

# Incarcerated Sport: The Experience of Nisei Women and Recreational Activities within the Internment Camps, 1942–1945

Samuel O. Regalado

California State University, Stanislaus

Japan's surprise attack on the Pearl Harbor naval base in Hawaii on December 7, 1941, not only brought the United States into World War II, but also proved equally as devastating to Americans of Japanese descent. The paranoia that followed led to a presidential mandate in February 1942—Executive Order 9066—which called for the internment of nearly 120,000 Japanese Americans. From 1942 to 1945, these “uprooted Americans” were sent to one of ten internment camps spread across America's most desolate regions. Confined, Japanese Americans attempted to replicate their normal activities

under abnormal conditions. Indeed, recreational events ranked among the highest outlets which tempered the harshness of their condition.

Nisei women, in particular, pursued competition with great vigor. Indeed, through school and community efforts, softball, basketball, and volleyball clubs formed and, at times, competed against opponents outside the confines of the camps. These athletic pursuits occurred as Japanese American women experienced change within their cultural sphere. Such alterations as equity in wages with men, disintegration of traditional patterns of arranged marriages, and other opportunities fostered during period of internment. Their involvement in athletics, to be sure, reflected this change.

While the War Relocation Authority (WRA) encouraged recreational activities, many internees needed little prodding in the pursuit of sport. The "block" system lent itself to community teams, and intense rivalries, some carried over from pre-camp existence, again emerged. Camp bureaucrats, for the most part, directed much of their attention towards males. However, women, too, participated in such sports as basketball, softball and volleyball. Programs varied in each camp, but, like their male counterparts, athletic activity for women often started within weeks after arrival to their respective locations. Announcements concerning contests found in camp newspapers drew communities together and, at times, female competition also made news headlines. Indeed, elaborate leagues, all-star contests, and exhibition matches, some between male and female squads, were all closely monitored by most sport-minded internees in all ten camps. Moreover, women exhibited high quality athleticism within their respective sport.

The Nisei female experience mirrored the changing role of the status of women in America. Their internment, however, made them unique in that incarceration forced them to make adjustments. While alterations in household chores and responsibility took place, sports provided the outlet for frustrations, helplessness, and community morale. For the Nisei women, it also helped to build and expand on newfound freedom.