

Aquabelles and All-Stars: Minority Western Sporting Women in The 1940's

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This paper examines the sport participation of women in the Los Angeles area in terms of the changing environment and the new opportunities afforded in the workplace. During the war years, women's magazines such as *Independent Woman* encouraged their readers not only to become active in the war effort, but also to pursue recreational pursuits in order to be stronger and healthier. Although these articles were aimed at the middle class white woman, many educated black women in California were part of the readership. Another factor in the recreational participation of minority women was the history of sports competition for women in California. In the first two decades of the century, California high school women and college women had participated in interscholastic sport competition in large numbers. This competition engendered interest in the local parks and elementary schools as well, culminating in annual championships. Although the interscholastic competition gave way to intramurals in the 30's and 40's in the high schools and colleges, players continued their competition in the playgrounds and parks through the 1940's. The demographic composition of the

players changed with the ethnic changes in the population. Whereas all of the winning teams were white in the 20's, by the end of the 30's both blacks and chicanas were competing in southern California cities. The majority of southern California blacks lived in East Los Angeles and formed teams which were the strongest in the city.

With the growth of the war industry, women's industrial softball leagues were formed and prospered throughout the decade. The softball competitions were followed equally by both black and white press, with small articles noting the score and the site of the games. *The Los Angeles Sentinel* became so interested that in 1946, its assistant editor and a local cafe formed their own softball team. The most famous of the black women's softball teams, was Webbs All Stars, often referred to as Webbs Colored All Stars. Mabel Brown was the leading "batter" and Dorothy Shaw was touted as the fastest pitcher in girls softball. Other black teams of note included the Hollywood Femmes, the Monrovia All Stars, Duarte Girls Softball, San Bernardino All Stars and Buena Park Diamond Cuties. Webbs All Stars were so famous that they often played benefit games in San Pedro with Mabel Brown as the star attraction. On various occasions there were attempts to form professional teams with the black women being paid \$55 a week with promises of larger paychecks as their skills developed.

Chicanas also participated in recreation league softball but not to the same extent as black women. Reports of the local women losing to such teams as the Mexican 7Th Street Team indicate that Chicanas were participating. Because there were many well educated and middle class black women in California, it not surprising to find that they participated in tennis. A major article in *The California Eagle* headlined Elaine Thornton as the victor in women's tourney singles at Angel City Raquet Club. She also won the mixed doubles with national black champion Jimmy McDaniels and the women's doubles with Nellie Green who also won the women's junior championship.

Black women also participated in bowling. The Central Avenue Bowling Alley was one of the places which catered to blacks. That bowling was a sport in which many ethnic groups participated, is evidenced in the fact that in 1946, a protest was lodged with the American Bowling Congress because a Chinese team was prevented from competing in a Los Angeles tournament.

Many swimming areas, known as plunges, set aside one day per week, the day before the pool was to be drained and cleaned, for the use of blacks and other ethnic groups. The Central Plunge at 1357 East Second Street in Los Angeles advertised in the *California Eagle* that it would be giving swimming lessons along with some fundamentals of lifesaving in order to form a swim team, the Aqua-belles.

Just as the black women and Chicanas competed at available public areas in softball, the Japanese fielded a large number of women's teams in the early war years. The Japanese teams had such non Japanese names the Red Sox, Tigers, Kalifas, Phydellis, Archerettes, Royallettes, Mariennes and the Les Etoiles often dubbed "the lazy toils." Of all the women's softball teams fielded during this time, the Japanese teams had the best newspaper support with numerous articles in *Rafu Shimpo*. When the Japanese were sent to internment camps the coverage of women's sports ceased. It was not until 1947, that the Women's Athletic Union announced in *Rafu Shimpo* that a softball league was being formed. The league was not successful. Perhaps the years in the internment camps had taken their toll causing the Japanese women to lose their enthusiasm for this American pastime.

After the war, many women lost their jobs to returning war heroes, became preoccupied with their families or took up jobs for less pay. The industrial leagues continued but with less competition for minority groups. Women of all ethnic groups continued to play basketball and bowling. During the Olympic years, black women competed in track and field. Other black women continued to play tennis through ATA competition. It is concluded that during the war years, increased industrial production with its parallel opportunities for working women to earn larger salaries also contributed to the distinct ethnic opportunities for sports participation.