

# Sameness, or Difference? Class, Gender, Sport, the WDNAAF and the NCAA/NAAF

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During the month of April, 1923, The Women's Division of the National Amateur Athletic Federation was founded by future first lady Lou Henry Hoover, then chairperson of the American Physical Education Association Blanche Trilling, and representatives from civic, military, playground, recreation, athletic (including men who held joint membership and leadership positions in the NCAA and NAAF), and religious groups from around the United States. Whether or not it was their intention, the members of the WDNAAF engaged in a debate from which class and gender based conceptions of sport, morality, and equality were central.

Of critical importance were two issues. First, to justify its separate power base, the WDNAAF fused 19th century male medical myth about woman's physical inferiority with three types of arguments that had been used by feminists and reformers to emancipate and/or improve the lot of women; these included the argument for natural rights, the call for special protective legislation for women, and the demand for egalitarianism. Second, these reformers constructed a model for competition that they believed could help to maintain the social order. The federation's views of

appropriate sporting and feminine behaviors were constructed on the middle class beliefs about the link between biology, physicality, and morality.

These arguments guaranteed women their own power base, but left future generations with several dilemmas. Women were asking simultaneously for equality and protective standards of treatment within an existing sport governance structure. Their demands were rationalized on the basis of their assumed moral superiority, emotional vulnerability, and physical inferiority to men. Thus, the WDNAAF's platform was grounded in contradictory views about women and equality. Additionally, the WDNAAF believed that all people should have an equal opportunity to participate in sporting activities and secure good health. They advocated what they believed to be an egalitarian model of sport for the masses. This alternative model for competition, however, was based on middle class values which may have precluded working women from fitting within its framework.