

For the Good of the Community: Nisei Women's Basketball in the Thirties in Southern California

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The story of Japanese women's basketball in the 1930s in southern California is the story of collectivity and caring, exclusivity and patriotism, racism and solidarity. It is the story of the Central YWCA, the Buddhist, Episcopalian and Methodist churches. It is also the story of hundreds of young women, who despite the harsh realities of the political and economic events of the time period, played basketball in the parks, playgrounds and gymnasiums of southern California, the San Joaquin Valley, San Francisco and San Diego.

Forced to live and work in their own enclaves, in specific sections of Los Angeles, the Nisei formed their own social groups which resulted in group empowerment. They created what Collins, in her book, *Black Feminist Thought* termed, "alternative communities that empower." One such place, the Japanese 'Y' was built by the Central Y.W.C.A., with some financial backing from grateful Issei parents. Emanating from the Japanese 'Y' structure, the first women's sports competitions, basketball, began in the early thirties on an informal level and it was not until 1935 that a group of Nisei women decided to formalize them under the name of Southern California Women's Basketball League.

Following a successful first season, the Women's Athletic Union of the Japanese Y, the W.A.U. was formed. In the first official year of the W.A.U., 18 teams played in A and B leagues, the A's playing on week nights and the B's on Sunday afternoons. As competition increased a desire for intersectional matchups was fostered. By 1937, the Reedley team of the Young Women's Buddhist League became the team to beat in Central California. The Stockton Busy Bees and the Oakland Methodists established territorial rights for northern California with the Berkeley Alpha Omegas reigning supreme in the college division.

The immense popularity, general enthusiasm and notoriety of the Nisei women's basketball competitions was evidenced in the Rafu Shimpō coverage of the leagues. As early as 1936 sports-writers began analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of each team, identifying outstanding players and ultimately an all-star team. Such elitism as an All-Star team which was in direct conflict with the care and collectivity mission of the W.A.U. was quickly renounced however.

Dominating the contests outside of Los Angeles, the Buddhist Leagues complemented the W.A.U. competition. In some instances, intersectional encounters against W.A.U. teams was provided. In other settings, all-star teams were named and state championships were held.

The individual stories of the Nisei women basketball players contributed interesting insights into the importance of the creation of alternative communities, in a time of economic and racial prejudice. While many of the women spent their childhoods in racially segregated neighborhoods, the care and collectivity experiences rendered by such an alternative community as the Japanese 'Y,' provided the empowerment opportunities, denied them by the anti-Japanese exclusionists in California.