

# INDEPENDENT SCHOOL SPORT

Celebrating sporting achievement and innovation within independent schools

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Traditional sports like netball are as strong as ever, says Longstaff

# The changing face of girls' sport



**Headmistress of Putney High School Suzie Longstaff**  
(an ex-Olympic cox herself) says girls' sport is undergoing a revolution

Girls' sport has been undergoing a quiet but very welcome revolution. The increasingly high profile and, crucially, growing popularity of women's sport on the international stage has meant that schools are having to move with the times in response to a whole new market.

PE departments have been upping their game, keen to satisfy increasing numbers of young women who are thirsty to try new sports, to compete at the highest levels and to follow in the footsteps of a new generation of inspiring sporting heroines.

Of course, traditional sports like lacrosse, netball and gymnastics are as strong as ever. At Putney High School GDST over 250 girls play netball with seven teams across year 7 alone and 250 matches per year. But for those looking for something different, or who don't want to play those traditional sports, there are now plenty of exciting alternatives.

Putney champions a culture of getting girls moving and enjoying being active, at every age and level of ability.

Physical fitness and mental wellbeing go hand-in-hand with academic achievement, and as such, an energetic sports department offers everyone the chance to get involved in team sports, to challenge themselves as individuals and to take part and/or

compete in something they enjoy.

The school has a strong tradition of student voice which has, of course, meant listening to demand. When England's National Women's team performed so well at the Football World Cup, igniting a passion for the game in a whole new generation of girls, Putney's sports department knew that football lessons should be added to

for raising awareness of the game.

"We've had an amazing response with more girls signing up every week and lots of positive feedback from parents who are pleased we're offering the sport. The plan is to keep having regular fixtures and training and enter national cups," explains Dominique McKee, Putney's head of football.

“Great Britain's success in women's rowing demonstrates that with clear vision and action, equality can be achieved, with all the benefits it brings in terms of participation, fitness, health and wellbeing as well as sheer enjoyment”

the timetable. Women's and men's football were once on equal pegging until a ban by the Football Association in 1921.

Since that ban was lifted in 1971, women's football has taken time to rebuild and it is great to see the explosion of interest amongst this generation of girls.

The sport is now hugely popular at the school and teams are progressing well under the watchful eye of specialist coaches. Putney has even appointed girls as football 'marketers' and 'deliverers' on a football committee who are responsible

Rounders has become a thing of the past at many schools, giving way to the much more popular cricket, which again hit the spotlight thanks to England women's performance in the World Cup. Everyone seems to want to play.

"We first introduced cricket three years ago, Kwik Cricket for years 7 to 9, and such has been its success that we have now widened this, launching hard ball cricket for year 9 upwards," explains Emma Fraser, Putney's director of sport.

Putney competes in the Lady Taverner's →



Lacrosse is a popular sport at Putney



Cricket is becoming more popular amongst girls





Putney have added football lessons to the timetable for girls

Indoor Competition at Lords and has four teams at under 12 and under 13.

The under 14s and under 15s train during the winter months with cricket coach Alastair Fraser (ex-County for Middlesex and Essex) in readiness for the hard ball season which begins in the summer.

One of the reasons cricket works well is that everyone can get involved – each player bowls, bats and fields. As well as being inclusive, it delivers for those who want to compete at elite level, there are so many opportunities now for girls within the sport.



Longstaff says cricket is great as everyone can get involved

### In the same boat

Rowing is another popular sport at Putney and the school has the first 'girls only' boathouse on a prestigious stretch of the Thames at Putney Embankment. Supported by an active Rowing Supporters Association, the boathouse provides professional facilities for girls who practise and compete nationally and to international GB level. There are five squads and almost one fifth of the senior school involved in rowing overall with social and performance tiers in each age group.

I remember the days when rowing was considered a male sport. Great Britain's success in women's rowing demonstrates that with clear vision and action, equality can be achieved, with all the benefits it brings in terms of participation, fitness, health and wellbeing as well as sheer enjoyment. I'm delighted that in 2021, Henley Royal Regatta will, for the first time, include a Women's Junior Eights race, a blue-riband event for schoolgirls to join the one that is already available to boys.

There is no doubt that one of the biggest issues for schools is finding time within the PE schedule. Emma Fraser evaluates the curriculum every year and tailors the provision according to the interests of a specific year group.

"In terms of the challenges of introducing new sports such as cricket, we are fortunate that there is a lot of support available for

girls and for coaches within the sports and particularly for us within the Girls' Day School Trust which has made the transition easier. For example, year 8 pupils receive training with community coaches from England Rugby," she explains.

From rugby and football to cricket, sports that once were the preserve of boys' schools are now top of a list that includes a huge amount of choice. There's also athletics, cross country, squash, volleyball, tennis, martial arts, spinning, dance, yoga and Zumba. For the increasing numbers of talented young students who are competing at county or national level, there is no shortage of specialist support.

Helping young elite athletes to manage their academic studies alongside the demands of training and competition is no easy task and some schools are now offering tailor-made support, like Putney's Elite Sportswomen Programme, to respond to the specific needs of high-performing pupils. Having a team of professional coaches on hand, from Olympian Jess Eddie (their rowing coach) to England's Claire Faram, head of lacrosse and world champion acrobat Lewis Walker, offers students access to not only some great role models, but a mentor who genuinely understands the demands on their time.

Equality of opportunity is heralding the dawn of a new generation of sporting talent and there's no sign of these girls dropping the ball any time soon. **ISS**