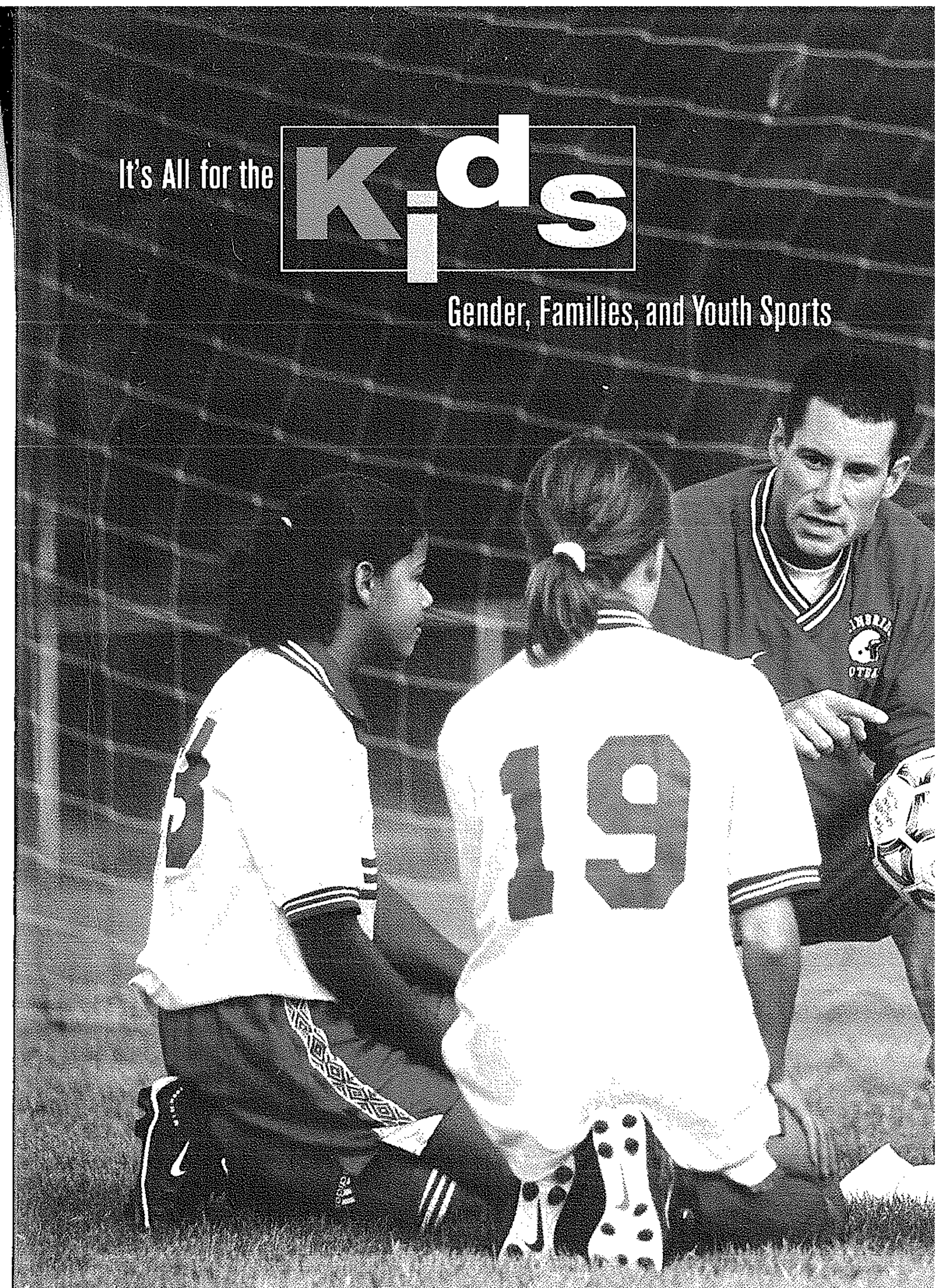
It's All for the Kids
Gender, Families, and Youth Sports
19

TWO "Looking for a Team Mom"

SEPARATING THE MEN FROM THE MOMS

February 14: A winter chill lingers and the field is soggy from recent rains. But here we are at the baseball field, starting another Little League Baseball season, so it must be spring. It's the first practice of the season for this 11- and 12-year-old boys' team. In addition to myself, three more dads have volunteered to assist Coach Dean. The practice drills are all ones that we learned at the coaches' clinic the previous day. I overhear one assistant coach say to Dean, "So, are the women still laying low?" Dean, with a chuckle, replies, "Yes! So far no team mom!" The assistant coach quips, "I guess nobody wants to do it, huh?"

February 23: Coach Dean, in his almost daily e-mails to the team's parents, continues to include a set-off note that reads: "Still looking for a Team Mom . . ."

It strikes me that if it were worded as "team parent," this would at least theoretically expand the potential pool times two!

February 26: At the team's first practice game, I'm standing alone by the dugout, and behind me sitting in the stands are three moms. One of them

says, in hushed tones, "I hear they are still looking for a team mom." Another giggles and whispers conspiratorially, "I'm laying low on that one." Another laughs and says, more loudly, "Me too. I'm sure they can find a dad to do it." They all laugh.

By the second game, the "team mom" is Tina, Coach Dean's wife.

When we asked a longtime Little League Softball manager, Albert Riley, why he thinks most of the head coaches are men while nearly all of the team parents are women, he said with a shrug, "They give opportunities to everybody to manage or coach and it just so happens that no women volunteer, you know?" Soccer coach Shelley Parsons saw a certain inevitability to this adult division of labor: "The women always volunteer to be the team moms, the women have always volunteered to make the banners, and the dads have always volunteered to be the refs and the assistant coaches." Riley's and Parsons' statements were typical for head coaches, who generally offered up explanations grounded in individual choice: faced with equal opportunities to volunteer, men just *choose* to be coaches while women *choose* to be team parents.

But as the story that opens this chapter suggests, and as I will illustrate in multiple ways, the gendered division of labor among men and women volunteers in youth coaching results not simply from an accumulation of individual choices; rather, it is produced through a profoundly *social* process. I will draw from interviews with head coaches to illustrate how gender divisions of labor among adult volunteers are shaped by gendered language and belief systems and are seen as "natural" extensions of gendered divisions of labor in families and workplaces. I will also draw from field observations to illustrate how the gendered organizational context of youth sports shapes peoples' expectations, ideas, and choices about men's and women's roles as coaches or team parents.

THE PIPELINE TO HEAD COACHING POSITIONS

When asked how they initially became coaches, most people spoke of having first served as assistant coaches—sometimes for just one season, sometimes for several seasons—before moving into a head coaching

position. Drawing from language used by those who study gender and race in occupations, we can describe the assistant coach position as an essential part of the "pipeline" to the head coach position.[1] One of the reasons for this is obvious: many parents—women and men—believe that as a head coach they will be under tremendous critical scrutiny from other parents in the community. Without previous youth coaching experience, many of them lack the confidence they feel they need to take on such a public leadership task. A year or two of assistant coaching affords one that experience and builds confidence, which can lead to the conclusion, "I can do that," and to the decision to take on the responsibility of a head coaching position.

But the pipeline from assistant coaches to head coaches does not operate in a purely individual, voluntarist manner. Longtime Little League manager George Starr, who also served as a member of the league's governing board, gave a glimpse of how the pipeline works when there's a shortage of volunteers for head coaching positions:

> When I first got on the [Little League] board and I was in charge of the minor leagues, one time we had ten teams and only like six or seven applicants that wanted to be strictly manager. So you kinda eyeball the yearbook from the year before, maybe a couple of years [before], and see if the same dad is still listed as a[n assistant] coach, and maybe now it's time he wants his own team. So you make a lot of phone calls. You might make twenty phone calls, and hopefully you are going to get two or three guys that say, "Yes, I'll be a manager."

The assistant coach position is a key part of the pipeline to head coaching positions, both because it makes people more confident about volunteering to be a head coach and, as George Starr's words illustrate, because it makes them visible and thus more likely to be actively recruited by the league to be a head coach. So in order to understand how it is that most head coaches are men, we need to understand how the pipeline operates—how it is that, at the entry level, women's and men's choices to become assistant coaches and/or team parents, are constrained, shaped, or enabled by the social context. This chapter explores this entry-level process.

RECRUITING DADS AND MOMS TO HELP

There is a lot of work involved in organizing a successful youth soccer, baseball, or softball season. A head coach needs help from two, three, even four other parents who will serve as assistant coaches during practices and games. Parents also have to take responsibility for numerous support tasks like organizing snacks, making team banners, working in the snack bar during games, collecting donations for year-end gifts for the coaches, and organizing team events and year-end parties. In AYSO, parents also serve as volunteer referees for games. When we asked head coaches how they determined who would help them with these assistant coaching and other support tasks, a very common story resulted: the coach would call a beginning-of-the-season team meeting, sometimes preceded by a letter or e-mail to parents, and ask for volunteers. Nearly always, they said, they ended up with dads volunteering to help as assistant coaches and moms volunteering to be team parents. Soccer coach Wendy Lytle told a typical story:

> At the beginning of the season I sent a little introductory letter [that said] I really badly need an assistant coach and referee and a team mom. You know anyone that is keen on that, let's talk about it at the first practice. And this year one guy picked up the phone and said, "Please can I be your assistant coach." And I spoke to another one of the mums who I happen to know through school and she said, "Oh, I can do the team mum if you find someone to help me." And by the first practice, they'd already discussed it and it was up and running.

We can see from Lytle's statement how the assistant coach and team-parent positions are sometimes informally set up even before the first team meeting, and how a coach's assumption that the team parent will be a "team mom" might make it more likely that women end up in these positions. When asked how he selected a team parent, Soccer coach Gilbert Morales said, "I just generally leave it to a volunteer issue. I ask for volunteers." When asked who normally volunteers, he replied, "Usually female. Usually female. I've found that most of the team parents are usually team moms." Even coaches who consciously

try to emphasize that "team parent" is not necessarily a woman's job, like softball coach Rosa Ramirez, find that only women end up volunteering to do this:

> Before the season started we had a team meeting and I let the parents know that I would need a team parent, and I strongly stressed *parent*, because I don't think it should always be a mother. But we did end up with the mom doing it, and she assigns snacks and stuff like that.

None of the head coaches we interviewed said that they currently had a man as the team parent, but four recalled that they had once had a man as a team parent (though one of these four coaches said, "Now that I think about it, that guy actually volunteered his wife to do it"). When we asked if they had ever had a team parent who was a man, nearly all of the coaches said never. Many of them laughed at the very thought. Soccer coach Joan Ring exclaimed with a chuckle, "I just can't imagine! I wonder if they've *ever* had a team mom who's a dad. I don't know. Same with the banner. That would be funny to see: has a man ever made a banner? I don't know (laughs)." Soccer coach Doug Berger stammered his way through his response, punctuating his words with sarcastic laughter: "Ha! In fact, that whole concept—I don't think I've ever *heard* of a team dad [*laughs*]. Uh—there *is* no team dad. I've never heard of a team dad. But I don't know why that would be." A few coaches, like softball coach Lisette Taylor, resorted to family metaphors to explain why they think there are few if any men volunteering to be team parents: "Oh, it's always a mom [*laughs*]. Team mom. That's why it's called team *mom*. You know, the coach is a male. And the mom—I mean, that's the *housekeeping*—you know: assign the snack."

Gendered Language

In the late 1970s, a popular riddle made the rounds that went something like this:

> A man is driving along in his car when he accidentally hits a boy on a bike. He gets out of the car, looks down and sees the injured boy, and says, "Oh, God! I've hit my own son!" He rushes the boy to the hospital, and in the emergency room, the doctor walks in, looks at the boy, and exclaims: "Oh God! I can't do surgery on this boy! He's my son!" How is this possible?

The answer, of course, is that the doctor is the boy's *mother*, and the point of the riddle is to illustrate the automatic assumption in the mind of the listener that *doctor* always implies a *man*. Another way to put this is to say that there are gendered assumptions in the language that we link to certain professions, so much so that often, when the person holding the position is in the statistical minority, we attach a modifier, such as *male* nurse, *male* secretary, *woman* judge, *woman* doctor. Or, *woman* head coach.

Over and over, in interviews with coaches, during team meetings, and in interactions during games, practices, and team parties, I noticed this gendered language. Most obvious was the frequent slippage from official term "team parent" to the commonly used term "team mom." But I also noticed that a man coach was normally just called a "coach," while a woman coach was often gender-marked as a "woman coach." As feminist linguists have shown, language is a powerful element of social life—it not only reflects social realities like gender divisions of labor, it also helps to construct our notions of what is "normal" and what is an "aberration."[2] Joan Ring's statement, "I wonder if they've *ever* had a team mom who's a dad," illustrates how gendered language makes this whole idea of a male team parent seem incongruous, even laughable, to many. In youth sports, this gendered language supports the notion that a team is structured very much like a "traditional" heterosexual family: the head coach—nearly always a man—is the leader and the public face of the team; the team parent—nearly always a woman—is working less visibly behind the scenes, doing the "housekeeping" support work; assistant coaches—mostly men, but including the occasional woman—help the coach on the field during practices and games.

Teams are even talked about sometimes as "families," and while we never heard a head coach referred to as a team's "dad," we did often and

consistently hear the team parent referred to as the "team mom." This gendered language, drawn from family relations, gives us some good initial hints as to how coach and team-parent roles remain so sex-segregated. Gendered language, in short, helps structure people's thoughts in ways that shape and constrain their actions. Is a man who volunteers to be a team parent now a "team mom?"

Gender Ideology and Gendered Organizations

When we pressed the coaches to consider why it is nearly always women who volunteer to be the team parent, many seemed never to have considered this question before. Some of the men coaches seemed especially befuddled by this question, and appeared to assume that women's team-parenting work is a result of an almost "natural" decision on the part of the woman to volunteer to help in this way. Some men, like soccer coach Carlos Ruiz, made sense of this volunteer division of labor by referring to the ways that it reflected divisions of labor in their own families and in their community: "In this area, we have a lot of stay-at-home moms, so it seems to kind of fall to them to take over those roles." Similarly, baseball coach Albert Riley, whose wife served as the team parent, explained: "I think it's because they probably do it at home. You know, I mean, my wife—even though she can't really commit the time to coach, I don't think she would *want* to coach—uh, she's very good with that [team parent] stuff." Soccer coach Al Evans explained the gender divisions on youth sports teams in terms of people's comfort with a nostalgic notion of "the classical family":

> I suppose unconsciously, on that sort of Freudian level, it's like you got the dad and he's the boss and you got the mom and she's the support, and then you got all the little siblings, so in a sense you're making this picture that, without really drawing too much attention to it—that's sort of the classical family, you know, it's like the Donna Reed family is AYSO, right? They have these assigned gender roles, and people in San Marino and South Pasadena, probably all over the United States, they're fairly comfortable with them, right? It's, uh, maybe insidious, maybe not, [but] framed in the sort of traditional family role of dad, mom, kids—people are going to be comfortable with that.

Ted Miller, a Little League baseball coach, broadened the explanation, drawing connections to divisions of labor in his workplace:

> It's kinda like in business. I work in real estate and most of your deal makers that are out there on the front lines, so to speak, making the deals, doing the shuckin' and jivin', doing the selling, are men. It's a very good ol' boys' network on the real estate brokerage side. There are a ton a females who are on the property management side, because it's *housekeeping*, it's *managing*, it's like running the *household*, it's behind the scenes, it's like cooking in the kitchen—[*laughs*]—I mean I hate to say that, but it's that kind of role that's secondary. Coach is out in the front leading the squad, mom sitting behind making sure that the snacks are in order and all that. You know, just the way it is.

Having a male coach and a team mom just seemed normal to Evans ("You know, just the way it is") because it seemed to flow naturally from divisions of labor in his household and in his workplace—gendered divisions of labor that have the good ol' boys operating publicly as the leaders, "on the front lines . . . shuckin' and jivin'," while the women are offering support "behind the scenes, . . . like cooking in the kitchen." Echoing this view, soccer coach Paul Leung said, "I hate to use the analogy, but its like a secretary: you got a boss and you've got a secretary, and I think that's where most of the opportunities for women to be active in the sports is, as the secretary."

It was striking to me how several of the men's explanations for divisions of labor between women and men were offered somewhat apologetically—"I hate to say that," "I hate to use the analogy,"—as though they suspected that their beliefs might be considered politically incorrect. When explaining why it is that team parents are almost exclusively women, a small number of women coaches also seemed to see it as natural, like most of the men coaches saw it. Pam Burke, a soccer coach who also served as a "team mom" for her daughter's team, held conservative views on gender. A homemaker, Burke disagreed with the women coaches who, for feminist reasons, disapproved of the gendered

nature of the "team mom" position. In her view, women's support and nurturance needs to be respected and valorized, though she too admitted to some ambivalence about these issues:

> I think we have to be careful in making that a negative, because more often than not, at least in this community, the father is the primary breadwinner, so he's working forty to fifty hours a week, and those are his responsibilities. We have lots of stay-at-home moms here in this community, and those are the people who have the time [to serve as a team parent], and these are typically mothering-woman sorts of skills. I mean, you can call it a stereotype and you can call it bad, but its true: if it weren't for me, my daughter's coach would be a disaster. He's doing *soccer* [and] he doesn't want to do this other stuff. And it takes like five minutes, and its not a lot of work, and its what we do as women, and mothers certainly, and for the most part we do it well, so I don't take offense to that. I have a sort of strange view actually of women and men in the world. I don't think women should be in positions of leadership over men, so I'm, I kind of have this struggle inside of me because I recognize the many differences between men and women, and I take kind of a controversial stand over it, because I don't think we should make us equal in ways that I don't think that we are. I don't think we are the same, and I think we should celebrate the differences.

Many women coaches, however, saw the gendering of the "team-parent" position as a problem, and made sense of its persistence, as did many of the men, by referring to the ways that it reflects family- and work-related divisions of labor. But several of the women coaches added an additional dimension to their explanations, by focusing on *why they think the men don't or won't* consider doing team-parent work. Soccer coach Wendy Lytle said, "I think it's because the dads want to be involved with the action. And they are not interested in doing paperwork and collecting money for photos or whatever it is. They are not interested in doing that sort of stuff." Jessica Torres, another soccer coach, extended this point: "I think it's probably, well, identity, which is probably why not many men do it. You know, they think, that is a women's job, like secretary or nurse or, you know." In short, many of the women coaches were cognizant of the ways that the "team-parent" job was viewed by men, like all "women's work," as non-masculine and thus undesirable. Jessica Torres found it ironically funny that her husband, in fact, does most of the cooking and housework at home but won't take on the role of team parent for his daughter's team. When asked if changing the name to "team dad" might get more men to volunteer, she replied with a sigh,

> I don't know. I wish my husband would be a team dad because he's just very much more domesticated than I am [*laughs*]. You know, "Bring all the snacks, honey, hook us up," you know. I think there's a lot of men out there, but they don't want to be perceived as being domesticated.

Torres's comment illustrates how—even for a man who does a substantial amount of the family labor at home—publicly taking on a job that is defined as "feminine" threatens to saddle men with a "domesticated" public image that would be embarrassing or even humiliating to them. That some women coaches speculated as to why men would *not* consider being team parents, while the men coaches relegated their responses to considering merely why women *do* volunteer as team parents, indicates that at least some of the women coaches have a more nuanced (and critical) understanding of gender than do most of the men coaches. As Ellen Lessing observed, her voice dripping with sarcasm, "All the [support] jobs are [done by] women, except for the assistant coach. That's the—the *man's* job." From these explanations, we can see that many coaches—both women and men—believe that men become coaches and women become team parents largely because these public roles fit with their domestic proclivities and skills. But the women add an important dimension to this explanation: women do the team-parent work because it has to be done . . . and because they know that the men won't do it.

FINDING A TEAM MOM

Explanations from interviews are revealing, especially about people's beliefs and underlying values, giving us a window into how people make sense of decisions that they have made. They give us insights into how gendered language and beliefs about men's and women's "roles" help to shape the kinds of decisions that individuals make. Yet asking

people to explain how (and especially why) things like gendered divisions of labor persist is not, by itself, the most reliable basis for building an explanation. Rather, watching *how* things happen gives us a deeper understanding of the social construction of gender.[3] My observations from team meetings and early season practices reveal deeper social processes at work—processes that shaped people's apparently individual decisions to volunteer for assistant coach or team-parent positions. This excerpt from field notes from the first team meeting of a boys' baseball team illustrates how men's apparent resistance to even consider taking on the team-parent position ultimately leaves the job in the hands of a woman (who might have been reluctant to do it):

> The boys are on the field playing catch, and Coach Bill stands facing the parents as we sit in the grandstands. Our boys are 13–14 year olds, so we are all old hands at this. The coach doesn't ask for volunteers for assistant coaches; instead, he announces that he has "invited" two of the fathers, "who probably know more about baseball than I do," to serve as his assistants. He then asks for someone to volunteer as the "team mom." He adds, "Now, 'team mom' is not a gendered job: it can be done by a mom or a dad. But we *really need* a team mom." Nobody volunteers immediately. One mom sitting near me mutters to another mom, "I've done this two years in a row, and I'm not gonna do it this year." Coach Bill goes on to ask for a volunteer for scorekeeper. Meanwhile, two other moms have been whispering, and one of them suddenly bursts out with, "Okay! She's volunteered to be team mom!" People applaud. The volunteer seems a bit sheepish about it; her whole body-language suggests someone who has just reluctantly agreed to do something. But she affirms that, yes, she'll do it.

As we have seen, this first team meeting of the year is often the moment at which the division of labor—who will be the assistant coaches, who will be the team parent—is solidified. In this case, the male assistant coaches had been selected previous to the meeting by the head coach, but it apparently took some cajoling from a mother during the team meeting to convince another mother to volunteer to be the team mom. I have seen two occasions when a woman who did not volunteer was drafted by the head coach to be the team mom, even though she was clearly more oriented toward assistant coaching, as the following story

from field notes I took over the first few weeks of the season of a 7-year-old boys' baseball team illustrates:

> At the first practice, Coach George takes charge, asks for volunteers. I tell him that I am happy to help out at practice and games and that he should just let me know what he'd like me to do. He appoints me assistant coach. This happens with another dad, too. We get team hats. Elena Rosas, a mother, offers to help out in any way she can. She's appointed "co–team mom" (the coach's wife is the other team mom). She shrugs and says okay, fine. Unlike most team moms, Elena continues to attend all practices. At the fifth practice, Coach George is pitching batting practice to the kids; I'm assigned to first base, the other dad is working with the catcher. Elena (the "team mom") is standing alone on the sidelines, idly tossing a ball up in the air to herself. Coach George's son suddenly has to pee, so as George hustles the boy off to the bathroom, Elena jumps in and starts pitching. She's good, it turns out, and can groove the pitch right where the kids want it. (By contrast, George has recently been plunking the kids with wild pitches.) Things move along well. At one point, when Coach George has returned from the bathroom, with Elena still pitching to the kids, a boy picks up a ball near second base and doesn't know what to do with it. Coach George yells at the kid: "Throw it! Throw it to the team mom!" The kid, confused, says, "Where is she?" I say, "The pitcher, throw it to the pitcher." The coach says, "Yeah, the team mom." I say, "Looks like a coach to me."

A couple of years later, I interviewed Elena Rosas and asked her how it was that she became a team parent and continued in that capacity for five straight years. Her response revealed a great deal about the informal constraints that channel many women away from coaching, toward being team parents:

> I always wanted to help out. I loved the sport, so anything I could do to help out [my son's] baseball, I was more than willing. The first year, when he was in kindergarten, he was on a T-ball team and I volunteered to be manager, and of course the league didn't choose me, but they did allow me to be assistant coach. And I was so excited, and [*laughs*] of course I showed up in heels for the first practice, because it was right after work, and the coach looked at me and I informed him that, "I'm your new assistant." And he looked at me—and I don't know if *distraught* is

> the correct word, but he seemed slightly *disappointed*, and he went out of his way to ask the parents who were there watching their children if there was anyone who wanted to volunteer, even though I was there. So there was this male who did kind of rise to the occasion, and so that was the end. He demoted me without informing me of his decision [*laughs*]—I was *really* enthused, because [my son] was in kindergarten, so I *really* wanted to be coach—or assistant coach at least—and it didn't happen. So after that I didn't feel comfortable to volunteer to coach. I just thought, okay, then I can do team mom.

As Elena's story illustrates, women who have the background, skills, and desire to coach are sometimes assigned by head coaches to be team moms. Some baseball teams even have a niche for such moms: a "dugout coach" (sometimes called a "dugout mom") is usually a mom who may help out with on-field instruction during practices, but on game days she is assigned the "indoors" space of the dugout; here, it is her responsibility to keep track of the lineup, to be sure that the boy who is on deck (next up to bat) is ready with his batting gloves and helmet on. The dugout coach also—especially with younger kids' teams—might be assigned to keep order inside the dugout: to keep kids focused on the game, to keep equipment orderly, to help with occasional first aid, and to help see that the dugout is cleaned of empty water bottles and snack containers after the game is over.

PLAYING FIELDS AS GENDERED SPACES

Although most teams don't have "dugout coaches" (they tend to be more common on younger kids' baseball or softball teams), their occasional presence reveals something about the spatial organization of gender. After learning of the existence of dugout coaches through some of our interviews, I started to make sense of something I had observed during the 2005, 2006, and 2007 seasons, during which I served as the official scorekeeper for my son's baseball teams. As scorekeeper, I chose to sit in the corner of the dugout closest to home plate. This gave me a good view of the entire field, and a good vantage point from which to observe coaches.

When our team was batting, the head coach would assign an assistant to coach first base, and would himself coach third base, a place from which he would shout instructions and flash signs (hand signals indicating strategies) to batters, base runners, and the first-base coach. While our team was on defense, for safety reasons the boys were required to be inside the dugout at all times, but I noticed that the coaches nearly always remained standing on the field, immediately outside the dugout. After I became aware of this pattern, I watched it recur in game after game, with team after team. The coaches almost never set foot inside the dugout. Instead, they stood on the field, arms crossed, talking with each other, barking out a few orders to the kids or interacting with an umpire. One notable exception to this pattern is described in this field note:

> It's the first Saturday day game of the season and it's early afternoon and in the low 80s, hotter than we have experienced yet this year. The dugouts this year have green semitransparent screens added to the back and the top, which shade those inside from the sun. Somewhere late in the game, Coach Joe stepped into the shade of the dugout carrying a five-gallon bucket, which he placed upside down just inside the dugout door, and sat down on the bucket. As he was sitting down, he muttered, to nobody in particular, "Whew! I gotta get out of the sun for a minute." But he barely stayed in the dugout for even a minute. Within a couple of pitches, he was back on his feet, standing just outside the dugout in the full sun.

Coach Joe's apology for entering the dugout to sit down, and his quick exit, underlined for me the extent to which coaches may think (though probably not consciously) of the dugout as a kind of no-man's-land. Standing on the field of play, I came to realize, publicly marks the coach as an authority, while sitting in the dugout may diminish his stature. Just as language tends to smuggle in gendered meanings, so too space is often gendered in ways that mark and reinforce divisions of labor and power.[4] In workplaces, bosses and managers (often men) tend to occupy larger spaces than those who do the less-valued and less-rewarded work, such as clerical labor. Bosses have the right to freely move into the spaces of their subordinates, while the subordinates must knock and ask permission before entering their boss's office. In homes, kitchens are often coded

as female workspaces, while a man's den or converted garage-workshop are masculine spaces. Sports spaces too are gendered: in public gyms, as sociologist Shari Dworkin has shown, the "cardio" workout area (treadmills, stationary bikes, etc.) is considered a more feminine space, while the "free weights" room is often seen as a male space. Women who want to lift weights as part of their workout need to muster courage to transgress this space.[5] The space of an American football field provides a clear image of dichotomous gender separation, with armored male bodies fighting it out on center stage while women cheer on the sidelines.[6]

My observations suggested that the baseball, softball, and soccer fields on which our children play are also gendered spaces, as the following observation of a "dugout coach" illustrates:

> I'm walking the rounds, briefly visiting and observing the five baseball fields clustered together in the South Pasadena Arroyo, and my observations reaffirm that, yes, I have achieved saturation in my research. It's the same old pattern, over and over: a co-ed T-ball game—all men coaches and assistant coaches; a boys' 10–12-year-olds game—all men coaches and assistant coaches; and finally I settle in to watch a boys' 7–8-year-olds game—all men coaches and assistant coaches. I'm standing behind the gate that leads to the dugout of the team that's currently in the field when the inning ends. As the kids surge toward the dugout, suddenly a woman rushes down from the stands, hurries by me through the gate, and begins meeting the boys as they enter the dugout. She holds a lineup card in one hand, shoos the remaining boys into the dugout with the other hand, and yells out the names of the boys who are coming up to bat: "Tommy, you're leading off; Jose, on deck; Eddie, in the hole! C'mon guys, get your helmets on. Everybody: drink up; keep hydrated. C'mon now, let's get some runs this inning!" I watch her for the whole inning, and she stands literally with one foot in the dugout and one foot on the field, continually shifting her attention from the field, to the kids in the dugout, and back to the field. The male manager stands in the third-base coaching box and is focused for the entire inning on batters and base runners on the field. He never looks toward the dugout, and doesn't need to, because the "dugout coach" has things organized and moving like clockwork. After the third out, she tells the boys, "Okay, good inning, back in the field now. C'mon, get your mitts and take the field! Joey, don't forget your hat." As the boys spill back onto the field, she leaves the dugout and sits back in the stands with the other parents.

The playing field itself is the public space where the (usually male) coach exerts his authority and command. The dugout is like the home—a place of safety from which one emerges to do one's job on the field. Work does happen in the domestic space of the dugout, but it's of the type that is behind-the-scenes, supportive of the "real" work of leadership and competition that is done on the field. In short, even women who have on-field game knowledge and skills are sometimes relegated to the dugout as a liminal space between the (clearly masculine) space of the playing field, occupied by the head coach and the assistant coaches, and the bleachers, occupied by the non-coaching parents and the "team mom." As we will see in the next chapter, women who are head coaches sometimes experience the playing field as a hyper-masculine space. Women who step on to this space as coaches must begin with a certain amount of chutzpah, and in order to survive (and sometimes thrive) in this space, they often consciously develop strategies that allow them to be seen as legitimate leaders.

CHALLENGES AND RESISTANCE

The head coach's common assumption that fathers will volunteer to be assistant coaches and mothers to be team moms creates a context that powerfully channels men and women into these directions. Backed by these "commonsense" understandings of gendered divisions of labor, many men and women just "go with the flow" of this channeling process. Their choices and actions help to reproduce the existing gendered patterns of the organization. But some don't, choosing instead to swim against the tide. Ellen Lessing already had several seasons of experience as a head soccer coach when she attended the first team meeting for her youngest child's team:

> At our first team meeting the coach announced, "I'm looking for a couple of you to help me out as assistant coaches," and he looked directly at the men, and *only* at the men. None of them volunteered. And it was really amazing because he didn't even *look* at me or at any of the other women. So after the meeting I went up to him and said, "Hey, I've coached soccer

for like ten seasons; I can help you out, okay?" And he agreed, so I'm the assistant coach for him.

This first team meeting, as Ellen Lessing described it, is an example of a normal gendered interaction that, if it had gone unchallenged, would have served to reproduce the usual gender divisions of labor on the team. It's likely that many women in these situations notice the ways that men are, to adopt sociologist Pat Martin's term, informally (and probably unconsciously) "mobilizing masculinities" in ways that serve to reproduce men's positions of centrality.[7] But Lessing's ten years of coaching experience gave her the confidence and the "capital" that allowed her not only to see and understand, but also to challenge the very gendered selection process that was taking place at this meeting. Many—perhaps most—mothers do not have this kind of background, and so when faced with this sort of moment, they just go with the flow. On another occasion, as the following story from my field notes describes, I observed a highly athletic and coaching-inclined woman assertively use her abilities in a way that initially *seemed* to transcend this kind of sex-segregation process, only to be relegated symbolically at season's end as a "team mom":

> A new baseball season, the first team meeting of the year; a slew of dads volunteer to be assistant coaches. Coach George combs the women for a team mom, and gets some resistance; at first nobody will do it, but then he finds a volunteer. At the first few practices, few of the fathers who had volunteered to assistant coach actually show up. Sandra, a mom, clearly is into baseball, very knowledgeable and athletic, and takes the field. She pitches to the kids, gives them good advice. On the day when George is passing out forms for assistant coaches to sign, he hands her one too. She accepts it, in a matter-of-fact way. It appears to me that her work with the kids at the practices is being acknowledged by Coach George with assistant coach status.
>
> At a later practice, there are three dads (including me) filling in for Coach George, who had to work. Sandra is there, but hangs on the margins, almost as though she's waiting to be invited to help. As no invitation seems forthcoming, she eventually finds a niche, backing up fielders, giving them pointers. I am struck again at how knowledgeable she is, a good teacher.

> Though few dads show up for many of the practices, there never seems to be a shortage of dads to serve as assistant coaches at the games. Coach George invites Sandra to coach third base once, but beyond that she is never included in an on-field coaching role during a game.
>
> End of season, team party. Coach George hands out awards to all the kids. Then he hands out gift certificates to all the assistant coaches, but does not include Sandra. Then he hands out gift certificates to the "team moms," and includes Sandra here, even though I don't recall her doing any team-parent tasks. Amazing! She had clearly been acting as an assistant coach all season long.

This story illustrates how, on the one hand, a woman volunteer can informally circumvent the "sorting process" that pushes her toward the "team mom" role by persistently showing up to practices and assertively doing the work of a coach (and doing it well). As Barrie Thorne showed in her groundbreaking research on children on school playgrounds, when children cross gender boundaries (e.g., a girl who plays football with the boys; a boy who plays jump rope with the girls), "they challenge the oppositional structure of traditional gender arrangements."[8] However, Thorne also points out that individual incidences of gender crossing are often handled informally, in ways that affirm rather than challenge gender boundaries: an individual girl who joins the boys' game gets defined "as a token, a kind of 'fictive boy,' not unlike many women tokens in predominantly male settings, whose presence does little to challenge the existing arrangements."[9] Similarly, Sandra's successful "crossing" led to her becoming accepted as an assistant coach during practices. However, the fact that she was accepted as a practice coach, but rarely recognized as a "real" coach during games, made her (to adapt Thorne's terms) a kind of "token," or "fictive," coach, whose gender transgression was probably unknown to the many adults who never attended practices. So, in the final moment of the season, when adults and children alike were being publicly recognized for their contributions to the team, she was labeled and rewarded for being a "team mom," thus symbolically reaffirming the categorical gender boundaries.

A few coaches whom we interviewed consciously attempted to resist or change this gendered sorting system. Some of the women coaches,

especially, saw it as a problem that the team-parent job was always done by a woman. Girls' softball coach Rosa Ramirez was concerned that the designation "team mom" amounted to negative role-modeling for kids, and fed into the disrespect that women coaches experienced:

> I think the way things are right now in Little League, all kids think that the moms should just be team moms. Which means that they don't take the mothers seriously, and I think that's a bad thing. I mean it's a *bad thing*. I think especially I think that's a lack of respect to women, to mothers. There are a lot of mothers who have played, who played softball since they were little, played all the way through high school. Some even played through college, and yet when they come out here, these kids, you know, boys and girls alike, are like, "Whatever, right, what do you know?" But they *do* know.

Ramirez's comments illustrated her understanding that a gender sorting process channeled men to become coaches and women to become team moms, because, she said, many people assume that

> that's all the women are good for. I think that's what the mentality is. [When] we need coaches, we're talking to the dads. [When] we need a team mom—I think that's part of the problem, they always say *team mom*. I think I'm the only one who says *team parent*, and I made it very clear to our parents that it did not have to be a mother, that it could be a father, and that I encourage any dad out there that had time to do what team parents are supposed to do, to sign up and do it. But it didn't happen.

Such coaches find that simply de-gendering the language—by using the term "team parent," and even stressing that it is "not a gendered job"—is unlikely to yield male volunteers. So what some women coaches do is they simply refuse to have a team parent. Soccer coach Joan Ring said, "I do it all. I don't have a team parent." Pam Burke agreed: "I never have a team mom, because I don't want one. I have a way I want things done and I would rather not let go of those things." And June Park said, "I think in general, compared to the men who coach, I do more of that [team-parent work]." This kind of resistance by women coaches is understandable, especially from those who see the "team mom" phenomenon as demeaning to women and who feel that it contributes to a climate

of disrespect for women coaches. However, it's also easy to see how this form of resistance ends up creating extra work for women coaches—work that most men coaches relegate to a "team mom." Reminiscent of an employed wife who gets tired of asking her employed husband to pull his share of the housework and finds it easier to simply clean the toilets herself, these women coaches are doing a "second shift" of volunteer work.[10]

An alternative way of setting things up, used by a small number of coaches, involved delegating specific support jobs to families rather than having a team parent. Soccer coach Nikki Lopez, a single mother, spoke of the way she organized support tasks on her girls' soccer team:

> I don't have a team [parent] per se, but I'm really overly organized [*laughs*], so at our team meetings I have sign-ups, and I make sure every parent signs-up for something. So I have parents that volunteer to come help me set up the field, you know, put the nets on the goals, do that stuff. And, you know, it was about half and half . . . I got men volunteering women volunteering, and I don't have a team mom or anything like that, so I don't think any particular job goes to any particular sex. Like the person that was in charge of our banner this year was one of the fathers; [he] coordinated the whole thing.

The very few occasions that a father does volunteer—or is recruited by the coach—to be the team parent are moments of gender "crossing" that hold the potential to radically disrupt the normal operation of the sex-category sorting process. But, ironically, a male team parent can also reinforce common gender stereotypes. Soccer coach Carlos Ruiz told me that the previous season a father had volunteered to be the team parent, but as it turned out,

> he was a disaster [*laughs*]. He didn't do *anything*, you know, and what little he did it was late; it was ineffective assistance. He didn't come, he didn't make phone calls, I mean, he was just like a black hole. And so that—that was an unfortunate disaster. This year, it's a woman again.

This kind of male incompetence at doing "women's work" might be especially familiar to married women whose husbands can't seem to recall

how to cook, fold laundry, shop for groceries, or change diapers. The idea that a man volunteered—and then failed miserably to do the team-parent job—may serve ultimately to reinforce the taken-for-granted assumption that women are naturally better suited to do this kind of work. When we asked a homemaker who coaches her daughter's team why she felt it was important for the team parent to be a woman, she explained her reasoning in gender-essentialist terms:

> [Women are] more organized. And because they understand the role, they're more likely to understand the significance of it and the meaning of it and what they need to do. I don't think many dads understand that. That's gender bias, but . . . I think there are very few dads who have that inherent understanding that once they come home from work, or even if they're at work, that their family life is inherent to who they are. Ok, one of the things that my friends who are married to men always complain about . . . is, "He's great, he's helpful, but I have to ask him."

THE DEVALUATION OF WOMEN'S INVISIBLE LABOR

It takes an enormous amount of dedicated volunteer labor to keep a youth sports team, and especially an entire league, running smoothly. In her study of a Little League Baseball league made up of thirty teams, Sherri Grasmuck estimates that the 111 league administrators, head coaches, and assistant coaches contribute a total of 33,330 hours of volunteer labor in a season—an average of about 300 hours per person.[11] Grasmuck's calculations do not take into account the behind-the-scenes supportive labor that team parents (usually moms) do. But a study of Little League Baseball in Texas focused on just that. Janet Saltzman Chafetz and Joseph Kotarba observed that "team mothers" in this "upper middle class, 'Yuppie' Texas community" contribute labor to their sons' teams in ways that result in "the re-creation and strengthening of the community's collective identity as a place where, among other things, women are primarily mothers to their sons." Most all of the team mothers in this community had college degrees, but fifteen of the twenty studied by Chaftetz and Kotarba were full-time homemakers whose husbands were employed as "physicians,

lawyers, corporate and public administrators." Chaftez and Kotarba conclude that "women, especially mothers, are expected to support Texasville's version of the cult of the child."[12] These Texas "team mothers" are similar to many of the South Pasadena "team moms" in my study, both in terms of their education and social class and in terms of their family structure. The Texasville mothers appear to be doing even more labor than their busy South Pasadena counterparts: they commonly prepare and serve food for the kids and coaches; plan and organize collective eating; and organize arts-and-crafts activities. However, these differences are only a matter of degree. The South Pasadena team moms are doing these same kinds of activities, thereby helping to enhance the social cohesion of the team, the league, and the community.

Despite the importance of the work that team parents are doing, it is not often recognized as anywhere equivalent to the importance of the work done by coaches. Of course, the team parent typically puts in fewer hours of labor than does the head coach. However, in some cases, the team parents put in more time than some assistant coaches (dads, for instance, whose work schedules don't allow them to get to many practices but who can be seen on the field during a Saturday game, coaching third base). Yet the team parent's work remains largely invisible, and, as we have seen, coaches sometimes talk about team parents' contributions as trivial or unimportant. Several coaches, when asked about the team-parent job, kind of pooh-poohed it as "not very hard to do," or "an easy job." But like many behind-the-scenes sorts of jobs, there is more to the team-parent job than meets the eye. Elena Rosas told me that, given her full-time job as an educator and her family obligations, she often found it difficult to do all of what was asked of her as a team parent:

> It demands much more time than most people realize, or that even I did. The team roster, the practice schedule, who's gonna bring the snacks, who's gonna work the snack bar. And the biggest problem for me was when somebody couldn't do the snack bar, then I'd have to find someone to cover, which at times translated to, *I'm* covering to do the snack bar. And it was continuous throughout the entire season, and then I had to figure out the gift for the coach, and some people wanted to contribute *very* little, you know, a dollar or so, and other people were insulted—and so, money

transactions—that also was uncomfortable . . . so I just thought, "It's too much." The rosters, making them on the computer, making copies for everyone—I remember giving it to them and they said, "You know, can you try a different font?" (*She laughs.*) That's when I decided, you know, I don't want to do so much of this.

My observations suggest also that the women serving as team parents are often doing this job as one of many volunteer jobs they do in their community, while nearly all of the men who are coaching are engaged in this and only this volunteer activity (an issue I will explore more in chapter 6). A field note from a boys' baseball game illustrates this:

> It is the second-to-last game of the season. During the first inning, Dora, the "team mom" shows up and immediately starts circulating among the parents in the stands, talking and handing out a flier. The flier announces the "year end party," to be held in a couple of weeks. She announces that she will supply ice cream and other makings for sundaes. Everyone else can just bring some drinks. She also announces (and it's on the flier) that she's collecting $20 from each family to pay for a "thank you gift . . . for all their hard work" for the head coach and for each of the three assistant coaches (all men). People start shelling out money and Dora starts a list of who has donated. By the start of the next inning, she announces that she's got to go, saying, "I have a Webelos [Cub Scouts] parents' meeting." She's obviously multitasking here as a parent volunteer. By the fourth inning, near the end of the game, she is back, collecting more money and informing parents on details concerning the party and the upcoming playoffs schedule. Finally, during the last inning, she sits and watches the end of the game with the rest of us.

As this story shows, team parents like Dora are doing work before, during, and after the game—making fliers, communicating with parents, collecting money, keeping lists and records, organizing parties, making sure everyone knows the schedule of upcoming events. And she's sandwiching this work around other volunteer activities with another youth organization. This kind of labor keeps organizations running, and it helps to create and sustain the kind of vibrant community, "for the kids," that people imagine when they move to a town like South Pasadena. In the words of sociologists Peggy Petrezelka and Susan Mannon, it is women's invisible labor that is "keepin' this little town going."[13]

THE SEX-CATEGORY SORTING PROCESS

In this chapter, I have revealed the workings of what I call the *sex-category sorting process.* Through this process, the vast majority of women volunteers are actively sorted into a team-parent position, and the vast majority of men volunteers are sorted into an assistant coach position, which in turn serves as the key entry point to the pipeline for head coaching positions. To say that people are "sorted" is not to deny their active agency in this process. Rather, it is to underline the fact that what people often think of as "free individual choices" are actually choices that are shaped (both constrained and enabled) by social contexts. In particular, I have shown how women's choices to become "team parents" are constrained by the fact that few, if any, men will volunteer to do this important, but less visible and less honored job. Women's choices are enabled by their being actively recruited—"volunteered"—by head coaches, and sometimes by other parents on the team, to become the "team mom." We have seen how men's choices not to volunteer for team-parent positions and instead to volunteer as assistant coaches, are shaped by the gendered assumptions of head coaches and by informal interactions at the initial team meeting. Moreover, the terms "coach" and "team mom" are saturated with gendered assumptions that are consistent with most people's universe of meanings. These gendered meanings mesh with—and mutually reinforce—the conventional gendered divisions of labor and power in the organization, in ways that make peoples' decisions to "go with the flow" appear "natural." And we have seen how having women do the background support work while men do the visible leadership work on the team is also made to appear natural, to the extent that it reiterates the gender divisions of labor that many parents experience in their families and in their workplaces.[14]

In short, people's gendered sense of identity, their informal gendered interactions and language, the gendered divisions of labor in their organizations, and their commonly held beliefs about gender and families together fuel a tremendous inertia that tends mostly to make this profoundly social sex-category sorting process appear to be natural. As sociologists Maria Charles and David Grusky have astutely asserted, "The

insidiousness of essentialism"—the belief in natural, categorical differences between men and women—"is that it clothes segregation in voluntarist terms."[15] It seemed to me at times that, despite the evidence around them of a sex-category sorting process at work, many of the people we interviewed held stubbornly to their belief that every individual was doing precisely what she or he had freely chosen to do. People's adherence to an ideology and language of individual choice, as the words of soccer coach Al Evans illustrate, makes it difficult for them to see and understand the social nature of the sex-category sorting process:

> In most teams, you've got the team manager or your team mom. I hate to use the—to *genderize* that position—but generally that is what happens, is the mom gets picked to do that.
>
> [She's picked, or she volunteers?]
>
> She volunteers.

The sex-segregated context of sport is a key to understanding the power of essentialism in this sorting process. Unlike in most other institutions, the move toward equality (e.g., the passage of Title IX, the explosive increase in youth sports for girls, expanded high school and college sports for girls and women) takes a sex-segregated form, backed not by ideas of integration but by a kind of "separate but equal" ethic, which continues always to make gender salient. Time after time, I hear leaders of leagues, and some women coaches, saying that the league leadership works hard to recruit more women coaches but just can't get them to volunteer. The *formal agency* here is to "get more women," but what sociologist Pat Martin calls the *informal practicing of gender* amounts to a collective and (mostly) non-reflexive sorting system that, at the entry level, puts most women and men on separate paths.[16] We will see in subsequent chapters how this informal practicing of gender also creates a kind of glass ceiling on women coaches, *and* on men coaches who do not display the "proper" masculine style. The mechanisms of this collective practicing of gender are individually embodied and displayed, given voice through informal interactions, made to seem normal through their congruence with family and workplace divisions of labor, and supported

by essentialist ideologies. These mechanisms are embedded in youth sports in taken-for-granted ways.

But showing the dominant pattern—the social reproduction that results from this sex-category sorting process—tells only part of the story. Not everybody goes with the flow, not all the time. People sometimes choose to push against the current, occasionally through overt acts of resistance, and more often through quiet, informal, actions that break or skirt the normal rules of operation. I have shown how a few women resist being assigned to the position of "team mom"—by refusing to volunteer, by jokingly supporting each other not to volunteer, or by insisting on acting informally as an assistant coach even when their activity is defined as that of a team mom. And I have also shown how some coaches (usually women, but a few men) have consciously broken with the dominant pattern of recruiting volunteers at the outset of the season—by taking "team-parent" responsibilities themselves, by not creating a team parent but assigning tasks to families instead, or by consciously recruiting women to help as assistant coaches. In addition, some coaches recognize the tensions inherent in the gendered language of "team mom" and consciously—sometimes humorously—bring these tensions into their conversations with others. These kinds of challenges are usually handled and managed in ways that eventually reproduce the dominant pattern (e.g., publicly presenting at the season-ending party a "team-mom" award to a woman who has been informally acting as an assistant coach all season long). But challenges and small acts of resistance also call into question the "naturalness" of the normal categorical division of labor between women and men. They create possibilities for change by demonstrating to other adults—and, crucially, to the kids—that women don't always have to play the background support "mom" roles, while men don't always have to play the leadership, coach roles.

While these mostly informal moments of resistance are important and provocative, by far the most profound challenge to the categorical sex-sorting process in youth sports takes place when a woman formally takes on the role of head coach. In the next chapter, I will examine the experiences of women who have done just that.

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For the many adult volunteers who work to make youth sports a healthy, life-affirming, and equitable experience for all of our kids

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