

The Controlled Development of Collegiate Sport for Women, 1923-1936

by

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During the 1920's, a conscious decision was made to curtail intercollegiate competition for women. New modes of competitive situations were established and/or popularized; these were designed to minimize competition and the development of high levels of skill.

In this paper, the controlled development of collegiate sport for women was examined for the period beginning in 1923 when a national philosophy was formally articulated and concluding in 1936 when a survey indicated that the form and shape of the new intercollegiate sport program had emerged and been accepted. The study was directed towards answering the following questions:

1. What was the status of women's sport in the colleges? What changes could be discerned during the period under discussion?
2. How was women's sport organized? What was the relationship of that organization to the practices associated with the sport programs in the colleges?
3. Who controlled collegiate women's sport? What were the mechanisms of control?
4. What was the philosophy underlying collegiate women's sport? On what premises was it developed? How was it implemented?

It was found that during the period varsity type competition was quite limited and declined relative to the extent of competition taking place outside the colleges. All forms of intercollegiate competition were virtually eliminated by 1930. In the early thirties there was a re-birth of intercollegiate competition using the play day and telegraphic meets as the primary forms.

The organization of women's sport, including the Committee and later Section on Women's Athletics of the APEA and the Women's Division of the NAAP, both of which had financial and professional support and good means for communication on a national scale, made it possible to exercise tight control over the collegiate women's sport programs.

This network also made it possible to formulate a national philosophy on competition. It was articulated by appointed and elected officers of women's sport, working within the framework of the APEA, and published in the *APER* or in separate brochures disseminated by the Women's Division. The philosophy, set forth in 1923 in the form of resolutions, was adopted by most relevant organizations. The resolutions were based upon the educational objectives, social mores and medical opinion of the time. Later in the decade, they were bolstered by the negative examples of sport at hand — particularly men's intercollegiate athletics, AAU and industrial league competition, and the performance of women in the 1928 Olympics.

Perhaps the single most influential motivating idea was "sport for all" — a concept which reflected the then contemporary goal of "education for all." The deliberate sacrifice of the needs of the highly skilled few for specialized training to the needs

of the great majority for some type of experience with physical activity, was consistent with the prevalent educational philosophy of pragmatism and progressive education.

The play day was developed as an appropriate means of implementing the stated philosophy because it was available to all. No special skills were necessary; the use of facilities and leadership to train a few girls was obviated. All incentive for winning was eliminated and therefore enjoyment rather than winning could be stressed. Situations in which girls competed in immodest clothing or “forgot themselves” in front of mixed audiences, were unlikely to ever occur. The activities chosen were those which were known to be absolutely “safe” for female participation and no incentive was present to pressure girls from participating during the menstrual period. Thus, the women physical educators joined philosophy with practice.