Georgia. **Bottom:** Commanding coach: Jordan-born Luma Mufleh watches as her players prepare for a game. Her team, Fugees Family, consists of refugee youths living in the United States.

FITTING IN

Through soccer, Fugees Family does more than break down cultural barriers: It gives the players a sense of belonging.

"They come to this country brand new. They feel very isolated, like they don't fit in and they don't belong," Mufleh explains. With different names and foreign accents, the refugee children stand out from their American classmates.

On the soccer field, however, surrounded by other kids with similar names and accents, they fit in.

"We don't really have a John or a Paul or a Mary on our team, so we try to celebrate our differences so the kids feel they're not alone," Mufleh said.

To play for Fugees Family, players must agree to attend tutoring and practice sessions, to demonstrate good behavior on and off the field, and to speak only English.

Mufleh established the English-only rule after watching her players struggle with language barriers in school. For some, practicing English on the field helped them succeed in the classroom.

For those who needed additional help, Mufleh created the Fugees Academy, the first school in the United States dedicated exclusively to educating child refugees.

The Fugees Academy combines sport and instruction to create well-rounded, high-achieving individuals. Mufleh hopes the school will serve as a model for addressing the unique needs of refugee communities.

Whether using soccer or school, Mufleh's goal remains steady. "We want to make sure everyone has access to the American dream," she said.

Mufleh has just recently realized that dream herself. She became a U.S. citizen during an October 2011 ceremony — nearly 18 years after she first arrived. Her Fugees Family was in attendance. ■

— Mary-Katherine Ream

Learn more about Fugees Family at their website:

FugeesFamily.org

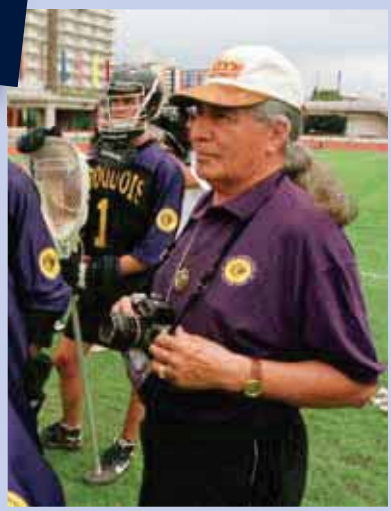
Return to Table of Contents

©AP Images

©Shutterstock

America's front yard: Washington-area youths join young Native Americans on the south lawn of the White House during a 2011 event celebrating lacrosse and its origins. **Lower left:** Lacrosse leader: Onondaga Chief Oren Lyons attends an Iroquois Nationals team meeting during their match against Japan at the 1996 Lacrosse World Championships in Tokyo.

Oren Lyons: The Legacy of LACROSSE



©AP Images

Oren Lyons, a member of the Iroquois' Onondaga nation, is turning 82 years old this year — but that will not prevent him from playing in Onondaga's first lacrosse game of the season.

"When you talk about lacrosse, you talk about the lifeblood of the Six Nations [Iroquois]. The game is ingrained into our culture, our system, our lives," Lyons said during a lecture.

Playing lacrosse provides Native Americans a way to honor their heritage while being part of a greater community. Lyons, who was inducted into the Lacrosse Hall of Fame as a goalie in 1993, earned a scholarship to attend Syracuse University thanks to his skill at the sport. Now a professor emeritus at the State University of New York Buffalo, Lyons remains close to the game as an Iroquois Nationals board member.

When he plays in Onondaga's first game of the season, it will be a medicine game, as is the tradition. Lyons said it is played "on behalf of everyone in the whole world because that's our style, that's our thinking."

"THEY BUMP HIPS"

For members of the ancient Onondaga nation, the game is pronounced "guh-jee-gwah-ai," which means "they bump hips." When the Iroquois played centuries ago, there could be teams of 1,000 players on fields that stretched for miles.

Today, lacrosse games consist of two 10-player teams using long sticks with mesh baskets to catch, carry and throw a small ball downfield. Each team scores points by placing the ball in the opponent's net. After four quarters, the team with the most points wins.

Above: Keeping tradition alive: Members of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma play stickball, a traditional game that was a precursor to lacrosse.

> "When you talk about lacrosse, you talk about the lifeblood of the Six Nations [Iroquois]. The game is ingrained into our culture, our system, our lives."

While lacrosse can appear violent and fast-paced, it serves medicinal, physical and diplomatic purposes for Native Americans. They believe the game is a gift from the creator to be played for the creator.

PLAYING TO HEAL

"The game itself is first a medicine game," explained Lyons. It is played to heal. Any individual can request a game for themselves or on behalf of someone else and then "the whole community gets mobilized."

Game day is celebrated with a feast. Everything that will be used during game day — from the food to the ball — must be created that day. After preparations are made, players gather around a sacred fire to listen to a spiritual leader explain who convened the game and what the game symbolizes for the community.

"The stick is made from hickory, so [the spiritual leader] explains the importance of the trees and what they add to this game … and the deer provide the leather, and he explains the importance of the animals," Lyons said.

Before starting, teams decide whether the groups must reach three, five or seven goals to win. After agreeing, the teams take the field, the ball is dropped and the game begins.

"For that moment," Lyons explained, "all the players are in an elevated space. They are spiritual beings playing for a much higher authority and realm."

PLAYING FOR PEACE

For the Iroquois, lacrosse has historically played a dual role in dealing with conflict. On one hand, the game prepared men and boys for battle. On the other hand, it helped feuding tribes avoid war by allowing them to settle their differences on the playing field.

While it may have lost its historic conflict-prevention role, lacrosse continues to bring diverse groups of people together. Made popular in the United States and Canada by local settlers who picked the game up from the Iroquois, lacrosse is now expanding its fan base to countries such as the Czech Republic and Japan.

The sport is also enjoying renewed appreciation on its home turf. According to a 2011 survey on team sports, lacrosse participation in the United States increased 218 percent in the last 10 years, making it the fastest-growing sport in America.

Lyons is happy to see lacrosse's reach expand. "It is based on peace and it is based on community, so, hopefully, that aspect is what will help to prevail, to bring peace to the world," he said. ■

— Mary-Katherine Ream

Learn more about lacrosse at:

USLacrosse.org

Return to Table of Contents

IBTIHAJ MUHAMMAD: Forging a new Frontier for Fencing

When Ibtihaj Muhammad removes her fencing mask, she sends a message to minorities everywhere.

"I want them to know that nothing should hinder them from reaching their goals — not race, not religion, not gender," she said.

A practicing Muslim of African-American descent, Muhammad has had to overcome many hurdles to become one of the world's top-ranked athletes in women's sabre, a discipline of fencing.

Not the least of these challenges has been reconciling her religion's call for modesty with the customs of modern sports.

UNIQUELY ACCOMMODATING

Muhammad's parents always encouraged their children to play sports. Her parents believed athletic participation provided a productive means for their children to stay physically and socially active.

By middle school, Muhammad was swimming, running track and playing volleyball. But for every sport she played, her mom had to make her a new uniform.

"I remember the feeling of being different from my friends because of my modest dress," Muhammad said.

One day when Muhammad and her mother spotted young girls fencing at the local high school, they knew immediately it was a sport that would allow Muhammad to participate fully — without a special uniform.

©AP Images

Take a deep breath: Ibtihaj Muhammad holds her helmet moments after defeating opponent Ekateri Diatchenko of Russia in the 2010 World Fencing Championships.

©AP Images

Top: All-American: Ibtihaj Muhammad smiles after winning a bronze medal at the 2011 World Fencing Championships in Italy. **Bottom:** Winning smiles: U.S. teammates, from left, Mariel Zagunis, Ibtihaj Muhammad, Dagmara Wozniak and Daria Schneider pose on the podium at the 2011 World Fencing Championships.

Learn more about fencing at:

USFencing.org

> "I was able to find a sport that embraced my religious beliefs and my desire to wear a hijab."

In fencing, a combat sport that features one-on-one sword duels, competitors wear head-to-toe protective clothing. For Muhammad, the required gear is what makes the sport "uniquely accommodating." With its full-body uniform, fencing allows Muhammad to adhere to Islam without standing out from her fellow athletes.

"What is so cool about my involvement in fencing is I was able to find a sport that embraced my religious beliefs and my desire to wear a hijab," she explains. "My desire to wear hijab brought me to a sport that I love, but probably would have never discovered otherwise."

Although the religious affiliations of athletes are not tracked, officials believe Muhammad may be the first Muslim to represent the United States in international competition. She is certainly the first Muslim athlete to compete for the United States while wearing a head scarf.

LEADING BY EXAMPLE

Muhammad said her successful fencing career proves "the hijab is not an obstacle."

She hopes to illustrate that point through her work at the Peter Westbrook Foundation, a New York nonprofit organization that uses fencing to help inner-city youth develop life skills.

Muhammad began visiting the foundation for conditioning and footwork classes as a young fencer. She now mentors other young fencers — particularly minorities and young women.

"I want to be their example that anything is possible with perseverance," Muhammad said.

TRAINING FOR SUCCESS

When she is not volunteering at the foundation, Muhammad trains 30 hours per week at the Fencers Club in New York. She spends another four hours conditioning in New Jersey.

As she wrote in her USA Fencing profile, Muhammad believes fencing has taught her "how to aspire higher, sacrifice, work hard and overcome defeat."

In addition to teaching her the rewards of hard work, fencing has provided Muhammad with opportunities she would not have had otherwise.

In 2007, Muhammad graduated from Duke University with a bachelor's degree in international relations and African-American studies, as well as a minor in Arabic. She is a three-time NCAA All-American fencer, an honor awarded to the best college athletes in each sport.

Although Muhammad has already earned many honors in her fencing career, there is one in particular she still hopes to achieve: She wants to represent the United States on the grand stage of the Olympics. ■

— Mary-Katherine Ream

Return to Table of Contents

ZUMA Press/ San Antonio Express-News/Tom Reel

Ready to serve: Jennifer Beltran pauses before serving for the University of Illinois in a 2011 national semifinals game against the University of Southern California.

JENNIFER BELTRAN: Serving the Community

While many university students in the United States relax over the spring break, Jennifer Beltran is at work. A star volleyball player for the University of Illinois, Jennifer spends her spring break helping to run a volleyball camp for students from an elementary school that serves the inner city of Los Angeles.

"I get to interact with them, I get to talk to them, and — hopefully — in some ways, I get to inspire them," Jennifer said.

Although she is now a successful student and athlete, Jennifer also grew up in the inner city of Los Angeles and understands the challenges of growing up in a neighborhood with few resources. Her mother, a single parent from El Salvador, struggled to support their family of two.

"I didn't have anyone to look up to who was a father figure. My biological father was there on and off when I was really young, but it wasn't the way it should have been," she explained.

Until she met Gustavo Beltran.

FATHER FIGURE

Gustavo was working as a kindergarten aide at Jennifer's school when he learned she was the only child of a single mother. Not wanting Jennifer to get lost in the system as many children in their neighborhood did, Beltran decided he would act as a father figure for Jennifer. He began babysitting her after school and helping her with homework and after-school sports.

It didn't take long for Gustavo to recognize Jennifer's athletic ability and inclination toward volleyball. He and his wife, Virna, began dedicating their time and money to help Jennifer turn her talent for volleyball into an opportunity.

Jennifer recalls that Gustavo and his wife "were there every step of

©Shutterstock

©AP Images

Fierce competitor: Jennifer Beltran celebrates with her University of Illinois teammates after scoring a point during the 2011 NCAA women's college volleyball championship.

the way — making sure to correct my every mistake, making sure to encourage me, making sure to remind me of where volleyball could take me and what I could do with it."

The Beltrans even went bankrupt in their efforts to support Jennifer's promising volleyball career. "They did a lot of things for me that sometimes a normal parent wouldn't do for their kid," Jennifer said.

Born Jennifer Bonilla, Jennifer adopted her mentor's last name in appreciation for all he has done for her. "Gustavo is like a father to me," she told ESPN.

PROVIDING OPPORTUNITIES

The Beltrans' emotional and financial support paid off. Today Jennifer attends the University of Illinois — one of the most athletically competitive universities in the United States — on an athletic scholarship. Through the opportunities afforded her by both volleyball and the Beltrans, Jennifer is receiving a top education for free. She is the first member of her family to attend college.

"A lot of times, it's hard for kids in my community to find support like that, and I totally understand why. I was just fortunate that I found" — she stopped herself — "that a family found me."

Jennifer credits Gustavo with pushing her toward volleyball and she credits volleyball for providing opportunities she never knew existed — particularly a college education. Her primary goal is to earn a degree in kinesiology, the study of human movement. After that, she hopes to play overseas with the U.S. national volleyball team.

When she is not pursuing these goals, Jennifer travels home to help with volleyball camp.

"The reason I always come back is because I want these kids to have an opportunity too," she said. "I want to be that example, to say you can do it too."

Her mentor, Gustavo, runs the camp. ■

— *Mary-Katherine Ream*

Learn more about volleyball at:

USAVolleyball.org

©Shutterstock

Return to Table of Contents

Playing it Forward

SHARE

Sharing the Power of Sports

Top U.S. athletes team up with the U.S. State Department to connect with sports enthusiasts in communities all over the world. Athletes share their talent and love of sports by conducting clinics, visiting schools, and leading discussions on the importance of education, teamwork and respect for diversity.

Photos: U.S. State Dept.

Banding Together: The assistant director of coaching for the North Carolina Youth Soccer Association, Sari Rose (in white), leads young women in a soccer clinic in Bahrain. During her May 2011 visit, Rose conducted several clinics at schools around the country, met with the Bahrain Football Federation and led training sessions for the Bahrain Women's National Team and the under-16 team.

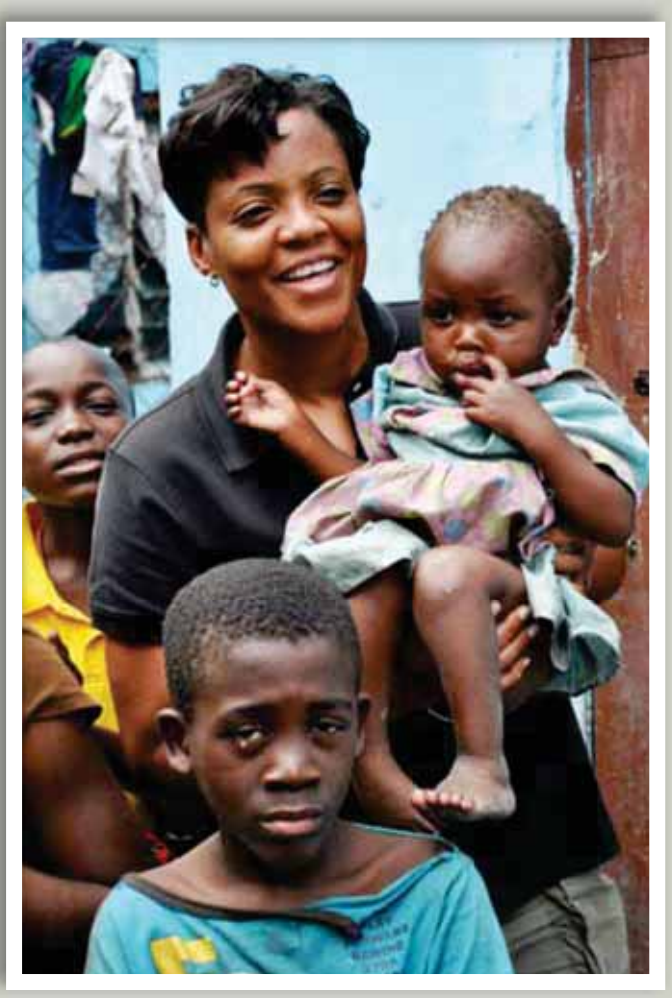
Pass it On: Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) player Swintayla "Swin" Cash passes the ball during basketball clinics she recently conducted in two boroughs near London that will host Olympic competitions this summer. Cash traveled to England in March 2012 as part of a joint effort by the U.S. State Department and the NBA to send current and former professional basketball players to engage youth in 10 countries, both on the court and within their communities.

Listen up! Major League Baseball Hall of Famer Cal Ripken Jr. shares baseball tips with young players in Japan. In November 2011, Ripken spent a whirlwind week in Japan leading clinics in Tokyo, Tohoku and Kansai, and touring towns affected by the earthquake and tsunami earlier in the year. Ripken has served as a public diplomacy envoy with the U.S. State Department since 2007.

Photos: U.S. State Dept.

Come play! Former U.S. Women's National Team player Amanda Cromwell pauses during a 2012 clinic in Argentina to pass the ball with one of the participants' younger sisters. From March 15 to 21, Cromwell and fellow player Lauren Gregg led clinics and teambuilding activities for girls in underserved communities in Buenos Aires, Jujuy, Salta and Tilcara as part of the U.S. State Department's Empowering Women and Girls Through Sports initiative.

Coaching the Coaches: Major League Baseball legend Ken Griffey Jr. (holding the catcher's mitt) and former Montreal Expos player Joe Logan (holding the ball) give Little League coaches a few pointers at a baseball clinic in Manila. Griffey and Logan conducted a series of baseball clinics in the Philippines in March 2011, teaching coaches how to develop teamwork and sportsmanship among their players.



Bonding over Basketball: Former WNBA player Edna Campbell visits with children at the Sainte-Claire orphanage in Brazzaville, Congo. Campbell and former NBA player Bo Outlaw conducted basketball clinics for more than 250 Congolese youth in August 2011, teaching them basketball techniques and the importance of teamwork, confidence and passion.

Learn more about the U.S. State Department's sports programs!

http://goo.gl/HQMU2

Return to Table of Contents

American Sports TRIVIA quiz

What is the fastest-growing sport in the United States?

TEST YOURSELF

10 facts!

What are the three most popular sports for American women?

Did you know?

American sports fans are wild about trivia. Test your knowledge with these fascinating facts!

1. What is the average life span of a baseball used in the Major Leagues?

a) 1 pitch
b) 5 to 7 pitches
c) 1 game
d) 7 games

2. What is the fastest-growing sport in the United States?

a) soccer
b) baseball
c) swimming
d) lacrosse

3. What sport boasts more female participants than any other sport in the United States?

a) tennis
b) volleyball
c) soccer
d) basketball

4. What are the chances of a secondary-school soccer player getting an athletic scholarship to attend a U.S. college for free?

a) 1 in 90
b) 1 in 900
c) 1 in 9,000
d) 1 in 900,000

5. Approximately what percentage of American girls aged 5 to 18 participate in organized sports?

a) 7%
b) 17%
c) 47%
d) 70%

6. Which U.S. baseball team has won more World Series than any other team?

a) Boston Red Sox
b) New York Yankees
c) Oakland Athletics
d) St. Louis Cardinals

7. What year did women first participate in the modern Olympic games?

a) 1900
b) 1925
c) 1950
d) 1975

8. True or False: Many American youth play soccer.

a) True
b) False

9. How many sports will be played at the 2012 Summer Olympics in London?

a) 6
b) 16
c) 26
d) 36

10. What athlete has won more Olympic gold medals than any other athlete?

a) Larisa Latynina, Soviet Union
b) Paavo Nurmi, Finland
c) Michael Phelps, United States
d) Mark Spitz, United States

©AP Images

Answers on page 20

©Getty Images

©Getty Images

©AP Images

How did you do?

Answers to Trivia Quiz

1. B The average life span of a baseball used in the Major Leagues is five to seven pitches.

2. D In the last decade, the number of U.S. kids playing lacrosse has more than doubled, making it the fastest-growing sport in the nation.

3. B Volleyball boasts more female participants (9.1 million) than any other sport in the United States, followed by soccer (6.8 million), basketball (6.5 million) and softball (4.7 million).

4. A As of 2011, the odds of a U.S. secondary-school soccer player receiving a full athletic scholarship at a well-ranked university are 1 in 90.

5. D Sixty-nine percent of girls and 75 percent of boys in the United States participate in organized sports, according to a 2008 report conducted by the Women's Sports Foundation.

6. B With 27 championships, the New York Yankees have won the World Series more than any other team.

7. A Women were first invited to participate in the second modern Olympic games in 1900.

8. A The number of kids registered to play soccer in the United States has nearly quadrupled in the last three decades.

9. C The London Olympics will feature 26 different sports.

10. C U.S. swimmer Michael Phelps has won 14 gold medals, the most of any Olympic contender.

Top: Rising star: Lacrosse, a game first played by Native Americans, is the fastest-growing sport in the United States. **Middle:** Gaining speed: Basketball is the third most popular sport among U.S. female athletes after volleyball and soccer. **Bottom:** Olympic spirit: Team USA athletes wave to the crowd during the opening ceremony of the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver, Canada. **Previous page:** Track and field star Mildred "Babe" Didrikson of Dallas, Texas at the Olympic Stadium in Los Angeles on July 31, 1932.

©Shutterstock.com

Return to Table of Contents

WANT TO LEARN MORE?

Explore America's diverse sports traditions through video!

Check out our "Sports in America" Video Series!

http://goo.gl/0QmYb

Return to Table of Contents

HAVE Something to SAY?

www.facebook.com/ejournalUSA

Join the Conversation—Visit us on Facebook!

Return to Table of Contents