

GOAL!

Mother-Daughter Bonding Through Sports

by Erin Mantz

One Saturday earlier this year, Silver Spring mom Jane Beech spent some quality time with her 11-year-old daughter Jennifer. Their action-packed morning was filled with plenty of challenges and time to chat. They shared a common goal — literally. The pair was off and running at the Washington Freedom's soccer clinic at Trinity University. Soccer was a familiar scene for them, but, this time, Jane was playing and Jennifer was supporting her mom from the sidelines!

Across the Washington, D.C., area, mother-daughter bonding is taking shape in the form of sports like soccer and lacrosse. The Beeches are just one of many mother-daughter pairs heading out to the field to polish their skills, spend time together and just have fun. From a mom's perspective, "It's a great way to connect with your child," says Jane, who urges moms to just "get out there and do it!" From daughter Jennifer's point of view, playing together "is just really cool."

Mother-Daughter Sports Are Suddenly Scoring Big

More than 200 adult women have attended Washington Freedom's soccer clinics since their launch last winter — most of them to try to keep up with their daughters who play. Why are moms suddenly getting more active? Several factors come into play. Something can happen out on the field as moms and daughters focus on the ball and live in the moment. Spontaneous talks and chats about the school day occur while kicking the ball around — moments historically envisioned as father-son scenes. Playing together also brings people back to a simpler time. While playing soccer, Blackberries, to-do lists and daily pressures fall out of focus. Most of all, women's sports teams, such as the Washington Freedom, are becoming more and more popular.

The Freedom's home games at Germantown's Maryland SoccerPlex are well attended, and "Fan Fests" prior to kick-off give families and players a chance to mix and mingle. Soccer is wildly popular with girls as young as 4, who start learning basic skills and grow to play on community, school and competitive travel soccer teams. As more and more girls from preschool through high school develop soccer skills and a love of the game, they spend more time practicing and playing their sport. The girls are out on the field, so that's where moms looking for common ground — or literally looking for their daughters — will find them. Participating in a daughter's sport has become a chance to communicate — and a secured spot in jam-packed schedules.

Clinics are just one way moms are getting involved. Some moms whose relationship to soccer was simply driving their daughters to practice are now getting into games. It's their turn to learn moves, polish skills and have fun. Take Michelle Goodman, whose 17-year-old daughter Nicole started playing soccer in first grade. Michelle used to drive Nicole to practices and games. Sitting on the sidelines, something about soccer sparked

Michelle's interest. "I was trying to learn everything I could to help Nicole. I did. Then I fell in love with coaching," Michelle says. She started coaching her daughter's third-grade team and continues coaching today. To Michelle, soccer has scored big on several fronts. "The bond soccer created has kept Nicole and me so close. We've been teaching each other throughout the process, and soccer has provided an open line of communication," she says. Nicole, now a high school junior, appreciates how her mom always managed to be involved in soccer — first in the background, then on the field. "We grew to love the sport together," Nicole says. She believes it's a good way to spend time together, and mom and daughter even volunteered at Washington Freedom games last summer. Nicole enjoys watching the Freedom play, and mom thinks Freedom players are great role models for area girls.

Some moms are extraordinary athletes in their own right, and share their athletic abilities and passions with their kids. For Jeannette Lussi and 12-year-old daughter Tyler of Kensington (pictured here and on our cover), sports play a big role in daily mother-daughter activities and weekend outings. They both enjoy playing soccer — and swimming, tennis, running, biking, water skiing and more! Jeannette's triathlon experience brings her satisfaction and success, and she clearly sees how sports impact Tyler, too. "Tyler is learning new soccer moves, but she is also gaining confidence, self-esteem and an ability to teach at a very young age," Jeannette says. "Through sports, she's experiencing life lessons that take an average adult years to acquire." Tyler seems equally proud and excited about her mom's athletic abilities. She gets a kick out of seeing mom wake-board and jump across a 20-foot wake with a smile. "Mom is great!" says Tyler. "She's like a big soccer sister, but I'm better. And she always beats Dad in the triathlons." Jeannette's advice for all mothers is "share in your daughter's passion for whatever sport or activity she enjoys. Encourage her, get involved and, whenever possible, play her game. These efforts will make you a better mother and will make your bond stronger."

Sports Step Up Communication

Playing a sport together is fun, but the experience has an even broader, more positive impact. Soccer is keeping parents involved and engaged in their daughters' lives, particularly through the angst-ridden preteen and teen years, when girls grapple with so many pressures, issues and changes. In fact, a 2006 study found that fit teens may be safer teens. Findings showed that teens who take part in many different kinds of physical activity — particularly with their parents — are less likely to get involved in drinking, drugs, violence, smoking, sex and delinquency than teens who spend a lot of time in front of the television. (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill findings as reported in the April 2006 issue of the journal *Pediatrics*.) The study also found the risk of poor self-esteem was lowest for teens who played sports with their parents. If this doesn't get more moms motivated to get out and play, what would?

Washington Freedom coach Jim Gabarra, who helps run the soccer clinics, has been at the center of the soccer explosion for years. "I've seen lots of moms who used to follow their daughters to soccer practices and games — and now they are playing, too! We've

had a great response to the clinics," he says. At one clinic last January, daughters ranging from 5 to 13 arrived with their moms to learn new skills and scrimmage situations. Gabarra and Freedom player Nicci Wright believe the clinics strike a good balance between fun and skill building. When asked what he thinks moms and daughters get out of the clinic, Gabarra calls it "a realization on both sides. The moms walk out thinking, 'Soccer is not as easy as it looks.' The daughters leave realizing, 'My mom can really do this!'" In other words, everybody wins.

Commitment Comes Full Circle

A mother's dedication to her daughter's sport can go way beyond driving to games and practice sessions. For Freedom goalkeeper Chante Sandiford, a rising soccer star headed to play at Villanova this fall, her mom made extra practice possible. "If it was raining, we'd move furniture around to practice in the house," she laughs. Mom Stella recognized how much the Freedom's summer soccer training polished Chante's performance, and she was determined to keep the momentum going. As for all those practice sessions, Stella stepped it up another notch for herself. She now plays on an indoor adult women's soccer team. "I learned a lot from listening to the coach at my daughter's practices," she says. Occasionally, Chante fills in for an absent player on her mom's team, and Stella always feels confident knowing her daughter has her back!

Daughters seem to take pride in their moms' sports performance, past or present. Washington Mystics guard Nikki Blue considers her mother a hero in life and on the basketball court. "Prior to my arrival, my mom excelled in sports and was especially talented in basketball," Nikki says. Her mom put her own basketball dreams on hold to give birth and raise Nikki, devoting time and money to her daughter's sports dreams. "My mom not only taught me the game of basketball, she taught me the game of life. She is the reason I wake up every morning and strive to be the best basketball player and person that I can be," Nikki says. To Mystics player Alana Beard, the number 21 had been magic for her. "I was number 21 in middle school, but when I got to high school, someone already had that number. So my coach gave me number 20. When I went home, Mom mentioned that *she* wore number 20 in high school, too. To verify, we dug out her high school yearbook, and it was true!"

Soccer and basketball are not the only sports attracting mother and daughter players. On National Girls and Women in Sports Day last February — an event founded by the Women's Sports Foundation — Catholic and Howard Universities partnered with Winners Lacrosse to hold a free mothers and daughters lacrosse clinic. Winners Lacrosse, a nonprofit organization dedicated to using lacrosse as a vehicle to reach youth in DC's inner city, invited its program's middle-school girls and their moms. They spent the day learning basic lacrosse drills and having a ball. Meghan O'Connor McDonogh, head women's lacrosse coach at Catholic University, led the effort in the spirit of promoting women's athletics and giving DC-area women a chance to learn the sport. "My mom was my first coach," McDonogh says. Today, Mom would be proud.

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Upcoming Clinics -- Reserve Your Spot!

On May 12, 5 - 6:30 p.m., the Freedom will host its second annual free mother-daughter clinic at the Maryland SoccerPlex in Germantown. Daughters ages 8 and up — and mothers of any age — are invited to sign up. This is just one of many free clinics the Freedom will run during the year to promote the importance of girls and women playing sports and living a healthy, active lifestyle. For more information, visit the Freedom website at www.washingtonfreedom.com.

Washington Freedom Players Single Out Sports Memories Of Mom

Casey Zimny: "A favorite childhood memory is being in the backyard with my mom playing soccer. She would put on garden gloves and stand in a goal we had rigged up with an old swing set. She looked goofy, but the fact that she cared and supported my passion one hundred and fifty percent — and was willing let me fire shots at her for an hour — meant more to me than anything."

Kelly Hammond: "My mom played basketball in college, so she knew what it took to play at the highest level. Although she would have loved for me to play basketball, she saw my passion for soccer and never complained about driving me all over the country for practices and games. Some of my greatest memories come from those long drives and soccer trips."

Emily Janss: "When my mom took me to most tryouts and games, she was always busy tolerating my anxiety on the way. I would almost consider it a girls' weekend, because we had a chance to bond for the weekend."

Christie Welsh: "My mom saw my sports activities as a way to make amazing friendships and have fun. I love to compete more than anything, but my mother always helped me remain grounded and remember the important things."

Joanna Lohman: "Growing up, we had a ping-pong table, and my mother and I would play for fun. Although my mom knew her rarely used ping-pong skills couldn't compare with mine (I played every day), we would hit together and laugh and share stories. For us, it wasn't about the game, it was about being together."