

Sports of Southern California Black Women in the 1920s and 1930s: An Even Harder Road to Recognition

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African-American women in Southern California in the 1920s and 1930s were as involved in sports as their white counterparts although some differences existed. While white women's participation was covered by local newspapers, coverage of black women's sports was found exclusively in the black newspapers. One of these papers, the *California Eagle*, hired a female athlete to cover women's sports in 1926 and the column titled "Girletics" continued throughout the time period.

Between 1919 and 1939, the *Eagle* published 235 articles on women's sports with 114 devoted to tennis. In Southern California tennis was a club sport with the first club, the Alpha Tennis Club, formed in 1914. In order for members to enter sanctioned tournaments, each club was required to pay dues to the Western Federation of Tennis Clubs which was a branch of the American Tennis Association, the African-American league. By 1921 ten Los Angeles area clubs were affiliated with the Federation and big tournaments were held on July 4th and Thanksgiving. Women's singles competition was included from the beginning of tournament play. On occasion (1927 and 1931) one or two of the best women players entered the Los Angeles municipal tournament thereby integrating the previously all white tourney.

Two sports which were widely played by African-American women in Southern California were basketball and softball. While the first mention of basketball for women was in 1922, it did not become popular until the early '30s. Basketball was organized by club teams with names such as the Amazons, Vitality Girls, Ionians, Delphas and Athenas. The Athena Athletic Club team was founded in 1930 and by 1934 had played over fifty games losing but four. All-star teams were organized in 1934 and played against local Chinese, Hispanic, Japanese and Russian teams.

Softball followed the club organization of basketball although league championships were held as early as 1931. Interracial games began in 1934 when the Athenas beat the Mexican Bloomer Girls and many of the women from both teams played basketball as well as softball. In 1936 the *California Eagle* sponsored a women's softball team named the Eaglettes and in 1938 began an Eaglettes all-star basketball team. By the late 1930s nearly all of the teams in both sports were coached by men. Joe Hines, former catcher for Satchell Paige, coached the premiere team in the late '30s, Webb's All-Stars. This team played together well into the 1940s and was highly regarded by all who watched or competed against them.

Tennis, basketball and softball were the popular sports of Southern California black women in the 1920s and 1930s. While there was some mention of both swimming and track and field, these activities were not widely practiced because of facility and athletic club restrictions based solely on race.