Adolescent pregnancy is a major social problem in the United States. Babies born to adolescents are at risk for a variety of medical problems, and adolescent mothers face a host of psychosocial problems including poor education, school failure, limited vocational opportunities, social isolation, stress, depression, earlier-than-planned entrance into the labor force, and poverty. Many adolescent mothers become pregnant again, which often accelerates their downward spiral into social and economic disadvantage.

Educators, public health officials, government officials, and religious leaders have, for decades, written policies and created programs designed to lower girls’ risk for unwanted pregnancy. A key goal of the Healthy People 2000 (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 1994) guidelines is to reduce the prevalence of sexual activity and pregnancy among adolescents. It is regretful that, amid these efforts to understand and prevent unwanted pregnancy among adolescents, the role of athletic participation in influencing reproductive behavior, contraception, and pregnancy has been basically overlooked.
Recently three research groups have suggested that athletic participation can help prevent risk sexual behavior in adolescence and young adulthood. First, Zill, Nord & Loomis (1995) used the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) of 1988 to assess the effects of participation in extracurricular, after-school activities on risky behavior, including having a baby while still a teenager. These self-report, longitudinal data were collected from students in the 10th (1990) and 12th (1992) grades, and from students in the 10th grade who later dropped out in 1992. Participation in extracurricular activities (i.e., interscholastic sports, school band, orchestra, chorus, school plays) was determined in the student’s sophomore year (1990). Generally speaking, students who reported no time spent in school-sponsored extracurricular activities were 37% more likely to have become teen parents by their senior year. However, the deterrence effect of extracurricular participation on teen childbearing was more clearly evident among females than males. With respect to interscholastic sports (i.e., varsity, junior varsity, and freshman level sports), female athletes were 33% less likely to become teen mothers than female non-athletes. On the other hand, male athletes were 38% more likely to report being fathers than male non-athletes by the time they were in the 12th grade.

While we may infer from these data that interscholastic sports can help prevent female participants from becoming teen parents, there appears to be no such deterrence effect for male athletes. In fact, male athletes were more likely to become teen parents than males who did not participate in school sports. Unfortunately, the researchers did not look at the effects of interscholastic sports participation on reproductive behavior itself; i.e., frequency of sexual intercourse, number of partners, or contraceptive use. Nor did they consider how factors such as family structure, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status influenced the relationships between ath-