
Incarcerated Sport: Nisei Women's Softball and Athletics During Japanese American Internment[†]

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Hearts and morale were low as the 120,000-plus residents of Japanese ancestry poured into the ten internment camps the federal government had, in the spring of 1942, hastily constructed so as to incarcerate them for the duration of the war. Only a few months earlier on December 7, 1941, the Japanese had bombed the Pearl Harbor naval base in Hawaii and launched the United States into its second world war of the century. The attack also ignited a movement by Pacific coast military leaders and nativists to evacuate what they believed to be potential saboteurs, largely those of Japanese descent. In February 1942, they got their wish when President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed into action Executive Order 9066, which mandated the removal of the Japanese from their West Coast homes and into internment centers located in some of the most desolate spots in the land.

In this bleak atmosphere, women's softball programs emerged as one of the most popular recreational activities in the camps. Like their male counterparts, young Nisei women sought to temper the crisis through sport and exercise. And, as a result, they organized clubs and leagues in each of the sixteen assembly centers and ten camps. Women's softball also illuminated the changing role of the Nisei female within the family structure resulting from internment. Housewives in the preinternment era, women during the camp era joined the work force that saw their wages and opportunities on par with their husbands. And, in some cases, they became the leading wage earners for their families. Women also took the lead in creating sports programs for themselves and, at times, were the featured athletes in their respective camps.¹ Their athletic competitive spirit, however, did not begin while interned, but carried over from the community life that had existed long before Pearl Harbor had gained its infamous notoriety.

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Since the Japanese had first appeared on the West Coast in the 1890s community building was an essential part of their growth. Throughout the west, both in the urban and agricultural sectors, their presence grew. Between 1900 and 1910, for instance, their population in the contiguous United States increased from 24,326 to 72,157. By the eve of the second world war, 126,948 Japanese appeared in the census scrolls. Yet, though their presence represented a scant 0.09% of the population, and only 1.2% of those who lived in the Pacific Coast region, cries of a “yellow peril” were, nonetheless, heard from those who viewed the Japanese as a threat to the status quo.² The influence of the xenophobes was such that they were able to push through several state and federal measures designed to minimize and eventually eliminate Japanese migration to the United States mainland.

The Japanese, however, were hardly docile in their determination to remain and grow. Turning inward, they formed agricultural colonies, pooled their assets, and created urban associations, such as the Japanese Association of America, in an effort to protect their interests. As the largely male first generation Issei established their roots in American soil, many summoned their “picture brides”—marriages by proxy which took place in Japan and prior to which the newlyweds had seen each other only through photographs—to North America and, subsequently, produced offspring. Born largely during the second and third decades of the twentieth century, the second generation Nisei grew up torn between their Japanese heritage and American nationality. At times, this schism manifested in family turbulence between themselves and their Japanese-born parents. Consequently, they lived a duplicitous life that held few bridges. “It’s a wonder we aren’t all schizo’s [sic],” claimed one female Nisei. “Our parents were always telling us to be ‘good Japanese.’ Then they’d turn right around and tell us to be ‘good Americans.’”³ One of the few arenas in both cultural imperatives could be satisfied was, however, competitive sport.

The ambitious Japanese in America loved competition. Some traced this competitive spirit to their samurai roots, while others suggested that the forefathers of the Meiji Restoration initiated this sense of drive. Clearly, however, Issei travelers of the late 1890s, many of whom had little time for recreation during their years in Japan, adopted baseball, for instance, during their stay in Hawaii. By the time they reached the North American mainland, recreation held an important seat in their communities. As the Japanese population increased, male-oriented athletic clubs popped up in many of their urban neighborhoods. In certain instances, associations like the Asahis and Nippons in the Seattle region not only developed intense rivalries in everything from kendo to football, but also were the centerpiece of attention among the Issei in that city.⁴

Although, unfortunately, no prominent record of Issei women’s sport in this early era exists, they formed small social clubs to provide various activities for enjoyment. For instance, in Los Angeles, young Issei women created the Young Women’s Christian Union (YWCU) in 1920. Affiliated with the larger Young Women’s Christian Association, not only did Issei women participate in such activities as dance, flower arrangement, and cooking, but their daughters also joined many of the same programs. Divided into various age groups from junior high school to junior college level students, group coordinators taught the girls “to study Japanese and American culture, [and] do their part in the line of service to the [Japanese American] community...”⁵ Grounded in the desire to advance personal virtues and cultural unity, clubs like the Japanese “Y,” stated D. Margaret Costa,

“built on the interlocking themes of sport, leadership development, charitable undertakings and cultural involvement, as well as providing Nisei women with a sense of identity and empowerment.”⁶

As the Nisei reached young adulthood, sport activities in their communities matured and expanded; by the mid-1930s, they occurred on a year-round basis. Indeed, throughout other Japanese American enclaves, athletic activities increased. Driven by a desire to both advance the assimilation of their children and to strengthen community ties, Issei elders organized athletic programs through their Buddhist, Christian, and Methodist churches, Gakuean language schools, and even urban presses like the Los Angeles *Rafu Shimpo* and San Francisco *Nichi Bei*. Additionally, Nisei assimilationists such as Seattle's James Sakamoto, a founding member of the Japanese American Citizen's League (JACL) and publisher of that town's Japanese American *Courier*, sponsored elaborate leagues and tournaments that attracted not only Nisei athletes from the urban areas, but those throughout the Pacific Northwest. The 1930s represented the Golden Age of sport for all Japanese Americans as activities such as baseball, basketball, football enjoyed great popularity.

Moreover, this expansion of athletic functions crossed gender lines. As early as 1931, the *Rafu Shimpo* promoted the value of sport for women to its Los Angeles readers. “More Japanese girls are encouraged to go out for sports...” claimed the daily. “[Sport] also helps [them] to be well and healthy.”⁷ Young women of the 1930s actively pursued competitive sport such as basketball, ping pong, softball, tennis, handball and volleyball. Additionally, their religious institutions, community service organizations, and various merchants sponsored women's teams throughout the year. In 1935, in the Los Angeles region, the Women's Athletic Union—a descendent of the Southern California Women's Basketball League—expanded its operations and served as the governing body for amateur female athletics in that area. Further, given the softball craze of that period, Nisei female teams undoubtedly competed against similar clubs representing women from Mexican, black, and Chinese neighborhoods.⁸

Women's softball, in particular, was, by the mid-1930s in the midst of a euphoria, especially in the American west. Ironically, the Depression contributed to the expansion of that sport. In an attempt to temper unemployment, New Deal policies, such as those of the Works Progress Administration, led to the construction of approximately 8,000 parks across the country. Lights illuminating these playgrounds allowed for night softball contests during the week. As a result, some 1,000 women's teams were formed in Los Angeles alone.⁹ Moreover, parents of that era viewed softball “as a viable means of building social and ethical character among girls during a period of time when such training was viewed [as being] necessary.”¹⁰ *Collier's* magazine in 1938 reported that “as many as thirty thousand fans” attended championship matches at Wrigley Field in Los Angeles.¹¹

Nisei women also participated in the softball euphoria. By 1935 approximately thirteen Japanese clubs participated in southern California's Women's Athletic Union. Three years later, the league increased to twenty teams.¹² In other regions, such as Seattle, where the *Japanese American Courier* promoted amateur sport among its constituents, similar numbers there suggested that the same magnetism seen in Los Angeles also held true for their Pacific Northwest counterparts. And in Portland, Oregon, the Nisei women there, too, “all trained hard and played to win.”¹³ In a time of innocence, their softball activities

offered the players a degree of independence from their often sheltered existence and, though they received little overall coverage in the various Japanese American dailies, their games attracted family, friends, and neighborhood sport “junkies” who sought mid-to-late afternoon free weekend entertainment during an economically depressed era. Though they did not travel the vast regions as did their male counterparts, plenty of competition existed not only within the sphere of their own communities, but on the outside as well with teams from other ethnic enclaves.¹⁴ In a period that saw meager wages for some and unemployment for many in the world outside of the playground, Japanese Americans playfields and gymnasiums in the 1930s portrayed anything but a bleak picture. Their woman’s softball ventures, played in the comfort of summer evenings or after-church Sunday afternoons, formed a large part of this important activity.

Toward the end of 1941, as war clouds intensified between Japan and the United States, so, too, did the concerns of America’s Japanese population, particularly those who resided on the West Coast. “Our properties would be confiscated and most likely [we would] be herded into prison camps,” predicted one Nisei student at the University of California at Berkeley. Events which followed the raid at Pearl Harbor, confirmed his once dire prophecy.¹⁵ In the ensuing weeks, government agents saturated Japanese neighborhoods, prowling for evidence of suspected sabotage. Meanwhile, West Coast columnists fed fuel to the long-time “yellow peril” theory as nativists fortified their fears in the belief that a “Fifth Column” operated on American soil. Partially in an effort to pacify western xenophobes, Roosevelt signed the proclamation which gave West Coast military authorities a virtual *carte blanche* to evacuate all suspected “enemy aliens” and other potential threats to national security from areas deemed “military sensitive”—that is, the entire West Coast. In effect, the order led to the internment of Japanese Americans. Initially sent to hundreds of assembly “holding centers” (some given only 48 hours to evacuate), the evacuees were eventually parceled out to ten internment camps situated across America’s most desolate regions. Once there, they attempted to reconstruct all aspects of their lives, including their sporting lives as they remembered them from their recent days of freedom.

Indeed, teams and programs carried over from their prewar existence. At the Merced Assembly Center in central California, for instance, it was not difficult to gather participants and begin an athletic program following evacuation. Nisei organizers put up signs and posted them throughout the camp to call out to women and men who wanted to compete in any number of games. As camp leaders, most if not all of them affiliated with the various JACLs from their home areas, trumpeted the call for sport, entire teams, many of them having formed in the years prior to the bombing of Pearl Harbor, enthusiastically responded. In less than two weeks following their May 13, 1942 arrival, softball leagues, with players who for several years had competed against each other in that region, swung into action. Additionally, herded together with groups from outside of their region, such as the San Francisco Bay area, rural-based teams—particularly the women’s clubs who in earlier times never had experienced the opportunity to face competitors beyond their locales—finally here gauged their skills against opponents from the larger urban neighborhoods. “The Livingston-Cortez teams made an impressive showing,” claimed historian Valerie Matsumoto, “...and athletic Cortez Nisei Peggy Taniguchi maintained a reputation for ‘heavy circuit smashing’ on the diamond.”¹⁶ “The grandstands were full of people,”

Peggy (Taniguchi) Yoshimoto recalled years later. "I mean where else could they go?"¹⁷ Short on overall entertainment, camp residents, particularly the older Issei, enjoyed watching both the male and female competitors. In addition, as internees flocked into their respective relocation centers old opponents also reappeared. "One night we ended up playing a team from the Livingston area and I remember them taking one look at me and crying out 'oh no, not her again,'" said Yoshimoto.¹⁸

By the end of the summer, relocation to more long-term facilities took the evacuees from their assembly-center dwellings to one of ten internment camps spread throughout America's most desolate regions. As they settled into their confinements, communities from an earlier era resurrected. Indeed, groups of families who resided as neighbors prior to their internment were again reunited in their "block" housing districts. Each block, consequently, formed its own sets of activities, which ranged from the formulation of political agendas to storytelling sessions. National organizations such as the Girl and Boy Scouts, along with the YMCA and YWCA, also formed in some of the camps.¹⁹ Largely outside of the realm of athletics, among their primary agendas were music, dance, and arts and crafts programs.²⁰ But, as before, competitive sport stood as the camps' most popular activity. In fact, from the outset of their internment, recreational facilities to accommodate all were in demand. For instance, at the Topaz site, once the block council was established, its members requested twelve baseball diamonds and a gymnasium.²¹ The diamonds would also be used for women's softball. In the meantime, barrack facilities served as sites for indoor games, while outdoor ballfields stood at the fringes of the camps. Males largely spearheaded those programs, teams, and leagues in order to accommodate their athletic appetites; but as they had done in earlier times, they did not exclude females in their recreational plans.²² In fact, women's sport played a prominent role in camp life.

Confinement at the relocation centers altered traditional family roles. Guidelines within their clans that restricted their independence and old folkways often "made it difficult" for the Nisei female "to express her strong personal opinions or act in a manner that might call attention to her."²³ But internment created a chemistry that provided a challenge to these rules. For instance, smaller barracks meant fewer household chores for women. Indeed, housewives of two generations often coexisted under one roof. Of this, one young Nisei wife wrote:

Today has been a rather peculiar day. I wonder if it's because I didn't have to wash. Funny how one depends on routine work to pass the day. Mom says it's embarrassing for her to save a tub for me all morning. So she did the wash today.... The day ended, thank goodness.²⁴

Equity in camp wages also interrupted the traditional protocol. The majority of workers, save teachers and doctors, earned \$16 per month. Moreover, as Valerie Matsumoto notes, "the new equity in pay and the variety of available jobs gave many women unprecedented opportunities for experimentation..."²⁵ In effect, Japanese males, in many cases, were no longer the primary wage earners of their families.²⁶ "Because they no longer depended upon [the male] for their daily necessities, family members were more inclined than ever to make independent decisions," said Mei Nakano.²⁷ Matsumoto concurred: "Women's developing sense of independence in the camp environment and their growing awareness of their abilities as workers contributed to their self-confidence..."²⁸ Consequently, as

male prestige evaporated, female independence grew. And, sports, for many, provided the outlets for their growing restlessness.

The War Relocation Authority (WRA) strongly encouraged "American" recreational programs. In fact, a number of camp programs were part of a larger attempt by the WRA to "Americanize" the residents. "We are providing educational opportunities for Americanization not only for the school children but for adults as well," wrote WRA Director Dillon Meyer in a 1944 report to members of Congress.²⁹ As for sport, Myer stated that "The WRA has stressed typically American activities," concluding that "Our efforts to further American-type activities have been highly successful."³⁰ Myer and John Province, his Community Management Chief, even congratulated themselves for having "prodded" the internees to adopt American sports such as baseball and softball. Surprisingly, it did not appear to occur to the directors that those incarcerated were well versed in the methodologies of those sports.³¹

Interestingly, "Americanization" programs were not unusual when it came to immigrants. Linda Borish found that the Educational Alliance, a social welfare agency, in its 1890s efforts to advance the acculturation of Jewish immigrants in New York City's lower East Side, "considered physical training and sporting experiences... to be part of its Americanization mission."³² Similar activity took place in San Francisco during the 1920s and 1930s; Susan Zieff observed that in that city's "increasingly Westernized Chinatown, sport and other physical recreation was used by second generation Chinese Americans to create a place for themselves in American society while preserving aspects of their own culture."³³ In Chicago, as well, a host of institutions from playgrounds to churches "taught the English language to many immigrants and introduced them to American sport forms," stated Gerald R. Gems in his study on Chicago's ethnic women.³⁴ But, as opposed to the aforementioned immigrants, the Nisei whom the federal government hoped to "Americanize" were American-born.³⁵

Raised in prewar neighborhoods in which their elders supported all types of athletic endeavors, Nisei sports enthusiasts wasted little time in forming leagues and arranging contests. Programs and participation varied in each camp, but, like their male counterparts, athletic activity for women often started within weeks after arrival at their respective locations. Announcements in the camp newspapers concerning contests drew communities together and, at times, female competition also made news headlines. As early as November 1942, the *Topaz Times*, for instance, reported a softball contest between a women's "all-star" team and an "old men's" club.³⁶ During that same month, the camp at Rohwer, Arkansas, announced the formation of a women's volleyball league.³⁷ In less than three weeks, following the announcement that called for clubs to represent their respective blocks, a league of ten teams began competition.³⁸

While women's athletic programs formulated, proper facilities and equipment stood in short order. "Initially, the government failed to provide sufficient funding, materials, or space," wrote Alison Wrynn in her study of camp recreation.³⁹ Some internees, in fact, made their own equipment, such as bats, volleyball nets, and basketball rims and backboards. However, at camps located in desert regions wood remained a scarce commodity which forced participants to await the arrival of equipment from outside sources. To say the least, given that gender equity appeared of no concern to camp directors, initially the WRA

forwarded to camps equipment that lent itself to male-oriented sports, such as football and baseball. But in a short time, softballs and volleyball sets began to increase in numbers.⁴⁰ Additionally, sports equipment from which women were the benefactors also came from institutions other than the government. In January 1943, the University of Southern California, for instance, donated to the Poston, Arizona camp a number of gym outfits specifically for their female athletes.⁴¹

Foul weather provided another barrier. Most camps were only partially built when internees arrived. They thus lacked indoor facilities for such sports as basketball and volleyball.⁴² Cold weather in 1942 at Heart Mountain, Wyoming, for example, forced postponement of some basketball leagues while steady rainfall in Arkansas held up the volleyball season there. Finally, athletic programs, like the block councils, were male-dominated.⁴³ Though as a result of their internment circumstances Nisei women came to temper their roles as subordinate to their male counterparts, at the outset of their incarceration the tradition of male authority prevailed. Thus, in most cases, female sports received low priority when the camps opened. Within a year, however, women's athletics, flourished in various camps.

Coverage of women's sports varied in the camp newspapers. For the most part, these reports were limited to announcements of upcoming events and occasional scores. However, papers did print statistics of women's contests and major events such as "championship games," and "all-star" contests. These publications, however, were, in effect, newsletters with general information concerning overall camp activities such as an occasional lecture, information on a newborn, or some news of the war. Hence, that sport received as much attention as it did given the monotony of camp life, is not surprising. Moreover,



Gila River Girls Softball Team, taken by Mori Shimada (February 1943). *Courtesy Japanese American National Museum/Mori Shimada*

popular women athletes among the Japanese Americans received considerable attention. For instance, in May 1943, the Topaz *Times* ran daily announcements on Nisei tennis stars Nebo Shimura and Shuichi Miho prior to their celebrated match later that month. The contest, which had been well publicized as a battle between two stars, drew nearly 500 spectators.⁴⁴ Of course, when it came to women, “well publicized” announcements generally amounted to a series of brief notes. In the case of the Shimura-Miho contest, Topaz writers never wrote more than a single sensationalized line such as “Sports fans will be in for a treat when stars Nebo Shimura and Shuichi Miho have at it on the tennis court.”⁴⁵

Beyond Shimura and Miho, other Nisei women were especially active in athletics at Topaz. Between 1943 and 1945, there were usually twenty softball teams in well-structured leagues during the summers.⁴⁶ Advancing the fame of the women, during softball season the *Times* routinely ran a “Players of the Week” column featuring Maisie Asakawa, Betty Nakaso, Jean Hayashida, and a few others.⁴⁷

Women’s athletic contests at some camps were also social affairs. For the single Nisei women, life in the camps created a far better atmosphere than the “outside” in the quest to win a husband. According to Valerie Matsumoto, “Gone were the restrictions of distance, lack of transportation, interracial uneasiness, and the dawn-to-dusk discomforts of field work.”⁴⁸ Similarly, men who sought suitable mates often attended women’s athletic games. Camp newspapers, moreover, encouraged this activity.⁴⁹ Indeed, any female athletic prowess, as seen through the eyes of male reporters, hence, was of secondary concern. Chief among creating “match-making” ploys was the Manzanar *Free Press*. In one issue, which featured the “Twixteeners” softball club, the columnist informed his young male readers “who are curious and want to know a little more about a certain girl you especially come out and watch” to stay tuned to the upcoming stories.⁵⁰ Indeed, when it came to covering girl’s softball games, *Free Press* writers leaned more towards romantic description in lieu of reporting athletic prowess. Shina “Besame Mucho” Okamoto, the paper reported, was “always trying to sing a love song.”⁵¹ The column later indicated that she had some softball ability. The “cuteness” and “gay smile” of Myro “Infant” Tachibana, the *Free Press* claimed, were major reasons for her club’s success.⁵² Things were such that one column entitled “Inspiration Does It” credited a potential male suitor for one young female player’s success on the diamond. “Did you see that gleam in R.T. of the Wee Necks when a youthful lad smiled at her?” queried the writer. “That is not all, she then stepped up and hit the first pitched ball into right for a triple. Imagine a girl hitting the pill especially for a beau—some news.”⁵³

Nisei male journalists also exhibited their gender bias in many of their reports. Most, if not all, women’s teams were coached by men who received considerable credit for their leadership qualities. In one instance, the *Free Press* reported that the “major reason for [the Wee Necks’] success was coach George ‘Poor-fessor’ Mishima who coached a ‘bunch of stubborn untamed kittens.’” The same article explained that “Roy ‘Pardon my Looks Wada is something of a masculine form for the girls to gaze at when they are behind, giving them the extra something to pull the team to victory.”⁵⁴

As most descriptions of women athletes often centered on their appearance, some were less than complimentary. For instance, the paper painted Susie “Lefty” Morishita as having only “fair looks.”⁵⁵ In addition, an article enticed readers to attend a game to see for

themselves how Sadako "Diesel" Yamashita received her name.⁵⁶ The same column described Ruri "Lulu" Yamshina as being "quite a mischievous damsel... even during the time she is seen on the diamond."⁵⁷ The Poston *Chronicle* also reported that "With four straight wins under their girdles, the 227 girls appear sure shots to win the girls' softball title."⁵⁸

By the middle of 1945 as the Allies closed in on Japan, plans to shut down the camps were already in the works. Basketball, softball, and volleyball games no longer appeared in the papers. As summer came to a close and camps dwindled in size, there occasionally appeared exhibition matches between "old men" softball teams and female opponents. Referred to as the "weaker sex," the Manzanar *Free Press* noted that "The old-timers showed their female opponents that they ain't never too old to get beaten by a bunch of women."⁵⁹

Nisei women, however, pursued competition with great vigor and their commendable talents. In each camp, women's softball teams were in abundance. And had there been better facilities to accommodate indoor sport, female basketball clubs, based on its prewar popularity, would have rivaled softball for attention. Moreover, in selected camps such as Manzanar, where agricultural work furloughs had depleted the male sports programs, women's softball, though played at the outset of their internment there, reached a level of popularity not seen during their days prior to internment. Though proper equipment and sport attire was sparse, their contests drew large crowds and, to an extent, elevated their status as athletes within the enclave. As the Nisei females underwent change within the family structure, so, too, did they see a metamorphosis of their position as sports figures during camp life. Women athletes outside of the barbed wire increased their prominence during the war years. But inside the fences, the role of the Nisei women's softball players was no less important to those who, because of their race, experienced the loss of their constitutional liberties and freedom. Athletics cushioned the trauma of an unjust internment—a point not lost by those incarcerated. "Sports," reported the Manzanar *Free Press*, "is the one thing that will build character, leadership, and sportsmanship."⁶⁰ Though mainstream Americans had, for generations, accepted this philosophy, the Nisei, who competed under the shadow of internment, took "character, leadership, and sportsmanship," to a higher standard.

Furthermore, women's softball was an important component to the morale needed to endure their imprisonment. Their camaraderie on the ball diamond during the prewar era, advanced in importance after they were interned. "I enjoyed playing ball with my friends," stated Peggy (Taniguchi) Yoshimoto of her experience at the Amache camp. And, within the field of play "It was just like the old days."⁶¹ Like ethnic women in other locales for which sport, according to Gerald R. Gems, "bound them together in a common purpose and engendered lifelong friends," that the Nisei softball players bonded in the period before the camps turned out to be an essential factor in maintaining a positive spirit during the most critical phase in the history of their people.⁶² Moreover, softball helped to advance their growing sense of independence and identity. Of equal importance, sport helped to magnify a growing sense of empowerment already seen within their family circles while they lived through internment in America's concentration camps.

In recent years, proponents of women's history and sport history have properly tackled the issue of conceptualization and reassessment of male-dominated scholarship. Sadly, traditional frameworks have provided "only limited insights into women's experiences of

sport and... distorts our understanding of the significance of those experiences.⁶³ But, while a revisionary overhaul of scholarship in this area is warranted, the “limited insights” will remain limited if the outcome of that reassessment continues to produce only Eurocentric perspectives of women’s sport. Long outdated, American social historians have largely abandoned the archaic “east to west” concept of the past. And monographs outlining the contributions of both Latin and Asian women, in particular, are no longer new. Yet, women’s sport historians remain on the outside of this change, for only brief essays and the occasional conference paper presentation containing a wider perspective have appeared in the past decade.

The absence of historical work which feature Pan American and/or Western ethnic women in relationship to sport in the United States also persists.⁶⁴ As such, the call to redefine and expand concepts will ring hollow until a global balance appears in future scholarship. The role of Mexican American or Cuban American women in sports, for instance, will reveal not only much about their communities, but also the cultural roots and gender traditions of societies whose path to the United States was south to north. Studying the history of women athletes from other Asian backgrounds, such as Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese, will provide important revelations from an west to east perspective. Their portrayals will also lend researchers opportunities to explore the Hawaiian arena of sport and that of other Pacific Islanders. Additionally, the experience of Native American women, particularly those from tribes whose homes lay west of the Mississippi River, will advance our knowledge of women’s sport still further. Not only can we possibly learn the importance of athletics in relation to gender within the scope of their traditions, but also how their recreational folkways might have effected and even influenced the Caucasian communities with whom they associated. Yet, until chroniclers of women’s sport challenge the Anglo-American status quo, a large void will remain in the area of study of ethnicity, gender, and sport. This introductory saga of the Nisei women softball players and that of their ethnic roots and community offers one window from which we can view the history of women’s sport from a west to east perspective. By enlarging the focus of this area of study, historians will provide a far more cultural and global balance to the contribution of women’s sport than has heretofore been seen, and, in doing so, greatly expand the understanding of gender’s role within America’s ethnic past.

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1. See D. Margaret Costa, “Nisei Women’s Sports in Southern California.” paper delivered to the North American Society for Sport History (NASSH) conference at Loyola University (Chicago), 26 May 1991. Costa provides an excellent overview of Nisei women athletes and their relationship to the Los Angeles Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA), Buddhist and Episcopalian Methodist Churches. She also provides evidence of Issei mothers who contributed to the formation of athletic activities in affiliation with the aforementioned institutions. Also, several camp newspapers touted the female athletes in their midst. The *El Joaquin* (Stockton, CA Assembly Center), for instance, made a point to include features on the “Busy Bees,” a women’s basketball club which had a national reputation in the California amateur circuit prior to the internment period. *El Joaquin*, 8 Aug. 1942.
 2. Roger Daniels, *Asian America: Chinese and Japanese in the United States Since 1850* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988), 115; Roger Daniels, *Concentration Camps, U.S.A.: Japanese Americans and World War II* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1972); and Audrie Girdner and Anne Loftis, *The Great Betrayal: The Evacuation of the Japanese-Americans During World War II* (New York:

- Macmillan, 1969) form an essential foundation for those who plan further study of any aspect of the internment of the Japanese.
3. Mei Nakano, *Japanese American Women: Three Generations 1890-1990* (Berkeley, CA: Mina Press, 1990), 105.
 4. Samuel O. Regalado, "Play Ball!" Baseball and Seattle's Japanese-American Courier League, 1928-1941," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 87 (1): 31-32 (Winter 1995-96).
 5. D. Margaret Costa, "Nisei Women's Sports."
 6. Ibid. A few years earlier, the Young Women's Hebrew Association in New York City's lower East Side launched similar programs for girls in their community. See Linda J. Borish, "Athletic Activities of Various Kinds: Physical Health and Sport Programs for Jewish American Women," *Journal of Sport History* 26 (2): 240-70 (Summer 1999). For additional analysis regarding the Young Women's Christian Association impact on other Asian groups, see Susan G. Zieff, "From Badminton to the Bolero: Sport and Recreation in San Francisco's Chinatown, 1895-1950," *Journal of Sport History* 27 (1): 1-29 (Spring 2000).
 7. *Rafu Shimpo* [Los Angeles], 22 May 1931.
 8. During the Depression, apart from the occasional small column, Japanese American newspapers in the large West Coast urban areas rarely gave much attention to women's sport. However, male teams often competed against opponents from other ethnic enclaves. Hence, speculation that women's clubs, too, competed against their ethnic counterparts, particularly in cities like Los Angeles where many ethnic neighborhoods were in close proximity with each other, is not far-fetched. *La Opinión*, the Los Angeles-based Spanish language daily, provided evidence of this in a 1938 article which featured a Mexican American team called "Las Señoritas de Glendale." The paper reported their entry into a league whereby several of the municipalities listed were those in which the demographics, at that time, consisted of those groups listed in the text. *La Opinión*, 1938 (exact day and month not listed). Similar encounters also took place in San Francisco. See Susan G. Zieff, "From Badminton to the Bolero," pp. 11-16.
 9. Merrie A. Fidler, "The Establishment of Softball as a Sport for American Women, 1900-1940," in ed. Reet Howell, *Her Story in Sport: A Historical Anthology of Women in Sports* (West Point, NY: Leisure Press, 1982), 536.
 10. Ibid., 538.
 11. Frank J. Taylor, "Fast and Pretty," *Collier's* (20 Aug. 1938): 38.
 12. D. Margaret Costa, "Nisei Women's Sports in Southern California."
 13. Deena K. Nakata, *The Gift: The Oregon Nikkei Story... Retold* (Portland, OR: 1995), 48.
 14. See note 8 above.
 15. Roger Daniels, *Concentration Camps: North American Japanese in the United States and Canada During World War II* (Malabar, FL: Robert E. Krieger Publishing, 1989), 26.
 16. Valerie Jean Matsumoto, "The Cortez Colony: Family, Farm, and Community among the Japanese Americans, 1919-1982," Ph.D. diss. (Stanford University, 1986), 127.
 17. Interview with Peggy (Taniguchi) Yoshimoto, Ballico, California, 19 May 1991.
 18. Ibid.
 19. Corrine Fonde, "Community Activities in War Relocation Centers in Arkansas," *Recreation* 38 (August 1944): 261-65.
 20. Ibid.
 21. Topaz [Utah] Times, 8 Apr. 1943.
 22. Following the dictates of cultural tradition, males stood at the top of the family household chain. By extension, the Nisei community reinforced these principles in social activities. As such, female supervision was rare, particularly in recreational matters. For example, at the Merced Assembly Center, each of the twelve members who made up the recreational hierarchy for that center was male (*The Mercedian Souvenir Edition*, 29 Aug. 1942). For further study see S. Frank Miyamoto, *Social*

- Solidarity Among the Japanese in Seattle, 1939*, 3rd ed. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1984); Bill Hosokawa. *Nisei: The Quiet Americans* (New York: William Morrow, 1969); and Roger Daniels, "Japanese America, 1930-1941: An Ethnic Community in the Great Depression," *Journal of the West* 24 (4): 35-50 (1985).
23. Nakano, *Japanese American Women*, 106; Susan M. Hartmann, *American Women in the 1940s: The Homefront and Beyond* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982), 125-26.
 24. Edward H. Spicer, et. al., *Impounded People: Japanese-Americans in the Relocation Centers* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1969), 106.
 25. Valerie Jean Matsumoto, "Japanese American Women During World War II," *Frontiers* 8 (1): 9 (1984).
 26. Even before the period of the war, the traditional family heirarchy in mainstream white culture also experienced change. Alice Kessler-Harris reveals that, as a result of Depression-era circumstances, the number of wage-earning women who were married increased by some six percent compared to the more prosperous 1920s. "When a husband was unemployed or underemployed, a family's need for income increased," stated Harris. The percentage of wage-earning married women, of course, climbed still higher during World War II. Alice Kessler-Harris, *Women Have Always Worked: A Historical Overview* (Old Westbury, NY: The Feminist Press, 1981), 138-42. An expansion of this argument is found in Sheila Tobias and Lisa Anderson, "What Really Happened to Rosie the Riveter? Demobilization and the Female Labor Force, 1944-47," in ed. Linda K. Kerber and Jane De Hart Mathews, *Women: America: Refocusing the Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982): 354-73.
 27. Nakano, *Japanese American Women*, 146.
 28. Matsumoto, "Japanese American Women During World War II," 10.
 29. War Relocation Authority Papers, "Recreation," Box 414, Folder 5, Letter from Dillon S. Myer to Congressman John M. Costello, undated 1944 note (National Archives, Washington, DC). Myer, it should be noted, in the same letter admitted that the "relocation centers at best are not a good enviroment within which to carry on Americanization work."
 30. *Ibid.*
 31. War Relocation Authority Papers, "Recreation," Box 414, Folder 5, Memo from Charles F. Ernst to Dillon S. Myer, 20 Jul. 1943 (National Archives, Washington). Both Meyer and Province, when appointed to their posts, had little background knowledge on Japanese Americans. In fact, Myer, whose expertise was in agriculture—he had worked with Franklin D. Roosevelt's Agricultural Adjustment Act during the 1930s—to his credit worked hard during his tenure to advance his knowledge of Japanese culture, and was not a strong proponent of internment.
 32. Borish, "Athletic Activities of Various Kinds," 245.
 33. Zieff, "From Badminton to the Bolero," 2-3.
 34. Gerald R. Gems, "Sport and the Americanization of Ethnic Women in Chicago," in ed. George Eisen and David K. Wiggins, *Ethnicity and Sport in North American History and Culture* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), 194.
 35. It should be noted that the Nisei, in some areas, had already been exposed to attempts by certain institutions to "Americanize" them. For instance, in Portland, Oregon, in the 1930s, Catholic nuns incorporated programs into their curriculum designed to "Americanize" their Nisei students. Deena Nakata relates that "Part of this process was that the nuns attempted to convert children to Catholicism. Issei parents evidently offered little resistance, as they wanted their children to grow up at least famliar with a traditional American religion." Nakata, *The Gift*, 47. As an observation, had these Issei parents been more familiar with America's historical resistance to Catholicism, perhaps they may have had second thoughts regarding the designs of the Catholic nuns.
 36. Topaz *Times*, 12 Nov. 1942.
 37. Rohwer [Arkansas] *Outpost*, 18 Nov. 1942.

38. Often, and as was the case in Rohwer, when respondents to the announcements formed their teams, officials often simply listed the various clubs by virtue of the names of their respective blocks (e.g. "Block 17," etc.). However, names of female teams, such as "Babes," or "Kittens," at times also appeared in various camp newspapers.
39. Alison M. Wrynn, "The Recreation and Leisure Pursuits of Japanese Americans in World War II Internment Camps," in Eisen and Wiggins, *Ethnicity and Sport*, 124.
40. War Relocation Authority Papers, "Recreation," Box 414, Folder 5, Memos Jan.-Dec. 1944 (National Archives, Washington).
41. Poston [Arizona] *Chronicle*, 5 Jan. 1943.
42. Rohwer *Outpost*, 9 Dec. 1942.
43. Spicer, *Impounded People*, 214-15.
44. Topaz *Times*, 25 May 1943.
45. Ibid.
46. Topaz *Times*, 15 Apr. 1943. The paper reported that 35 women's softball teams had been organized.
47. Topaz *Times*, 5 and 12 Jun. 1943.
48. Matsumoto, "Japanese American Women During World War II," 6-13.
49. Though it was not directly related to sport activities, camp newspapers were not above giving single women advice on "catching" a man. For instance, in a Topaz *Times* column entitled "Women's Mirror," Tomoye Takahashi advised her unmarried female readers to "be cheerful [and] dress down for the 'serious man,' and dress up for the 'he-man.'" He other suggestions were to "exhibit cooking, sewing and knitting techniques. Let them think they are pursuing you." Topaz *Times*, 30 Jan. 1943.
50. Manzanar [California] *Free Press*, 8 Jul. 1944.
51. Manzanar *Free Press*, 15 Jul. 1944.
52. Manzanar *Free Press*, 22 Jul. 1944.
53. Ibid.
54. Ibid.
55. Ibid.
56. Manzanar *Free Press*, 15 Jul. 1944.
57. Ibid.
58. Poston *Chronicle*, 10 Jun. 1943.
59. Manzanar *Free Press*, 4 Aug. 1945.
60. Manzanar *Free Press*, 11 Aug. 1945.
61. Yoshimoto interview.
62. Gerald R. Gems, "Sport and the Americanization of Ethnic Women in Chicago," 194.
63. Catriona M. Parratt, "From the History of Women in Sport to Women's Sport History: A Research Agenda," in ed. D. Margaret Costa and Sharon R. Guthrie, *Women and Sport: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 1994), 6.
64. As an example of this argument, Allen Guttman's *Women's Sports; A History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991) and Susan F. Cahn's *Coming On Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth Century Women's Sport* (New York: Free Press, 1994), two award-winning books, make no mention of Asian or Latin women, and barely touch upon the athletics of Native American females. For a better sense of community and identity relevant to the topic, these suggested books contain excellent oral histories: Nancy B. Diggs, *Steel Butterflies: Japanese Women and the American Experience* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998); Evelyn Nakano Glenn, *Issei, Nisei, War Bride: Three Generations of Japanese American Women in Domestic Service* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986); Paul Spickard, *Japanese Americans: The Formation and Transformation of an Ethnic Group* (New York: Twayne Publications, 1997); Paul Spickard, *We Are A People: Narrative*

and Multiplicity in Constructing Ethnic Identity (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, January 2000); Linda Tamura, *The Hood River Issei: An Oral History of the Japanese Settlers in Oregon's Hood River Valley* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993).