WellesleyWeston

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FIVE DOLLARS

GirlPower Flag

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NICK GRACE / BOSTON RED SOX

Fenway sports groups hosts Playrox Flag Football at Fenway Park in Boston, Massachusetts on Tuesday, November 21, 2023.

June 2022 marked the 50th anniversary of the landmark 1972 Title IX legislation, which blew open the doors for girls' athletic programs across the nation. While the number of young female athletes has soared in schools since then, the benefits of the legislation run deeper.

Research shows that girls who participate in sports are less susceptible to teen pregnancy, depression, and obesity, and more likely to have a positive body image, high self-esteem, and academic and career success. Given today's teen mental health crisis, fueled by the pressures of social media, playing sports has never been more important—especially for girls. But playing sports should also be fun.

The Emergence of Flag Leads to Opportunity

Flag football is one of those sports that's emerging into the mainstream and has a lot of momentum behind it. National Public Radio (NPR) called flag "a long-time staple for gym classes in the U.S. that is finally hitting the big time." It's becoming an NCAA sport, and it was selected



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for the Olympic Games in Los Angeles in 2028 with both women's and men's tournaments.

Community Investors (CI), a Wellesley-based 501(c)(3) with a mission to "EmPower Healthy Happy Kids Rocking the Power of Play," launched its own girls' flag program—*GirlPower* Flag—to give girls a chance to play in a low-pressure setting.

Joe Roberts, CI's chief executive officer noted, "We saw a unique opportunity to grow an emerging sport with programs to truly serve the physical, social, and emotional development of the participants. National studies show that 70 percent of kids quit organized sports by age 13, with the number one reason being that sports aren't fun. Studies also report that girls quit earlier and more often." From the beginning,



PHOTOS BY NICK GRACE / BOSTON RED SOX

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Student Coaching Promotes Fun

CI's *GirlPower* Flag uses student coaches rather than parents, which is a key differentiator from most community sports. The coaches' number one job is to make sure all participants are engaged and having fun. But they also actively manage the games to provide balanced enjoyment to a diverse group of participants.

Wellesley resident and student coach Caroline Keyes said, "Sometimes kids are scared to engage and get out of their comfort zone. When that happens, we work one-on-one with them to encourage them to join. But if they don't want to participate, they don't have to. We show how important it is to try new things, even if it feels uncomfortable, but make sure they have fun no matter what."

Music-Powered Play

Part of what makes CI's flag program unique is the music. Based on studies showing how music has a positive effect on movement and social-emotional development, CI's student DJs energize experiences by mixing tunes to help participants relax, engage, connect, and enjoy active play.

Wellesley resident Kelley Tuthill shared, "When I saw an email about flag football, no experience necessary, my youngest, Scarlett, decided to give it a try. She knew very little about the game but enthusiastically participated and loved the encouragement of the older girls and the fun music and atmosphere. We are so grateful to Community Investors for creating opportunities for our girls to try new sports with confidence, learn to be good teammates, and get moving."

Pandemic-Inspired Service

Community Investors' inspiration to launch its *GirlPower* Flag football

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program was sparked by its service to the Wellesley High School (WHS)'s Class of 2021 senior women. Their treasured traditional PowderPuff flag football game vs. their rivals from Needham was canceled that year because of the pandemic. WHS senior women leaders approached Community Investors to see if they could help organize an intramural game. During the spring, with school sports halted, more than 60 girls enjoyed weekly practices and pickup games culminating in a PowerPlay Game (instead of PowderPuff).

"We were truly honored to bring play and smiles to these girls during such difficult times and help them keep such a special tradition alive," recalled Roberts. "After seeing how much the girls enjoyed playing flag, we committed to making more flag experiences available to girls of all ages." Now in its third year, more than 50 girls, grades K–8, rocked CI's *GirlPower* Flag at Babson College under the lights last fall, free of charge.

Building Programs and Support

"CI's goal is to build and support programs to serve girls from elementary school through high school," explained Chris Cavallerano, who helped found Community Investors and serves as an adviser. "We are building a leadership team to explore how we can help our schools and community offer a variety of recreational programs, including physical education, intramural, and interscholastic opportunities. We welcome all who are interested in joining our growing team and helping more girls rock flag!"

Many parents and players have shown their enthusiastic support for *GirlPower* Flag. Wellesley resident Ruth Keyes, and mom of student coach Caroline, said, "I can't say enough about the program. It gets kids off screens, outside, and allows kids to be kids. There's so much pressure on them today, this is the perfect outlet for girls to just enjoy playing. I absolutely adore what Community Investors is doing—they have the best interest of kids at heart. It's a win-win for everyone in the community, especially the girls."

Wellesley resident Johanna Cahoon, who serves on the Community Fund for Wellesley, is also a big believer in the program. "My fifth-grade daughter, Paige, is a huge Patriots fan, and she always questions why girls can't play in the NFL. She started playing co-ed flag last winter and then continued during school recess. When she found out about *GirlPower* Flag, she was elated," said Cahoon. "The older girls taught the younger girls how to play and made sure everyone was involved. Paige had such a good time—she looked forward to it all week."



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National Youth Sports Strategy Leaders

Developed over three decades, CI's programs have been designated as National Youth Sports Strategy leaders by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and "Best Practitioners of PLAY" by Stanford University's Challenge Success Wellness initiative serving Wellesley Public Schools. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts Joint Education Committee has requested that CI continue to develop curriculum and program blueprints to reach and serve more communities. CI ultimately wants *GirlPower* Flag's unique formula of student-led, fun-focused, musically energized play to be a model for serving kids everywhere.

Fenway Flag Event

To help expand its reach and impact, CI was invited to run a flag event at Fenway Park last November. Over 300 girls and boys from local communities, urban schools, and organizations, ranging from grades kindergarten through college, enjoyed an epic day of music and play together on the historic field. Cahoon shared, "A student sang the national anthem, and people were on top of the Green Monster watching the kids play. It was a really unique experience and one of the best days of my daughter's life!"

Tuthill echoed Johanna's enthusiasm: "The highlight for our 8-year-old was having the opportunity to play at Fenway over Thanksgiving weekend. Not many people can say they've walked on that hallowed field, let alone played flag football on it." Fenway also served as a "stage" for CI's PlayRox Music Mission. Student bands had an opportunity to perform and entertain the players and fans, while student DJs musically powered the games.

Launching Pad for the Future

CI believes its Fenway Flag home run will help its organization continue to rise. "We have a time-tested effective formula providing truly organic remedies to heal and empower a generation facing historic challenges," stated Roberts. Mike McGreal, CI's CFO added, "The only missing ingredient is the capacity to reach and serve more communities. We encourage all who care and want to truly make a difference to connect with us." WW

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