

# The Sunshine State Becomes a Playground for Sportswomen

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The converging of winter visitors on the east and west coasts of Florida was an unanticipated result of World War I. Vacationers who were unable to pursue their enjoyment of the European rivieras shifted their holiday destinations to the Sunshine State.

By the 1920s Palm Beach, Miami, and Miami Beach were noted for attracting a steady flow of well-to-do tourists. The winter months became the "tourist season" in south Florida for the well-heeled who sought a respite from colder climates. Less prosperous vacationers who could not afford the higher winter rates along the Gold Coast, journeyed to Florida during the summer months.

By the second decade of this century, well known women athletes were lured to tournaments during the mild winter months. Balmy weather and the relaxed atmosphere created by the vast stretches of beaches provided a backdrop for the development of recreational and competitive sport. The inclusion of women's sports activities in the society columns of newspapers contributed in part to the acceptance of women in sport. Society columnists wrote accounts of women who attended sporting events as well as descriptions of the participants in tennis and golf tournaments. Occasionally space in sports sections was devoted to sportswomen. Women who appeared in the sports pages were generally well-known golf and tennis players. A few nationally known female swimmers infiltrated the sports pages.

While the country club set engaged in golf, tennis, and swimming, college women competed in a more varied schedule of sporting events. The Florida Agricultural and Mechanical College (FAMC), founded as a black institution, was a member of the Southern Intercollegiate Conference. FAMC sponsored teams in tennis, track and field, basketball, and field hockey. Meanwhile, white colleges emphasized interclass competition in volleyball, basketball, softball, tennis, swimming, and field hockey.

A few early Floridians gained entry in international competition through the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU). Anne Harwick was a member of the delegation from the United States that participated in the 1922 Women's World Games in Paris. She was elected vice-captain of the American team and finished second in the basketball throw. In 1932, Katherine Rawls became the first woman from Florida to gain a berth on an Olympic aquatic team. She won a silver medal in springboard diving at the 1932 Olympics.

Recreation Departments in cities throughout Florida advanced women's sports by providing competition in numerous sports. Softball, volleyball, and basketball were popular by the 1920s. The Women's Sports Committee of the Florida Recreation Association organized competition on local, district, and state levels. Betty Palmer, former Director of Playgrounds for Girls and Women in St. Petersburg, attributes the acceptance and recognition of women in sports to the Florida Recreation Association activities.

Collegiate sport became more visible in the 1970s when university athletic departments offered scholarships and paid coaches to start varsity teams. The once controversial Kellmyer case originated in south Florida and made athletic scholarships a reality for women.

Sportswomen of the 1980s are enjoying unprecedented opportunities to pursue recreational, collegiate, country club, and sports club participation.