

Kentucky Women Choose a League: The Story of Their Participation in City Recreation Programs

PEGGY STANALAND

Eastern Kentucky University

League play for women in sport programs has not always been a reality. Reporting of their participation by various media has been less of a reality. Questions concerning the existence of league play for girls and women in recreation settings, the beginning of such play, its growth and development, the participants and the organizers have been answered in part by those who played and those who had a leadership role in promotion of leagues particularly in the city of Louisville.

“As Maine votes, so votes the nation”. Whatever Louisville does, the rest of Kentucky will likely follow. The largest city in the state has taken a leadership role in many areas - women’s sports included. The story of Kentucky women’s participation in organized leagues of city recreation programs is probably best reflected in leagues established by the city of Louisville. It would not be entirely accurate to say “as Louisville goes, so goes the state,” yet it would not be entirely inaccurate either. The Park and Recreation Department has enjoyed organized recreation programs since 1901. The city has had basketball leagues for women since 1937 and softball leagues since 1939.

The softball and basketball leagues in Louisville enjoyed a particular high during the decades of the forties, fifties, and early sixties. There were three prevailing conditions that contributed to this zenith: (1) strong leadership, (2) massive participation, and (3) high standards of play and conduct.

Quite a few of the participants of the forties and fifties league play of Louisville city programs went on to careers in physical education, coaching, and recreation leadership. Their own enthusiasm for personal competitive play had been at least partially fulfilled by their participation in city recreation competitive team sports leagues. Many of those who were participants in city recreation used the experience as a proving ground for later vocations and avocations. More importantly, they assumed leadership roles in girls competitive sports in Louisville schools.

The story of Kentucky women's participation in organized leagues of city recreation programs has been largely reflected by the structured, comprehensive offerings of Louisville. From the 1930's on to the 1970's, the largest city in the state seemed to have set the pace. Organized leagues in softball and basketball were structured for the inexperienced as well as the experienced. Clinics for the younger players, high calibre tournaments for the elite players, and a strict adherence to codes of behavior have been important chapters in the story of organized leagues. Kentucky women chose not to confine their activity to the sipping of miraculous elixers for health's sake or remaining spectators for men's leagues in the world of sport. They chose a league of their own, and city recreation programs provided the setting for their choice.