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Do sporty women make better entrepreneurs?

By Jane O'Brien

BBC News, Washington

Whoops and cheers greet Shavannia Williams, who steps onto the conference floor with an agility unfettered by her 6in (15cm) stilettos.

This is Heels and Helmets, a training camp for women in Washington DC that uses sport to help them elevate their business game.

"Sport teaches us that you cannot allow your accomplishments to make you complacent, and you can't allow your fears to stop you from soaring," says Ms Williams, president of Heels and Helmets, and editor of an online magazine of the same name.

"It's about understanding the culture behind sports as well as the vernacular. I relate it to working and studying in another country."

With a background in sports marketing, Ms Williams is well placed to help other women understand the lingo.

But while using sporting analogies in business isn't new, an increasing number of organisations are now looking at whether playing sport can make women better entrepreneurs.

Consulting company Ernst and Young [surveyed 821 senior managers](#) and found the vast majority of top women executives had played sport at school or university.

The company says its research validates and underscores the fundamental role that participation in sport plays in developing women leaders. As a result, it has launched its own [Women Athletes Global Leadership Network](#).

Ms Williams also highlights the networking benefit that businesswomen can gain from playing sport - access to the locker room, that exclusive male space, real or metaphorical, where men are said to seal deals, and make the business decisions that matter most.

Research, by Catalyst, a non-profit organisation aiming to advance women in business also stresses the networking boost that sport can offer females, both playing and watching it.

'Stronger resilience'

Ernst and Young's findings do not surprise Karlyn Lothery, a Washington-based communications consultant who works extensively with athletes, and uses the psychological power of sport to help her less active clients too.

Women with a sports background usually show more confidence, she says. That can range from having a firm handshake to

speaking authoritatively without a rising inflection at the end of a sentence which some women adopt to avoid appearing confrontational or too assertive.

"When the athlete-turned-executive has a point, they make it," says Ms Lothery. "You can't have that softer, questionable, doubtful sound in your voice. [Athletes] have this confidence of, 'We are going to do this, we will do this, we can do this, and we will win.' There's greater strength there.

"They usually have stronger resilience too, because in sport you have to learn to lose but then pick yourself up and get back in."

Ms Lothery has played a number of team sports including softball, football and basketball. She left her job in television news to work for the US Tennis Association before starting her own business in 2008 - just as the economy collapsed.

She says her sports background gave her the skills to transform her \$30,000 (£19,000) a year start-up into a company with an annual turnover of about \$1m.

"In sport you look at what the successful teams are doing, what training you need to do better. I'm a great communication consultant, but what I learned at that moment was I wasn't great at running my business.

"So I did the practice necessary for any team to regroup and rebuild - they've got to make time for practice and do the drills and work longer hours. Adopting that philosophy, I think, was it."

Sheila Wellington, a professor of management at the New York University Stern School of Business agrees, saying that "having athletic experience gives women a kind of experience and edge that is undoubtedly helpful in the business world".

She adds: "Women who are eager to win are sometimes characterised as being bitches. A guy who's eager to win is called a winner.

"A woman who competes is considered not to be feminine. A guy who competes is a go-getter. Sport teaches women that it's all right to want to win and it's all right to be on top, that there's nothing wrong with caring about being part of a winning team.

"These are important life lessons, and the earlier girls learn them the better off they'll be."

Negative side

But simply playing sport isn't enough, says Maureen Weiss, professor of kinesiology at the University of Minnesota.

"I strongly feel that competitive sport and other physical activity can provide the skills needed in the business world, but one key thing - this is not an automatic consequence of participation," she says.

"When individuals have a negative experience of sport, it can really have a very negative effect on self-esteem and motivation."

Ms Weiss is starting a longitudinal study in the autumn that will assess how structured physical activity can teach girls social and psychological skills.

She'll be tracking the development of girls who take part in programmes offered by Girls on the Run, a nationwide non-profit organisation that seeks to improve physical and mental health through activities culminating in a 5km (three-mile) run.

Achieving a goal that many thought was unobtainable instils confidence and teaches the value of focus, effort and determination, says Girls on the Run president, Elizabeth Kunz.

Many girls drop out of sport when they reach puberty, the same age at which they often start to lose confidence and self-esteem, she says.

"It's like a rite of passage. We're really trying to give them the tools they need so that when this time comes they can remember what they learned at Girls on the Run."

Other experts say sport in general teaches the value of teamwork, discipline and willpower - as well as creating the physical stamina necessary for long hours and a gruelling workload.

The message seems clear - business is a tough game so employ the same tactics you would in competitive sport and you stand a better chance of winning. And by the way girls, it's OK to want to win.

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