

Southern Sportswomen: Toward a Theoretical Framework

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In 1983 a group of sport history devotees representing ties or allegiances to some thirteen southern states generated the idea of a series of papers on the history of southern women in the sport. The intent of the project was to highlight accomplishments of women in sport from southern states. The reasoning was that if the reporting of the deeds of American women in sport has been a neglected phenomenon, then the reporting of distaff accomplishments of a regional nature was likely an even more neglected phenomenon.

The framework established at that time was general in nature and gave individual researchers great latitude to research the sport habits and exploits of women in their assigned states. The time-frame chosen was roughly the 1900's to the 1980's. The study was to be limited to women performers (college level and above). Roughly, some consideration was to be given to ethnic backgrounds and socioeconomic scales. The criteria set for inclusion were simply stated. Did these sportswomen set some record; was their achievement of a record breaking nature? And secondly, did the sportswoman make an impact (on sports) or elevate the position of southern women in sport?

In thinking through a more definitive theoretical framework descriptive units were identified to give continuity and substance to the deeds, records and accomplishments. The smallest of the descriptive units was a single event or an occurrence; the next was a series or a sequence of two or more events; the third descriptive unit was a pattern or chain.

This process can be illustrated with the development of league participation by women. The formation of a women's basketball league in the early years of this century in a South Carolina textile mill would be an example of an event or an occurrence. The formation of more and more textile mill leagues in both South Carolina and North Carolina becomes a series. As the development of league play spread to other southern states, a pattern is observed. The consideration of descriptive units helped observe continuity, change and the placing of seemingly isolated events into a larger picture.

Unusual achievements or records set (however regional or provincial) were generally a part of a larger event, broader and of more general interest. An example of this was Babe Didrickson (Zaharias), the Texas Tomboy, who set many records of her own as an Olympic gold medalist, basketball star and golf phenomenon was also source for criticism from women educators. The dress, behaviors and championship drive were cause for some women leaders to rethink the direction of sports for girls and women in the '20's and '30's. So the performances of "The Babe" were a part of a larger movement to direct sports for girls and women away from those "regrettable exhibitions" and "highly intense" play.

Performances (whether of individuals, or groups or institutions) also needed to reflect a lasting impact on large numbers of people. This is illustrated in the work of Clara Gregory Baer, early 1900 mentor of the Physical Education Department of Sophie Newcomb College. She introduced the south's first physical education certification program, invented the game of Newcomb and was a staunch advocate of lady-like behavior in sport. Her deeds did affect large numbers and continued this influence over a long period of time.

In the further development of a theoretical framework, it was necessary to deal with the who, what, when, where, how and why concept. Since the focus of this project was on the

sportswoman, then her performance embodied the who, when, and what. Further, since her accomplishments usually were made possible by some enabler, then the *facilitating agent* embraced the where and how. For example, in her work with country club sports and wealthy women of Florida, Welch manifested the importance of the enabler or facilitating agent. Lumpkin also supported this idea with her research on the leisure pursuits of North Carolina upper-class women. The country club was the vehicle for sport for women. And finally, the southern sportswoman's deeds were done in an accompanying atmosphere in space and in time. The *attendant conditions*, then, embraced the how and the why. The fear of union take-over in the South Carolina textile mills, the social focal point of St. Augustine country club golf, the financially lean years surrounding Calumet Farm and its horse industry, the societal perception of women's basketball as mere entertainment illustrate the attendant conditions concept. Other observable conditions such as war, economic depression and public apathy became factors in the consideration of how and why. The deeds of the performers, the facilitating agents, and the attendant conditions became inextricable parts of the theoretical framework.

Since 1900, sport for the American woman has grown from a silly, frivolous amusement toward a serious, methodical pastime. The closer to 1900, the more southern women champions were perceived as renegades. The closer to 1980, the more they were perceived as a part of the mainstream. The deeds of southern sportswomen can neither be isolated from events surrounding their accomplishments nor insulated from causes or outcomes.