

# A Gym of One's Own: Separatism and Women's Physical Education in Early Twentieth-Century America

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In her 1929 essay *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf discussed the connection between independence and creativity. If women writers had sufficient space and money, she contended, they could express their special literary vision more fully. As did many women reformers and professionals in the early twentieth century, female physical educators in America agreed with Woolf's premise. A separate space, insulated from male influence, would best serve the physical development of girls and women. In fact, autonomy seemed not merely desirable, but necessary to them: the physiological, psychological, and social differences between the sexes mandated separate programs of physical education and athletics and, logically, female control over female programs. "A gym of one's own" was essential.

During the early 1900's, prominent female physical educators in America articulated and practiced a separatist philosophy. It was grounded, first, in seemingly conservative attitudes about gender roles and attributes and, second, in a democratic model of athletics and competition, summarized by the creed "A sport for every girl and every girl in a sport." Female leaders successfully implemented their philosophy in many (though not all) schools and colleges around the country and established organizations to promote, even enforce their views.

Those facts are familiar to scholars in sport history. In large measure, however, an underlying question remains unsolved. Why did female physical educators adopt those particular ideas and strategies? Was their position an apology for women in sports, a political necessity, a shrewd compromise, or a feminist manifesto? The answer awaits a fuller analysis of the factors—personal, professional, and cultural—that shaped the women's beliefs and practices.

Through a case study, this paper addressed the origins and significance of separatism among female physical educators in America during the first half of the twentieth century. It focused on the career of Mabel Lee (1886-1985), an influential physical educator who directed the women's program at the University of Nebraska for nearly thirty years and served as the first female president of the American Physical Education Association. Based on archival and published materials, as well as interviews, this paper explored Lee's attitudes about women and health, her philosophy of physical education and sports, and her efforts to build "a gym of one's own," at Nebraska and around the country.

Labels such as "conservative" do not convey the complexities of Lee's position. Her beliefs conformed to many popular assumptions about gender and sexuality in twentieth-century America; at the same time, Lee and her colleagues helped redefine the boundaries of femininity and health. As a strategy, separatism proved rather self-defeating, because it facilitated the marginalization of women's sports in a society that celebrated male values and athletics. Nevertheless, separatism allowed Lee and her cohorts to experiment with a distinctive ethos and structure for women's physical education and athletics. As second-class citizens, in society as well as their profession, female

physical educators understood that women were the “losers” and “dubs” in American life. They devised an alternative—female-controlled, egalitarian sports—that enabled women to compete and win in a man’s world. In terms that resonate with modern feminism in unexpected ways, their philosophy challenged central premises of sport, male domination, and American culture.