

# The Fledgling Years of Women's Intercollegiate Basketball in Florida

Paula Welch

University of Florida

Stetson University in DeLand, Florida was founded in 1883. Soon after the private coeducational institution was established, physical activities were offered to female students. Because of the favorable view of physical culture for female students, sports were gradually incorporated into the curriculum. Women played basketball before men at Stetson. The absence of a men's varsity basketball team produced no male-female comparisons regarding the style of play or the suitability of the sport for women. By the time men began playing basketball, women's involvement in the sport was taken for granted. Favorable accounts of women's games and practices reported in the college and state newspapers promoted basketball.

Women's basketball was enthusiastically adjudged at Stetson and was first played by women as early as 1903. Dormitory contests and a few town and gown match-ups characterized the university's initial association with the women's game. The student newspaper, the *Stetson Weekly Collegiate*, contained frequent stories that depicted women's basketball as an exciting game that attracted zealous fans.

According to an article in the February 21, 1906 edition of the *Stetson Weekly Collegiate*, Florida's inaugural women's intercollegiate basketball game involved Stetson and another central Florida institution, Rollins College. Stetson, the more experienced team, defeated Rollins in Winter Park 39 to 16. Spirited spectators filled the gymnasium to capacity. In 1907 Stetson claimed the mythical women's state basketball championship following victories over Rollins and the Florida State College for Women. The attainment of a women's state basketball championship was the invention of student newspaper reporters. When the Stetson women

defeated the only two women's collegiate teams in the state, the mythical state title was bestowed on the team by Stetson's reporters.

Early in February 1909, the first game involving a girl's high school team and a collegiate team was recorded. Apparently the Stetson coach, because of the paucity of college teams expanded the schedule with interscholastic teams. The inclusion of high school teams eventually provided a means to recruit players for Stetson. The level of skill among high school players was elevated as a result of the competition between interscholastic and collegiate players. On a few occasions Stetson lost to high school teams.

Men's and women's basketball was perceived along similar levels of enthusiasm, expectations and importance. Women were also given equal consideration for athletic recognition and were required to meet the same standards of participation as male athletes for awards. When the first decade of the 20th century had ended, Stetson University, in the eyes of its partisans had acquired a reputation in Florida as a leader in athletics. Men's varsity teams had been very successful and the women's basketball team had never experienced a losing season. Continuous support from the administration, student body and press advanced women's varsity basketball. Leadership for the women's basketball program came entirely from male faculty members during the first ten years of competition, Stetson did not have a physical culture department, therefore, influence from female physical educators regarding the participation of women's intercollegiate athletics never occurred. In general athletics for men and women were viewed as an integral part of university life. Stetson University, because of its organized and successful program can be credited with the establishment of basketball' first generation of female players in Florida.