

# “Not Altogether Ladylike”: The Premature Demise of Girls’ Interscholastic Basketball in Illinois

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Although it was conceived as a cold-weather diversion for young men, basketball quickly outgrew its original purpose and became an important part of the athletic regimen for high school girls as well. In Illinois, the advent of basketball gave girls their first legitimate opportunity to compete in athletic games and led almost immediately to interscholastic competition. The girls were so enthusiastic about the new pastime that, in many parts of Illinois, the development of high school girls’ basketball outpaced its masculine counterpart for several years. From 1895 to 1907, the bloomer girls compiled an impressive list of accomplishments. They organized and managed teams, issued challenges, conducted barnstorming tours, and formed the state’s first high school basketball league. They also fought a continual battle against school authorities who sought to alter the face of girls’ basketball—first with their opposition to the use of boys’ rules, and later with their opposition to interscholastic competition itself.

What accounted for the spectacular growth of girls’ basketball in Illinois, and why were the local authorities so anxious to eradicate it? This study examined the forces that spurred its development, probing the attitudes of the faculty, parents, students, and the popular press. It also discusses the unique geography and demographics that made Chicago, in particular, a fertile area for interscholastic competition.

The paper also focused on the attitudes of the schoolmen—and schoolwomen—who struggled for control of interscholastic athletics and against competition by girls. Along the way, the story involves Amos Alonzo Stagg, the original Director of Physical Culture, who blocked the way for women’s intercollegiate competition at the University of Chicago; Frances A. Kellor, the noted social reformer, who coached girls’ basketball and wrote far-reaching opinions on athletic policy; and Edwin G. Cooley, the controversial superintendent of the Chicago Board of Education, who brought student organizations of all kinds under the authority of his administration.

Finally, the study focused on the nascent Illinois High School Athletic Association, which succeeded in banning girls’ interscholastic basketball in 1907—many years before most other states moved to purge the sport. What remained of the sport after the ban—from “independent” girls’ competition to spirited attempts at overturning the decision—is left as a postscript.