
The First Intercollegiate Contest for Women: Basketball, April 4, 1896

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The year 1896 has been credited with the first women's intercollegiate athletic contests. The month of April was an especially eventful month in sports for it was then that the first of the modern Olympic Games was held in Athens. April also contained the two earliest intercollegiate sports contests for women. On April 22, 1896, the women's basketball team from the University of Washington met the team from Ellensburg Normal School. The first intercollegiate contest for women, however, was held on April 4, 1896, between the women's basketball teams of the University of California — Berkeley and Stanford University.

This first game was held at a neutral site, San Francisco's Armory Hall, and was the result of a challenge issued by the Stanford team. The Stanford challenge invited the California women to play a basketball game on Stanford's campus. California accepted the invitation but with conditions which included playing indoors rather than on Stanford's outside court and the refusal to play before a mixed audience anywhere.

By 3:00 P.M. on Saturday, April 4, approximately 500 women were in attendance for the big game. Because playing before a mixed audience was not conducive to manners befitting a lady, the condition set by Berkeley was respected and no men were allowed to witness the event. Captains Elizabeth Griswold of California and Stella McCray of Stanford led their teams, dressed in bloomers and sporting school colors, into the hall and the game began. During the hard fought 20-minute first-half, both teams scored. The score at the end of the half was 1 to 1.

An incident occurred during the first-half which enlivened the game. When one of the baskets nearly fell, two male laborers were called in for repairs. As the men came onto the court the Berkeley team screamed and hid in a corner. Stanford, on the other hand, paid scant attention to the men and moved indifferently to a convenient area where they assumed becoming postures of ease.

As play resumed in the second-half, a rousing battle ensued. California's captain Griswold demonstrated her knowledge of changing the complexion of play by tossing the ball backward over her head. When Berkeley fouled, Stanford made its free-throw and, after a great contest, the final score was Stanford 2, California 1.

In an effort to explain the loss, the California newspaper chided its team for lack of conditioning since they had failed to score in the second-half despite two splendid opportunities. Stanford's paper, however, praised Captain McCray's agility and declared that Stanford never lost.

During this first intercollegiate contest for women, great interest and enthusiasm was generated by both the spectators and the media. The game of basketball was felt to be an entirely appropriate activity for young women and the favorable newspaper coverage and the behavior of both teams during this first game allowed women to continue participation in the game. Newspaper accounts of the game, however, dealt primarily with the pleasing appearance and becoming actions of the players rather than with their athletic abilities.