

All-Women Rodeos and Women's Professional Baseball, 1942–1954: An Analysis of the History, Acceptance, Successes, and Failures of Two Unique Experiments in Women's Professional Sports

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Women's sports in America experienced a decline during the 1940s and 1950s, with renewed emphasis on domesticity and femininity. Simultaneously, two highly unusual experiments in women's professional sport took place: The All American Girls Professional Baseball League (AAGBBL), and all-girl rodeos. The AAGBBL originated at Chicago, Illinois, in 1942, and began play the following year in small nearby communities. Paris, Bonham, and Wichita Falls, Texas, hosted the first all-girl rodeos in 1942. These early contests led ultimately to the formation of the Girls Rodeo Association (GRA) which began governing and sanctioning-all-girls rodeos in 1948. The GRA is now the Women's Professional Rodeo Association (WPROA). Both all-girl rodeos and AAGBBL began in response to anticipated manpower shortages during World War II and experienced both success and failure during the war years. While the AAGBBL ceased operations in 1954, all-girls rodeos continue today. This study examines the similarities and differences in the AAGBBL and all-girl rodeos, including press treatment and factors contributing to eventual success or failure. Data includes newspapers, archives, scrapbooks and memorabilia, and interviews. While all the data on all-girl rodeos comes from the author's original research, some data on the AAGBBL is from theses and recent publications.

There are major similarities between the two phenomena: Both AAGBBL and all-girl rodeos involved women in sports closely tied to myths of masculinity; both enforced strict rules of dress and conduct, however, cowgirls designed their own regulations while management dictated the AAGBBL rules; and both appeared identical to the male versions, but had different rules. But at the same time, major differences between the two also existed: All-girl rodeos exist today while the AAGBBL does not. Women had a long history of successful participation in Professional rodeo, but not in baseball, while the rodeos originated with women, who initially organized and Produced the contests, males conceived, organized, and governed AAGBBL; after 1948, an all-women's organization governed all-girl rodeos while the AAGBBL did not allow any females in leadership positions; small town papers gave both coverage similar to that accorded the male versions of the sports, while metropolitan dailies did not; and, finally, press coverage for-all-girl rodeos produced by females was superior to that for all-girl rodeos produced by males.

The history of all-girl rodeos and AAGBBL showed that the public would accept and support women's participation in high-level, professional sports, and that the press would sometimes report these events in much the same manner as they reported men's contests. A variety of factors unrelated to the skills of the athletes involved or excitement of the contests led to the demise of the AAGBBL and decline of the all-girl rodeos. The number of females in leadership roles appears to have had a major impact on the greater success of all-girl rodeos. It seems reasonable to suggest that some of the factors that contributed to the success of these events, despite the odds against them, may well be the same ones that can improve the prospects for women's sports today. Scholars regularly comment on the disappearance of female coaches and administrators from women's collegiate sports, yet the situation at the professional level is worse. Women's tennis has come a long way since the pioneering days of Billie Jean King and Gladys Heldman, but it is not the direction they intended. As Michael Mesaw recently noted, the women's tennis tour is a man's world. "Almost everything on the tour is men, except for the players. Men are coaches; the tour is run by men." (*USA Today* 7 May 1993) The tour is experiencing problems. Perhaps there is a connection. Maybe it is time to give women a chance. Female coaches, directors, managers, commissioners, promoters, and publicity agents might have a noticeable and positive impact on women's professional and amateur sports, as they continue to do for women's rodeo.



Rodeo Raconteur, Mary Lou LeCompte