

Women's Sports at the University of Tennessee: A Model for Women's Collegiate Athletics In the South during the 1920s and 1930s

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Sports historians have demonstrated that the early twentieth century, particularly the 1920s and 1930s, was a period of both decreasing and increasing opportunities for American sportswomen. Most would agree that a philosophy of anti-competition and universal participation as advocated by the Women's Division of the National Amateur Athletic federation steered women's collegiate athletics during the twenties and thirties. However, they disagree over the extent of the application of that philosophy and its effectiveness once put into practice. While examining the early development of women's sports and physical education at the University of Tennessee, this paper focuses on the decades of the 1920s and 1930s and measures the effect of the WDNAAF's policies on the University. This study can provide us with a model for examining how anti-competition and universal participation affected the Southern sportswomen and how one institution dealt with the philosophy.

This paper suggests that skilled and competitive athletics, and the recognition and prestige derived from them, were important factors in the development of women's sports at the University of Tennessee; and they remained important throughout the 1920s and 1930s, despite the abolition of women's intercollegiate sports and the development of forms of universal participation. Tennessee first introduced physical education to its coeds in 1899 and skilled and competitive sports, such as basketball, were part of that program. Prior to 1926, Tennessee supported women's sports at both intercollegiate and interclass levels. In 1926, as the WDNAAF's philosophy became more influential nationwide, Tennessee eliminated its women's varsity program and began to develop forms of universal participation: an honorary point system and an intramural program. These, however, emphasized skill and competition more than universal participation by awarding points toward individual awards or an overall team championship. Moreover, in its early stages, sorority teams dominated the intramural program, leaving little opportunity for independent coeds to participate in sports. By the mid-thirties, Tennessee developed an intramural program which offered all coeds the opportunity to participate and compete in athletics.

This paper indicates that the anti-competition and universal participation philosophy of the WDNAAF had an effect on the University of Tennessee, but only in an indirect manner. Tennessee eliminated its women's varsity athletics not in response to a directive from the WDNAAF itself, but because other schools had already done so. Moreover, Tennessee failed to strictly adhere to the Women's Division guidelines by continuing to stress skill and competition, along with emphasizing recognition and prestige. This study suggests that the development of universal participation was not an immediate process, but one requiring many steps in the reorganization of groups, individuals, and activities. Overall, this paper suggests that compliance with anti-competition and universal participation guidelines was largely the responsibility and design of the institution itself.