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GIRLS ON THE RUN

Working out their bodies and their minds

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Go, girls, go.

There's a lot of muscle-flexing going on at the track at McAlpine Elementary School these days. And running is only a part of it.

There's mental training going on, too. That's because the after-school program, Girls On The Run, is as much about building girls' self-esteem as it is about strengthening bodies.

It's a program founded by Charlottean Molly Barker in 1996 and is now in 130 cities. It teaches young girls self-esteem through training for a 5K run.

The 13 girls in McAlpine's after-school program have been meeting twice a week since August to gear up for the Reindeer Romp 5K run on Dec. 9 in Charlotte.

Before they stepped outside to run last Thursday, the girls and their teachers gathered in a classroom, seated in a circle on the carpet. Kelly Crouch, a coach and the school's speech pathologist, held up magazine ads for a talk on images and persuasion. One showed tennis player Serena Williams wearing a milk moustache.

"Look at all the muscles she's got," Crouch said. "Is milk what makes her a good tennis player?"

They want you to believe that, several girls said.

The next ad showed a young boy holding up a box of grits.

He may not have even tried them, one girl said.

The lesson: Don't be swayed by ads trying to tell you how to look, eat or dress. Think for yourself.

"It's teaching her to be an individual, to think on her own," said parent and volunteer Maureen Villa, whose daughter Amy, 9, is in the program.

"She has gifts -- they may not be the same as everyone else's. It's OK to be different."

Then the girls headed outside for a practice run.

Their December 5K goal may have seemed insurmountable in August. But earlier in the week, the girls completed a full run-through of the race distance, then donned tiaras to celebrate their achievement.

Before starting Girls On The Run, fourth-grader Savannah Stancombe didn't like the idea of sprinting around the track. "I'm more of a walking person."

And now what does she think about running?

"It's fun."