

Towards a New Sporting Ideal: The Women's Division of the National Amateur Athletic Federation

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In the period following the first World War, men's athletics began to develop into a big money business. Men's sports were gradually evolving into a spectator activity, and male athletes into super stars. At the same time there was a growing recognition of women's equality, and women too were participating in various sports. While the major organizations controlling men's athletics were convinced that sport should be a competitive spectator activity, one very prominent women's organization held a contrary view of the purpose of sport. The Women's Division of the National Amateur Athletic Federation proposed a sporting ideal involving universal participation for joyful physical activity. The women were opposed to all fiercely competitive contests, on the grounds that they tend to encourage spectatorism instead of participation, and that they produce "experts" instead of inviting all to play.

Since the women in the division were physical educators and women involved in community sports programs, they were able to influence the development of women's and girls' sports in the schools and universities. They worked for strong intramural games, instead of inter-school competition, and encouraged players' involvement in many different sports instead of specialization in one. They were also instrumental in formulating "women's rules" for many games in order that more women and girls could participate with greater ease. The Women's Division was only successful in the schools and universities, however, and had little or no influence on women's industrial teams or on women's Olympic participation. Because the Olympics represented the epitome of star-producing spectatorism, the Women's Division objected to women's participation in the international games. But since their power base was academic and they were working against a general trend, the division had little effect on the gradual addition of women's sports to the Olympic games.

The Women's Division's influence on the development of women's and girls' athletics may be interpreted by some to have been negative. If equality in sports means imitation of men's athletics, however, it will be a mixed victory for women. Amateur athletics for boys and men has become a caricature of all the "evils" the Women's Division recognized as early as the twenties. In attempting to transform a masculine structure with feminine goals, the division did not view equality as meaning "same-ness," but believed rather that women needed something different from sport than spectator games. Perhaps at that time, when women were only one generation out of corsets, a sporting ideal encouraging universal participation and physical activity for the joy of it, was a useful and necessary phase in the development of health and body-confidence among American women. Besides being an interesting aspect of Women's history, the sporting philosophy of the Women's Division represents an important alternative view in the history of sport in this country.