

The Femininity Game: The Sexologists and Women's Basketball in Early Twentieth-Century America

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As Susan Brownmiller has documented in *Femininity*, the only sanctioned competition for women has historically been for men. Any competition outside of this domain drew societal condemnations and called into question one's femaleness. As women in physical education began to define "A Gym of One's Own" at the turn of the century, they were confronted with the writings and research of a new group of psychologists, who focused on the sexual behavior of men and women. Friendships between women now came under close scrutiny within a new set of rules.

The research of the sexologists began to influence women's relationships with each other and how these "friendships" were viewed by the culture. The writings of Freud and Ellis established new language and new criteria for the evaluation of relationships between men, men and women, and women. Women, who had been considered asexual, now found themselves to be very sexual creatures. This redefinition of women's sexual nature and its impact on their sporting experiences is the focus of this presentation.

How women in physical education attempted to define "A Gym of Their Own" within these new rules is an historical question worthy of exploration. The question of maintaining one's femininity while participating in sport has always been central and remains an issue to this day. Gaining a historical perspective on this issue is essential to the understanding of the female sporting experience.

The women's basketball rules, the archival records of the WDNAAF and NAGWS, correspondence between individuals and organizations, and diaries were all examined for any historical evidence of changing views of women's friendships. The research for this presentation was limited to women's intercollegiate competition and explored the impact of the sexologist in this context. Of particular interest are the sexologists' views on femininity. The contrast between the acceptance of female friendships before the 1920's and the changing view after the 1920's will be examined. Did women's relationships change or just society's view of these relationships change?

There exists extensive documentation on why women in physical education established a separatist philosophy at the turn of the century. There has been less examination on why the separatist philosophy continued throughout the Twentieth Century. What happened between the "New Women" of the turn of the century and the "Feminism" of the 1960's? Did the changing views on women's sexuality influence the separatist philosophy embraced by women physical educators? The sexologists helped to define the rules of the "femininity game" and women physical educators made choices on how women would be allowed to play.