

A Lost Sport: Clara Gregory Baer and Newcomb Ball

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This past year, 1995, we celebrated the centennial of volleyball, a sport familiar to all. However, in 1895 there was another game patented by Clara Gregory Baer of Sophie Newcomb College in New Orleans called "Newcomb" that has been virtually ignored by sport historians. Newcomb became a game played by boys and girls, men and women, from 1895 into the 1920s as a competitive tournament sport in recreational leagues, public schools, and colleges. It rivaled the popularity of volleyball into the 1920s,¹ and evidence suggests it may have been the blueprint for William Morgan's game of volleyball. Unfortunately, the only vestiges of the game are found in elementary physical education texts and occasionally in recreational game books, sometimes described correctly and sometimes incorrectly by the authors. This paper investigates the similarities and differences of the two sports, and attempts to answer the following questions: Was Morgan familiar with Baer's Newcomb ball game before he invented volleyball? Did Baer's game of Newcomb influence the development of volleyball? Was volleyball a derivative of Newcomb rather than the modern-day notion that Newcomb evolved as a lead-up game to volleyball? What caused one game to continue its development as a competitive sport to the present day while the other was relegated to a children's game?

William Morgan, the YMCA director at Holyoke, Massachusetts, is credited with inventing the game of volleyball in 1895 to provide light exercise for older businessmen on their lunch hour. Morgan was said to combine elements of tennis and handball in developing his game, and simply substituted the hand for the racquet. He raised the net to over six feet, and disallowed players from moving within four feet of the net. Although the game was first publicly presented at a YMCA sports conference in 1895, the first published account of his game did not appear until July 1896 in the *Springfield Journal*.²

1. Dale A. Somers, *The Rise of Sport in New Orleans, 1850-1900* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972).

2. Morgan first called his game, *Minonette*. See Deobold Van Dalen and Bruce Bennett, *A World History of Physical Education*, 2nd ed. (New York: Prentice Hall, 1971); Betty Spears and Richard Swanson, *History of Sport and Physical Education in the United States*, 3rd ed. (Dubuque, IA: Wm. C. Brown, 1988).



Clara Gregory Baer, a stalwart for physical education and sport for women.

Volleyball was one of the few sports born in the United States and one that was played early on by women as well as men. "Newcomb," a game that became a physical education gymnasium activity, a playground game, and developed early in the twentieth century into a competitive class and varsity sport for boys and girls, men and women, received little recognition after the half-century. However, Newcomb, like volleyball, is unique because it originated in America, was invented by a woman, followed basketball as the second team sport to be played by women, and became one of the early "lead-up" games taught in physical education classes. Even though the founding dates and the rules of the two games are very similar, it may be impossible to determine if a connection existed between Newcomb and volleyball, as there is apparently no evidence of interaction between William Morgan of Massachusetts and Clara Gregory Baer of Newcomb College in New Orleans, Louisiana. The coincidences are so evident, however, that it causes one to ponder the points of origin for each game and the resulting influence each could have had on the other.

William Morgan was director of the YMCA at Holyoke, Massachusetts, but there is little written about him in the general physical education or sport history texts that give him much prominence except as the inventor of the game of volleyball. Clara Gregory Baer's many accomplishments have only been brought to light over the past decade, but her outstanding contributions to Southern and national sport and physical education are still often overlooked in general sport and physical education history books.³

Clara Gregory Baer was educated in Boston at the Boston School of Expression, the Emerson School of Oratory, and the Nils Posse Normal School of Physical Education. Rather than accept a position offered at the Boston School of Oratory, Baer returned to her native city of New Orleans in the fall of 1891 because of family matters, and to take the position of Women's Gymnastics Director at the Southern Athletic Club.⁴ This prestigious, male-only club had opened its doors a few hours a week in 1889 to the female relatives of its members. The sisters, daughters, and wives of members of the club apparently showed little enthusiasm for gymnastics before Baer's arrival, and reportedly

3. For more information on Clara Gregory Baer's life and contributor to physical education and sport, see Joan Paul, "Clara Gregory Baer: Harbinger of Southern Physical Education," *Research Quarterly for Exercise & Sport*, Special Centennial Issue (April 1985), 46-55; Joan Paul, "Catalyst for Women's Basketball," in Joan S. Hult and Marianna Trekkell, Eds., *A Century of Women's Basketball: From Frailty to Final Four* (Reston, VA: American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance, 1991): 37-52; Joan Paul, "H. Sophie Newcomb Memorial College. The South's First Preparatory School for Physical Education," *JOPERD* 65 (March 1994): 53-56.

4. Baer's father lived in New Orleans and was probably in poor health, as he died in 1894. Clara Baer was also 28 years old and was mature enough to assume responsibilities that a younger woman might have refused; Clara G. Baer, "To the Posse Gymnasium Club, Boston, Mass.," *The Posse Gymnasium Journal* 1 (December, 1892): 5-7. In earlier works it was reported that Baer was lured back to New Orleans to take a newly created position to teach physical education at the Sophie Newcomb Memorial College which had opened for students in 1887. However, new evidence indicates that after Baer began her work in New Orleans at the Southern Athletic Club, it was she who visited and convinced Brandt V.B. Dixon, Newcomb College President, that physical education should have a place in the college's curriculum. She was hired in October of 1891 as an instructor and taught a few hours a week in the 1891-92 academic year. In the fall of 1892 she was given the title of Director of Physical Education, and her subject was made a regular part of the college.

preferred gossip to physical activity. The officers of the Southern Athletic Club believed women would show a greater interest in gymnastics if they had a qualified, same-sex instructor to teach and encourage them, and apparently this was correct. Baer did motivate the women to excel in Swedish gymnastics and in playing her games of basketball and Newcomb. It was also in the fall of 1891 that she secured a job teaching gymnastics at the newly formed Sophie Newcomb Memorial College where she taught until her retirement in 1929 as Professor Emeritus.⁵

Baer received a number of prestigious teaching offers at other institutions during her years at Newcomb College. For example, some six months after Baron Nils Posse's sudden death in December 1895, Baer was asked to return to Boston to take charge of the Education and Normal Departments of the Posse Normal School.⁶ However, after giving the decision much thought, she decided to remain in New Orleans where she taught her progressive ideas about education and sport for women through summer positions at the Louisiana Chautauqua, Louisiana Educational Institute, and Monteagle, Tennessee, Summer School of Higher Physical Culture. During the regular school year, she taught evenings at the Southern Athletic Club and held gymnastic classes for local professional women. Although summers, vacations, and evenings were usually spent in additional teaching activities, she never shirked her duties at Sophie Newcomb College as shown by her promotion to a full professorship in 1899. She also made her ideas public by presenting papers at national conventions and publishing in professional journals. Baer, because of her teaching, writing, speaking engagements, and the invention and promotion of her games, was recognized as the foremost Southern pioneer in physical education and sport for women by the time she retired in 1929.

Even though it was the position of Director of the Ladies' Class at the Southern Athletic Club that caused Baer to return to New Orleans, it was her establishment of a program of physical education and sport at the newly formed Sophie Newcomb Memorial College that should ensure her a place in history. She began the South's first certification program for physical education in 1893, instituted the first four-year physical education program leading to the bachelor's degree in the South in 1907, successfully worked to get the second compulsory physical education law in the nation passed in Louisiana in 1894, published the first rules for women's basketball in the United States in 1895, introduced basketball to the South, and was the first woman to invent a game that became a varsity sport at the school and college levels. This sport, which she titled "Newcomb" for the college where it originated, is still taught in physical education classes and played by children recreationally throughout the United States.⁷

5. Sophie Newcomb Memorial College, a coordinate college of Tulane University and the first such college to grant a bachelor's degree in the United States, was founded in 1886 and opened its doors to "white female" students in the fall of 1887.

6. Clara Gregory Baer, letter to Robert Sharpe (Tulane University president), 5 February 1916, Tulane Archives. New Orleans, Louisiana. (This letter contained Baer's Vita, 1890-1916.)

7. Because her hall game was named for Newcomb College, the title was always capitalized.

The game of Newcomb and Baer's personal history in physical education followed similar patterns. From the mid-1890s into the 1920s Baer was one of the best known women physical educators in the South and gained recognition for her work from the deep South to the far northeast corners of the United States.⁸ She served as an active member in the American Association for the Advancement of Physical Education (later the American Physical Education Association), the National Education Association, the National Playground Association, the Physical Education Department of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, and the American Posture League.⁹ However, after the demise of her early major's degree program in physical education in 1925 and then her retirement in 1929 when physical education was still considered a neophyte profession by the educational community, Baer became only a vestige of history herself.¹⁰ Newcomb, little recognized as a competitive sport today, became widely popular throughout the United States during these years. A number of states required Newcomb in their school curricula for several decades, but it, too, became a victim of its time and usefulness.¹¹ Apparently by the late 1930s except at colleges such as Sophie Newcomb, it was relegated to a lead-up game in schools and as a recreational activity for children.¹²

The reasons for inventing the games of Newcomb and volleyball were similar, yet different. Morgan's motivation was to provide exercise for older businessmen while Clara Baer's reasons were to provide activity and skill development for young women who had limited opportunity to engage in sport or receive strenuous exercise. Her immediate and specific objective was to develop a game that allowed her Newcomb College students to practice their ball-handling skills for basketball while waiting for the arrival of goals ordered from Narragansett Mfg. Company. Since Baer first introduced her students to basketball in 1893 and even wrote an unpublished rules guide for women's basketball that year, it is apparent that Newcomb was invented during the 1893-94 academic year.¹³ The game originated when Baer divided her students into two equal teams and placed them facing each other in her small gymnasium. The object of her new game was for one team to throw the ball into the other team's area, attempting to throw it with such direction and force that it caused

8. Baer, in capacities as convention speaker, officer in professional organizations, and committee work, had personal relationships with the likes of Dudley Sargent, Amy Moms Homans, William Anderson, Luther Gulick, Delphine Hanna, Clark Hetherington, Ethel Perrin, Jay Seaver, and others.

9. Baer, letter to Robert Sharpe, 5 February 1916.

10. Physical education in the South probably received even less recognition than programs elsewhere in the nation. For example, even in Dorothy S. Ainsworth, *The History of Physical Education in Colleges for Women* (New York: A.S. Barnes & Company, 1930), not one woman's college in the South is included. This appears typical of most early writings concerning women and physical education.

11. Baer said that Newcomb was a required part of the course of physical education in many states, and "notably the State of Michigan." See Baer, Letter to Robert Sharp, 1916.

12. After Miss Baer's death, Dean Pierce Butler wrote the Carnegie Foundation a statement to be used in their death notice that mentioned her development of basketball and Newcomb and told how both were still being played there. Statement in scrapbook, 27 January 1938, Tulane Archives.

13. Clara Gregory Baer, "The History of the Development of Physical Education at Newcomb College." National Education Association (1914): 701-4.

the ball to hit the floor without being caught. She called this a “touchdown,” and it scored one point for the throwing team. Baer found that this game not only taught throwing and catching skills useful to playing basketball, but she was also impressed with how the game accommodated up to 40 students playing at once, required minimum equipment, and generated great enthusiasm in her students.

Even after the basketball goals arrived, Baer continued to teach her new game as part of the sports’ curriculum, and it remained a required part of the Newcomb College sport activities through the 1930s and perhaps beyond.¹⁴ In March of 1895, Baer published an article in a national journal describing her new sport, “Newcomb.” One month later she demonstrated the game at the invitation of Jay W. Seaver at the American Association for the Advancement of Physical Education Conference, and it was said to have been met with “hearty approval,”¹⁵ A few months later, Baer read an “enthusiastic description of ‘Newcomb’ in the Boys’ Department of *Harper’s Weekly*” and decided she should officially publish and copyright her rules. In December of 1895, Baer published her rules for Newcomb along with her original basketball rules called *Newcomb and Basquette: Games for the Gymnasium*.¹⁶

The first published rules of Newcomb listed only 10, with the major objective still being to score touchdowns by throwing the ball so that it hit the ground or floor on the opponent’s side of the court. The only two ways a team could earn points in Newcomb were by scoring a touchdown or by a team committing fouls. Fouls were called when players stepped inside the “bases” during play (bases were areas seven feet on either side of a center line painted on the floor across the middle of the court), fell down when catching a ball, threw the ball while on the knees, kicked the ball, or threw the ball so that it landed out of bounds or in the “base” area. The ball was put into play to begin the game and after each foul by a referee throwing the ball up in the base area directly between the captains, referred to as “centers.” The ball was tapped back to one of the captain’s players, the captains then returned to their respective court areas, and the game was officially begun by a throw to the other side upon the signal from the referee. The game apparently called for no net or rope in its earliest days.¹⁷ The number of players could vary from eight to 20 members playing on a side, and recommended court size depended on the age and sex of the students playing the game.

14. *The Tulane University Catalogues, 1885-1930*. (Some of these catalogues are entitled *The Bulletin of the Tulane University of Louisiana, The H. Sophie Newcomb Memorial College for Women*.) Tulane University Archives.

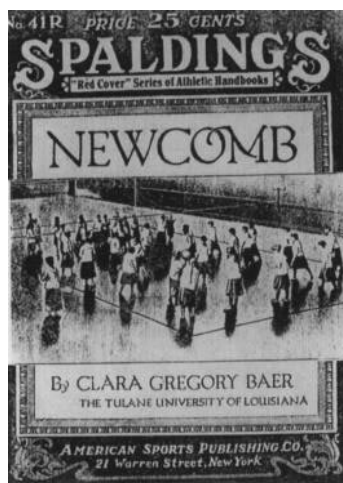
15. Seaver was president of the AAPE when he issued the invitation to Clara Baer. This statement about the *Harper’s Weekly* article was in the introduction of Clara G. Baer, *Newcomb: A Game for Gymnasium and Playground* (New Orleans, La.: Tulane University, 1913).

16. Clara Gregory Baer, *Newcomb and Basquette: Games for the Gymnasium* (New Orleans: L. Graham & Son. LTD., Publishers, 1895). She registered later editions of her rules in 1911, [9]3, and 1914. Letter to Joan Paul from Maine L. Marshall, Senior Certification Specialist, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., August 1983.

17. Because no rope or net was used to divide the court, it is logical that a “bare” area was necessary to keep the players from getting too near the opponents before throwing the ball.

The last set of Newcomb rules published by Baer in 1914, had 14 rules with 79 sections.¹⁸ By this time, through an agreement with A.G. Spalding & Bros., the company marketed an official Newcomb ball and a “Newcomb Outfit” apparatus that consisted of a rope and wall-posts.¹⁹ The apparatus allowed for the rope divider to be raised to a height of eight feet for boys’ and college teams, and lowered to six feet for females. Baer’s match play rules now limited players from six to 12 on a side as long as both teams agreed on the number at least a week prior to the game. The rules permitted from 10 to 20 to play on recreational playground teams. The game was now divided into two 15-minute halves with a lo-minute intermission. Although the objective

of Newcomb remained the same, winning points through scoring touchdowns, the rules by 1914 were more descriptive and specific. One reason for greater elaboration in her later rules was that Newcomb was being adapted by various groups as it spread across the country and Baer wanted more uniformity practiced in her game. Two new rules were added that made the game more consistent with her unique Newcomb College basketball rules and illustrate Baer’s intent of using Newcomb to bolster her students’ basketball skills. First, thrown balls were restricted to one hand or a foul was called, just as two-handed basketball shots or passes were declared fouls in Baer’s rules. Nils Posse, Baer’s teacher at the Posse Normal School. taught his students that when two hands were used for throwing, it



Newcomb joins Spalding’s list of recognized sports in 1914.

compressed the chest and interfered with breathing.?” The second rule change was to score a point for each foul and to award the ball to the team fouled rather than taking the ball back to the center base area for a jump ball between captains. This practice of awarding points for fouls committed was also identical to the rule she used in basketball.

A national Newcomb game advisory committee was appointed by Baer around 1911 which included Baroness Rose Posse, President of the Posse Normal School of Gymnastics, Boston, Massachusetts; Miss Ethel Perrin,

18. Clara G. Baer, *Newcomb: A Game for Gymnasium and Playground*, “Spalding Red Cover” Series of Athletic Handbooks (No. 41R, New York: American Sports Publishing Company, 1914).

19. “Picture out of our Past.” New Orleans *Times-Picayune* (27 Nov. 1960), np. Tulane Archives. The original write-up was from A.G. Spalding & Bros., Chicopee, Mass., catalog, and it pictured the game of Newcomb in progress with approximately 40 young women on the court at once. The price of the Newcomb posts sold for \$20 a pair, and the ball for \$6.

20. Baron Nils Posse, *Swedish System of Educational Gymnastics*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1896).

Supervisor of Physical Training, Detroit Public Schools; Mrs. Fannie Cheever Burton, Associate Professor of Physical Education, State Normal College, Ypsilanti, Michigan; Miss Mary Ida Mann, Instructor, Department of Hygiene and Physical Education, University of Chicago; John E. Lombard, Director of Physical Training, New Orleans Public Schools; and Otto F. Monahan, Physical Director, The Hotchkiss School, Lakeville, Connecticut. In her last set of rules published in 1914, there are pictures of boys' and girls' park and playground teams, interclass high school and college women's teams, and interscholastic and intercollegiate men's teams from Louisiana, Massachusetts, Oklahoma, Ohio, Michigan, Tennessee, New York, New Jersey, and Kansas. This gives some indication of the national popularity of the game, and provides evidence that the sport was played across the country by both sexes.

In reflecting on the origins of the two similar games, volleyball and Newcomb, there are several obvious societal factors that influenced their development, but there are also the unanswered questions about their similarities. Both games were developed for specific purposes and were products of the times. The 1890s was a period when industrialization was driving Americans away from agrarian lifestyles into urban centers, with males in particular occupying jobs of a more sedentary nature. William Morgan recognized the need for businessmen to have opportunities for needed exercise that their jobs no longer provided, and his game of volleyball could meet that purpose. It could be played indoors, was mild enough to be played without the exhaustion caused by a strenuous game such as basketball, and it accommodated a fairly large number of men in a small space.

Women's sport was being introduced into colleges across the United States in the 1890s, but rather than being promoted along competitive lines like men's sport, it was advocated for women because of health and social benefits. Baer had been a sickly child and had been encouraged to participate in "tomboyish" games which may have led to the importance she attached to girls and women engaging in healthful games and sport. Newcomb was seen by Baer as a healthful exercise and an excellent way to teach ball-handling skills for basketball. Newcomb was never intended as a lead-up game for volleyball as many physical educators through the years have assumed, nor was Newcomb a by-product of volleyball as is commonly thought.

So what are the facts that suggest a relationship between the inventions of the two games? Was William J. Morgan familiar with Baer's game of Newcomb before he invented his game, and if so, did it influence him in the development of volleyball? It seems impossible for him not to have known about Newcomb prior to developing volleyball. First, Baer apparently invented her game of Newcomb almost two years before Morgan invented volleyball. In addition, she published an article describing the game in a national journal, presented a program demonstration of the game at a national convention of which Morgan was a member, and published her rules a year earlier than Morgan published his rules of volleyball.²¹ Was it likely that Morgan was influenced by Baer?

Similarities of the early volleyball rules to Newcomb rules are obvious. Both games provided for a “dead” area on either side of the center line in which players could not enter. Baer called this area the “base” area while Morgan referred to it as a “neutral” area.²² Both games provided for gender and age factors in determining court size, number of team participants, and net or rope height. The most cogent similarity was the purpose of both games, and the most differentiating feature was how that purpose was accomplished. In both games, players attempted to make the ball strike the floor before being played by the opponents, while the major difference in the games was in the throwing and catching of the ball in Newcomb and batting the ball back and forth in volleyball.

The last question may be the easiest to answer. What caused one game to continue its development as a competitive sport to the present day while the other was relegated to a children’s game? The perceived cultural differences in gender needs and expectations in the 1890s would account for the more difficult skills of striking being considered more appropriate for males than females. Women had team sport opportunities only in basketball in the 1890s prior to the invention of Newcomb, while men since the 1850s had engaged competitively in sports such as football, cricket, and baseball. Throwing and catching were basic skills that most men had long mastered, but skills which would have been considered most necessary for females to learn if they were to play basketball or other sports. It was the elementary versus the more difficult skills that separated the games of Newcomb and volleyball in their early formation, and it was this difference that accounted for the demise of one game and the subsequent growth in popularity of the other. Perhaps another explanation was that Newcomb was invented by a woman and played first by females, thus stereotyping the game as “feminine.” Tennis suffered similar problems in being accepted by males during its first several decades in the United States because it was brought to America by a woman and played from the beginning by women. Tennis called for greater skill and vigor than Newcomb and overcame the possible “female” or “sissy” stigma, while Newcomb undoubtedly could not.

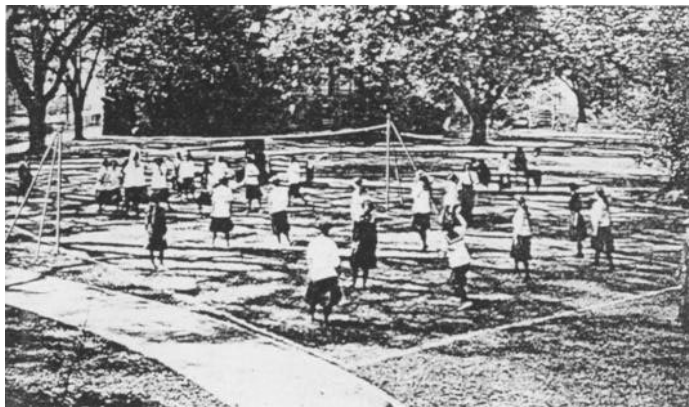
Whether Morgan used Baer’s ideas to create his own game may never be known, but it is important to contemplate. Apparently the similarity of the games was not such a bother to Baer that it caused her to deal with it publicly.” She never suggested in any of her articles or presentations that volleyball was a plagiarized version of her game. However, there is some indication that she was

21. See Clara G. Baer, “The ‘Newcomb’: A Substitute for Basket Ball.” *The Posse Gymnasium Journal*, Baroness Rose Posse, Ed., III (Boston, Mass.: Posse Gymnasium Club, Publisher, March 1895). pp. 8-9. In this article, Baer explains how the game was an outgrowth from the demand of her students to be initiated into ball-handling for basketball while they waited on their goals to arrive.

22. This may be the most telling similarity. Baer’s earliest Newcomb rules called for the “dead” area because there was no net to prevent a player from throwing the ball directly at a close opponent. Since volleyball made use of a net from the beginning, there appears to be no practical reason to require a similar neutral zone.

23. It did bother Baer that Senda Berenson was given credit for the first rules published for women’s basketball when hers had been published six years earlier. She made it clear that she was first in her article. “History of the Development of Physical Education at Newcomb College,” 701-704.

not particularly receptive to volleyball. Uncharacteristically for this progressive woman, she failed to include the sport in her Newcomb College curriculum until the 1923-24 school year even though volleyball had been a well-known sport for almost 30 years. Baer included sports such as tennis, field hockey, archery, croquet, track & field, and even baseball early on in the century, but did not include volleyball which was being played as a popular woman's sport in other colleges around the country. When volleyball entered the Newcomb College curriculum, Baer was 60 years old and had assumed greater teaching responsibility in the "scientific and theoretical" work at the college. In fact, in the 1920s Baer had turned over most of the responsibility for the sports program at Newcomb College to Florence Smith, a young instructor.²⁴ Perhaps because her original game of Basquette was a version of Naismith's basketball game, Baer believed it was legitimate for games to be patterned after one created for the opposite sex provided that skills were appropriately modified.²⁵ Regardless of whether Morgan took Baer's ideas to create his game or they both independently and coincidentally developed their games with no knowledge of the other's, it is important that the game of Newcomb and its inventor, Clara Gregory Baer, be acknowledged just as William J. Morgan and volleyball were recognized in reaching the centennial year. It is important, too, that the "lost sport" of Newcomb and Baer are recognized, not only because they are deserving, but because of the dearth of historical information on women's contributions to sport and physical education.



Although intercollegiate athletics were never allowed at Newcomb College during Baer's tenure, the game of Newcomb was played competitively in class matches and at Field Days.

24. Gail Moody, "Newcomb Physical Education: A Sport for Every Girl: Every Girl in a Sport" (Unpublished paper, Southeastern Louisiana University, 1985). In her article based on Newcomb College catalogs and interviews with Florence Smith shortly before her death. A unit in volleyball was put in during the 1923-24 year usually following the Newcomb unit. Volleyball also became one of their intramural activities that year.

25. Baer wrote James Naismith and asked his permission before she published her first set of rules on basketball for women in 1895. He mistakenly gave credit to Baer for the three-court game that subsequently developed in women's basketball, but that rule variation should be attributed to Senda Berenson. See James Naismith, *Basketball: Its Origins and Development* (New York: Associated Press, 1941).