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## Leveling the playing field

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Both of us have had the good fortune of experiencing great success as professional athletes: one in football as a three-time Super Bowl champion with the 49ers; the other in baseball as a three-time World Series champion, including the 1989 A's team. Now we are champions of something else: The effort to get girls from low-income communities into the gym and onto the playing field.

Next month marks the 35th anniversary of Title IX, the groundbreaking law that increased opportunities for women and girls in college and high school sports. Title IX's benefits, while laudable, were limited to school sports. The law does not cover after-school or summer programs -- programs that are still overwhelmingly targeted to boys.

This means that thousands of Bay Area girls -- mostly girls from low-income communities -- have no access to sports once the school bell rings. And with schools cutting back on physical education and sports teams, many girls are completely shut out of organized sports.

We cannot continue to let this happen. This isn't about dribbling a basketball or catching a fly ball. It's about the transformative power of sports on a young person's life -- lessons of teamwork, leadership, competition, risk-taking.

No one understands that better than we do. Our achievements started with simple but powerful dreams played out in our youth in the parks of Atlanta and Oakland. Organized sports helped us connect with caring adults, learn life lessons, stay fit and have fun. The skills we developed as athletes -- discipline, hard work and goal setting, to name a few -- have carried over into our careers in business.

It certainly is no surprise to us that in a recent survey of successful businesswomen, 81 percent played organized sports in their youth, and many acknowledged that what they learned on the field contributed directly to their success.

Suburban parents understand the benefits of sports for their daughters: Girls from Bay Area suburbs participate in out-of-school sports at a rate almost equal to boys. But inner-city San Francisco and Oakland girls make up just 25 percent of participants. And those who do participate drop out at a rate two times that of boys.

Why? Girls from low-income neighborhoods are doubly challenged: They face barriers of both poverty and gender. Families are hard-pressed to pay fees for organized leagues. Fields and gyms are often neglected and in unsafe areas, and there is a lack of trained female coaches to work in these communities.

There still are cultural stigmata in some ethnic communities to girls playing sports. Girls are still more likely than boys to have duties at home when both parents work. And though coverage of women's sports has increased in recent years, girls still have fewer sports role models than boys.

There have been positive steps. California is the first state in the nation to implement a law, authored heroically by former Assemblyman and now state Sen. Darrell Steinberg, D-Sacramento, and signed into law in 2004 by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, that prohibits discrimination against girls in park and recreation and other publicly funded programs. Officials in Oakland are wasting no time in creating quality programs for girls through their park and recreation department. This has led to some action. For example, Oakland's Park and Recreation Department hosted sports clinics for girls and hired a girls sports coordinator to help organize sports programs.

It's a great start, but it's not nearly enough. We need to remove the hurdles that keep girls on the sidelines. We need more volunteer female coaches. We need more media coverage of women's sports focused on athletic accomplishments and role models. We need to encourage girls to defy outdated stereotypes. We need to inform low-income families about the benefits of sports for their daughters: a more positive body image, healthier habits, less risky behavior. We need to create more programs that reach out to girls and know how to keep them engaged and active. And we need to allocate public funding for the upkeep of gyms and fields in the inner cities.

Urban girls from low-income communities have been facing an uphill climb for too long. It's time to level the playing field.

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*<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007/05/09/EDGKOP3DOL1.DTL>*

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