

## My Own Words

# Mia Hamm On Self-Esteem and Sport



*Mia Hamm is the world's best-known female football (known as soccer in the United States) player, an Olympic gold medalist, a World Cup champion, and a three-time All American collegiate star. She was named the Women's World Player of the Year in 2001 and 2002 by FIFA, the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (the world football governing body). She retired from professional competition in December 2004. Go to [www.gogirlgo.com](http://www.gogirlgo.com) for more information about Mia, other athletes, physical activity, and sports.*

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**M**y dad was in the Air Force. When I was a kid, we moved every few years. That meant a lot of good-byes. It also meant getting used to a whole new community and a whole new school each time we moved. It was scary because I was really shy. I can still feel what it was like to have to walk into the new school—that sinking feeling in my belly, that lump in my throat. All the kids already knew each other. It would always take time for me to learn how everything worked, what was cool and what was not. It was always a struggle to find where I fit in—never a fun struggle either.

Feelings happen. Sadness, anger, stress, worry, nervousness, and all other emotions are normal. It's what makes us human. But the emotion commotion can hit girls especially hard during the teen years. Changing bodies, changing friends, changing schools, and just growing up can make life confusing and hard. It's totally normal.

But the battle to fit in wore on me. Already shy, I didn't have much self-confidence in my friend-making abilities. I was the girl walking in the halls with her head down, fidgeting. I would check my clothes and hair every two seconds. When I spoke, you could hardly hear my soft voice. I was nervous and doubted myself a lot.

It's a fact—girls are likely to face a drop in self-esteem during the teenage years. That means all those feelings about self-worth and competence take a big hit. I think part of that is due to wanting to fit in. And part of it is due to what girls see in the media. We are bombarded with nasty messages in videos, magazines, and television—about how girls are “supposed” to be.

Low self-esteem might lead to some very serious consequences. Have you heard the statistics? Before graduating high school, nearly one out of every three girls will experience depression, anxiety, or eating disorders—almost twice the rate of boys. Now that’s scary!

It was very hard not having a history with everyone else. I was an outsider. But what I did have was soccer. Wherever I went, I knew that I could fit in with the soccer ball. The soccer team meant a familiar place and immediate friends for me. I could express myself on the field. Playing hard helped to get rid of all my nervousness. Girls who play sports and are physically active are more likely to feel good about themselves. And that goes for all kinds of physical activities, from yoga to basketball.

Even today, I am not confident all the time. I still think about getting people to like me. When I start feeling like that, I just call my mom or sister or a friend and talk about it. Or I’ll do things that make me feel good, like exercising, cooking, or reading.

There are always going to be things that make you nervous and uncertain. That’s life. And even in my lucky life, I still have those feelings—at the beginning of the new sports season, when meeting new people, or making important decisions. I keep a small, core group of really good friends. Most have been my teammates for years. We have shared a lot together. They have seen the good, the bad, and the ugly sides of me, and they still accept me. They have taught me that it’s how you treat others that makes you valuable in life. I guess I have history with friends now.

Throughout our lives, our self-esteem goes down when we feel like a failure, and it goes up when we feel successful. Doing something well, being praised, and feeling loved goes a long way. We all need to explore opportunities where we can be good at something and feel good about ourselves. Physical activity and sport participation is a terrific way to build up your sense of self-confidence and self-worth. You get to set goals for yourself, you get challenged, you feel good about your accomplishments, and you learn that after today’s failure—there’s tomorrow’s chance. ■

*Mia Hamm (previous page) celebrates a teammate’s goal in the last game of her professional career, December 9, 2004, against the Mexico women’s national team. (below) Mia goes for the ball in a game against Germany during a semifinal match of the 2004 Olympic Games. (© AP/WWP)*

