

A LINE ON LIFE

4/26/98

"Throwing Like a Girl" *

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In 1994, both President Clinton and his wife, Hillary, were given the privilege of throwing out the first pitch at separate games. However, the way they threw the ball out was so different, it was compared in several papers around the country including *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*.

The President turned his shoulders sideways to the direction of his throw, brought his throwing arm back, and let the ball fly with a clean follow-through, as his body turned with the throw. In contrast, his wife faced her target directly. The elbow of her throwing arm was in front of her body, with her forearm cocked back and the ball in her upturned palm. Her throw was limited to merely a quick extension of her arm. In other words, she "*threw like a girl*."

Why not? She *is* a girl! Many people blame this difference on anatomy. They say that the "*rotator cuff*" in the shoulder joint is hinged differently. However, if you ask an orthopedist, an anatomist, or a coach of a women's softball team, they would tell you that there is no anatomical reason why men and women should throw differently.



Other evidence comes from the recent Olympic games in which women's softball was featured. Although softball is pitched underhand, players throw to each other overhand. Women players in the Olympics peg the ball to one another at speeds that relatively few men could match.

The difference between the way boys and girls throw is not due to biological makeup. Boys are *taught* to hurl the ball by using the whole body. Boys practice and learn to make a "*kinetic chain*" with their bodies. They put their bodies at right angles to their target. There is a push from the back leg, as the hips rotate. The energy is transferred to the upper body, which also rotates with the throw. The momentum is transferred to the arm. With the wrist outside the elbow, the arm comes from behind the body in a whip-like motion, and the ball is released.

In contrast, women face their target. They only throw with the arm. The wrist is inside the elbow. Essentially, they "*push*" the ball rather than hurl it.

If you are a person who is happy with your throwing skills, you can demonstrate this difference to yourself in a few seconds. If you are used to throwing with one hand, try throwing with the opposite hand. You will "*throw like a girl*."

Actor John Goodman was cast in the 1992 movie, *The Babe*. As a right-hander, he had played baseball casually when he was in high school. However, Babe Ruth was left-handed, so Goodman had to learn to throw with his untrained hand. When alone, Goodman practiced throwing a tennis ball left-handed for many hours. "*I made damn sure no one could see me. I'm hard enough on myself without the derisive laughter of my so-called friends.*" After the movie was released, Goodman made another comment. "*I'll never say something like 'He throws like a girl' again. It's not easy to learn how to throw.*"

Many gender differences in behavior have their roots in early training rather than biology.

Men can throw better as adults, because they spent much time learning how when they were young. Like the basic skills for many tasks, throwing is much easier to learn early in life. Notice how toddlers — both boys and girls — first throw a ball. They throw from the shoulder "*like a girl*." However, in contrast to boys, girls are only rarely given the training and practice to throw more effectively.

As an adult, if you want to learn how to throw better, there is hope. First, it takes the time to practice the skill. Second, you have to overcome the sense of embarrassment and futility of trying something new — or improving on something you cannot do well. The *Little League's How-to-Play Baseball Book* has a couple of hints that may help.

First, play catch with a partner who is 10-15 feet away. Do this while squatting on the knee on the side of your throwing arm. This forces you to throw higher to get it to your partner without bouncing the ball. In turn, this compels you to raise your elbow well above your shoulder while throwing.

Second, if are a woman, you might hesitate to learn to throw with a man. At first, you will not be graceful. Almost any remark from him would seem patronizing. To avoid this, your partner should throw with his non-dominant arm.

Having a right-handed man throw with his left hand would be a great equalizer. Now he is not so graceful either. He has to concentrate on getting his hips, shoulder and elbow working together again. He will be aware of how vulnerable his attempts are to ridicule from others. He may also worry who will make the break-through in throwing first. He does not want to be the one left "*throwing like a girl*."

* Adapted from Richard Blonna's *Issues in Human Sexuality*, Morton Publishing, 1998, pages 21-24.
Reprinted with permission from the *Atlantic Monthly*, August, 1996, pages 84-87.