

Part of the Team: Organized sports score with area women

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In the film "A League of Their Own" -- about a women's baseball team during WWII -- the team's alcoholic coach, played by [Tom Hanks](#), constantly reprimands his players, including the pitcher (played by [Geena Davis](#)) and third baseman ([Rosie O'Donnell](#)) for playing "like girls."

The scenario is all too familiar to [Jan Brown](#) of Newtown, who recalls how her basketball coach once yelled, "You are too nice! You have to start banging into one another!"

"Women do rise to the occasion," says Brown.

"Once you start getting used to pushing back (and using your body to be aggressive), it's powerful."



Being part of a team and feeling the power of the game is just one reason why women are drawn to team sports in a big way.
Photo: Kristen Gill / Healthy Life



Participation in team sports is as good as lifting weights or getting on the stair climber. It's just a different kind of workout.
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Being part of a team and feeling the power of the game is just one reason why women are drawn to team sports in a big way. We crave that unique interaction found only in the competitive heat of the game. Getting out on the field or the court to chase, catch, slam or bunt the ball is not only a great work-out; it's also a mental and emotional cleanse as we get swept up in the team spirit and the overall collegiality. That's what makes it a lot of fun.

For many women -- especially those in their 40s and 50s -- joining a team is making up for lost time, since school sports for girls were limited when they were in high school. But now, women of any age can sign up, jump in, be competitive, get exercise and meet like-minded folks.

Jennifer Larson, president of the Southern Connecticut Women's [Soccer League](#), has spent the last 13 years in the league. As president for the past four, she oversees teams

from Westport, Fairfield, New Haven and Stamford. The 10 teams in the league have an average of 20-22 players.



The social piece is what gets many women to join the team in the first place. Photo: Kristen Gill / Healthv Life

"Women come from various levels of the sport, but they (all) love the game," Larson says. "It's where women can run around, have fun and get out of the house every Saturday morning."

Larson, 35, has seen many changes in SCWSL. "It has absolutely grown since I've gotten out of college. Now it's much more serious and there are more leagues for women in their 40s and 50s. Although they have children

and a job, they still want to enjoy a sport."

For years Larson felt the stronger players gravitated to one team and constantly beat the weaker teams. When she became president, Larson required new recruits to try out -- daunting for some -- with the guarantee that no matter how you played, you would be included. The new approach spreads the talent among teams, which keeps the games friendly. It's something that SCWSL soccer player [Kim Silverman](#) appreciates.

"My team doesn't win too often but we still have fun and play our hardest," she says. "There is definitely a level playing field between all the teams."

Silverman, 41, is a [Stamford preschool](#) teacher who has been in the league since 1992, along with some of her colleagues. She also played in college intramurals.

"When I got out of college, I found out there was a women's soccer league. I loved soccer growing up and I wanted to get back into the game," Silverman says. "I'm not a gym freak -- but put the ball in front of me and I'm getting a great source of exercise."

For women like Silverman, who are turned off by the gym scene, participation in team sports is as good as lifting weights or getting on the stair climber. It's just a different kind of workout, according to [Paddy Jarit](#), physical therapist and owner of [Physical Therapy for Women](#) in Trumbull and Fairfield.



Adult leagues provide competitive and social outlets for women. Photo: Kristen Gill / Healthv Life

"The gym workout and the exertion during a game serve different functions," he says. "In a game, instead of working on and isolating individual muscles and joints, you are being

asked to use everything simultaneously. On the field you have to integrate strength, focus and balance."

Jarit also says that doing both a workout routine and playing team sports is extremely beneficial because it "strengthens the core, which helps tremendously with balance and agility."



Players serve as good role models for kids, who are often more used to seeing adults on the sideline of their games than on the field. Photo: Kristen Gill / Healthy Life

Getting yourself out of the house to play on a team can be a lot easier than slogging to the gym for the same old solo routine where you plug into the television screen and block out everyone else. When you're on a team, connecting with others socially is an added inducement; coming together to play the game is enhanced by expanding one's social network.

"I love meeting other women and making new friends," says Silverman. "When I'm out there on the field, I'm getting a great workout. But I'm also having fun with everyone else."

Brown says the social piece is what gets people to join the team in the first place. "Most of the time when people come to us to play either baseball or

basketball, it's because they know someone already on the team," says Brown. "We get a lot of players that way."

Women are joining coed leagues as well. Recreation departments in the towns of Trumbull and Stamford have several volleyball and softball teams. "What started out being a fun, relaxing league, now is very serious," says Trumbull recreation director [Mary Markham](#), adding that the town organizes teams of local corporations including JC Penney, Unilever, Cooper Surgical, Marriot and Aquarion.

Of the 20 softball teams and 20 volleyball teams, Markham says she has seen more women signing up to join. "It used to be harder to get teams together and we didn't have as many (teams) as we do now," she says. "That tells me that more women are actively joining. There is a power league for players who are much more serious and then a recreation league that is more for fun."

Several years ago Markham tried unsuccessfully to organize a women's softball league. But she still thinks it can happen. "Maybe in a year or two, with this trend, we will have enough for a women's team and league."

The [May Laber Volleyball League](#) is named after Laber, a longtime employee of the town of Stamford, who loved volleyball and founded the league before retiring. "The league has been around for about 30 years," says [Rick Bauer](#), recreation supervisor for

[Stamford Recreation Services](#). "Right now we have six teams and about a third of the players on each team are women." Games run 45 minutes with two breaks. Generally three matches are played with a break between each, Bauer explains.

For older women such as Jan Brown, 61, rules and court size are changed to make the game easier and more playable. Brown, who stands four feet, ten-and-a-half inches, says she first started playing on both women's softball and basketball teams some 10 years ago. Today, she is an active member of the Senior Olympics, a national group that organizes sports for men and women over the age of 50.

She finds playing on a women's team both exciting and motivating. "I never thought about it until I got involved, but women's team sports show that women are exactly what they are: strong, resilient team players and thoughtful human beings." HL



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Where to Play

Check with your local recreation departments to find leagues in your area. Southern Connecticut Women's Soccer League Jen Larson, league president, littlekid1223@msn.com; (203) 733-5560; www.scwsl.com Connecticut Women's Soccer League (statewide, open summer league); www.gmoeser.net/cwssl/

Nutmeg Women's Soccer League (formed in 2010 for over-30 and over-40 teams) www.nutmegwomen.com

Kick For A Cause women's soccer tournament

Annual soccer tournament for over-30, over-40 and now, over-50, teams held every July in Wallingford. www.kfac.org

May Labor Volleyball League

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