

# *Dear Sisters and Hated Rivals:* Athletics and Gender at Two New South Women's Colleges, 1893-1920

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"Basketball in the most popular game women play," Senda Berenson declared in 1901. Within months of basketball's invention in 1891, women were adopting and adapting it to what were widely accepted as their special needs and capacities. College women, including those from southern institutions more commonly viewed as breeding grounds for languid belles, especially took to the new game. The role of higher education in creating new opportunities for women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is well known, and a number of recent studies have dealt with the role of athletics in redefining gender, both masculine and feminine, in this period. This paper looks at the development of athletics, especially basketball, at two New South women's schools, North Carolina's Normal College and New Orleans' Newcomb College, to explore some of the ways it helped shape new images of southern womanhood.

Both schools sought to train students to be self-supporting, as teachers and leaders of a crusade for improved public education at the Normal and as designers of art deco pottery at Newcomb. The contrasting implications of these occupations were mirrored in the responses of the two schools' students and faculty to the possibilities embodied in the new game of basketball. Immediately popular with the students at the Normal, basketball was seen as promoting teamwork, self-control, physical and moral courage, and competition, qualities widely deemed necessary for success in the heretofore male public sphere. However, the implications of competition, with their classmates on the court and with men in the work place, provoked anxiety and ambivalence on the part of the students who therefore adopted forms of "apologetic behavior" to deny their assertiveness even as they celebrated it. This strategy allowed them to fashion a new

ideal of womanhood that eschewed the passivity and dependence associated with the still influential image of the southern lady without overtly rejecting it.

Newcomb's Clara G. Baer was the first to publish rules for a female version of basketball, which she called "Basquette." (1895) Her rules restricted players' movements on the court and opportunities for aggression and competition more severely than those Senda Berenson would promote some years later and contrasted with the more exuberant student-devised game played by Normal students. The limited vision of the New Woman offered by Newcomb and the influence of Baer on its athletic program meant that the students were less able to realize the expansive implications of sports on gender roles.

This paper is based on student newspapers, memoirs, literary magazines, photographs and annuals from the two schools and on the published writings of Clara Baer.