

Female athletes at Arapahoe know all too well what it's like to compete without a crowd cheering them on. Parents? Yes. A couple siblings and maybe a handful of students? A few. A teacher or two? Perhaps. But a roaring cheering section supporting them as they take the court, field, pool, track or course? Even at state tournaments that just doesn't exist.

Because the norm for female athletes is to receive little promotion, coverage or recognition from the school or their peers. Sadly, this isn't only the case at Arapahoe. Like the majority of high schools in America, football and boys basketball are the center of attention, and students prioritize attending those games over any other sport. And they also seem to receive the most praise and attendance from administrators and teachers. These sports are popular for a reason and we understand the excitement that surrounds them. But the dismissal of the achievements of Arapahoe's female athletic programs goes much further than just lack of popularity.

Myriad factors contribute to how Arapahoe treats girls sports systematically and culturally. The most obvious issue is social media coverage and the promotion of girls games and meets. The culture at Arapahoe is extremely focused on athletics and student promotion of games is seen on the @arapahoetribe and @ahsbarstool Instagram accounts. But nearly all of the posts are for the football and boys basketball teams. The vast majority of the time girls sports are only posted when there is a playoff game or meet, or upon request by female athletes or their coaches looking for recognition.

"People don't even know that our games are happening," says senior girls basketball captain Sydney White, a Division I commit. "The boys aren't better than us, but they get so much more recognition and attention than we do."

These accounts even go as far as to acknowledge losses from the boys teams, while ignoring girls' wins. For example, after the Eaglecrest basketball games this season @ahsbarstool posted several stories supporting the boys team after its loss; the girls' victory wasn't recognized until a player requested a post.

The attitude that girls' sports are less important than boys' extends to general conversations held among students, as well. Girls have to endure derogatory comments about the caliber of their play and hear about how much more fun it is to watch boys' sports far too often. 16 of the 22 Arapahoe athletes that signed to play collegiate sports were girls. There is no evidence that the male athletes at this school are more talented or successful; if anything it's the other way around.

"I think there's honestly just a stereotype at Arapahoe that girls aren't as good at sports as guys," says senior volleyball captain Hannah Resley. "And I know that that is false, especially in specific sports. So, I think this is a big cultural issue because people don't want to support a girls team that they think are less than."

Four-time first-team all-state runner and cross country captain Ava Michell also weighed in on the issue.

“I think that by announcing our meets and acknowledging our sport more, more people would come out to watch; specifically for our girls team where we have been having huge successes,” the Division I commit says.

A teacher’s comment to a girls basketball player regarding why he doesn’t attend girls basketball games was especially painful.

According to White, he said: “ ‘Why would I want to go watch a bunch of girls double-dribbling and chucking the ball off the backboard?’

“What makes me the most upset is that a teacher has been so disrespectful to the sport that I've given my entire life to.”

How are teenage female athletes supposed to feel seen, respected and appreciated when adults in the building are making these kinds of comments to their faces? It’s not funny. It’s not flippant. And it’s certainly not something he would say to a player from the boys team.

Treating female athletes as less than their male counterparts is clearly a deep-rooted issue at Arapahoe that also appears to be systemic. Just take cheerleading. Only half the team attends volleyball or girls basketball games (a full squad appeared at one girls basketball game this year after a complaint was made). This means there are just six to seven cheerleaders for girls, whereas boys games will boast up to 14. Go to a boys wrestling meet and find cheerleaders at the mat, but don’t expect to see them at the girls meets. There isn’t a more clear example of how unsupportive the school is of girls athletics.

All of these factors add up to a great deal of frustration for female athletes, and send a clear message to females in general. Females work just as hard and dedicate the same amount of time to their sports as male athletes—and have the winning records to prove it, so why should they not receive equal recognition?

This issue was recently brought to the attention of the administration, specifically regarding girls basketball, and the response was passive and unconvincing, saying it was sorry the team “feels” that its hard work is unappreciated and unnoticed. Telling female athletes their frustrations are just a feeling is completely invalidating, insinuates the issue isn’t real and feels like a refusal to ensure all students are treated with equal fairness.

“Warriors take care of one another.” We hear this constantly. It’s repeated in assemblies, in school communications, on T-shirts. But when it comes to athletics, the level of that care clearly depends on gender. If that’s a motto this school really wants to embody, it’s time to do better.