

The Institutional Politics of Women's Sports In American Colleges, 1920-1950

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Increasingly, sport historians are examining the role of exercise, and athletics in women's lives, in both formal and informal settings. Whatever period or country they study, most scholars consider organized athletics to be a particularly intriguing facet of women's recreational history: In which sports did women participate? Who advocated or opposed female competition, and on what grounds? Recent scholarship has provided both more detailed and accurate information and more sophisticated explanations about women's sporting history.

Studies about women's athletics in twentieth-century America illustrate those general trends. At first, historians concluded that organized sports for girls and women were virtually nonexistent; the primary reason, they suggested, was cultural prejudice about female physicality. Recent work, however, has drawn a more nuanced picture. Many communities, businesses, and schools (black and white, secondary and collegiate) did sponsor high-level competition for girls and women, while others prohibited it or organized less intense athletics. Such information has generated more complex analyses about women's sports; in what respects, historians now ask, were the attitudes of doctors, sports promoters, physical educators, and others affected by such factors as race, class, gender, and professional status? This new multifaceted perspective adds a welcome and necessary dimension to our understanding of women's sports.

It also raises a puzzling question. Why did people of the same race, class, gender, and professional status often implement quite different athletic programs for girls and women? Why, for instance, did white female staff at white colleges create divergent, rather than uniform programs? Similarly, why were the athletic activities that black physical educators organized at minority schools so diverse? One important factor was local conditions; the particularities of an institution - its structure, staff composition, and internal politics - also determined what decisions were reached about women's sports.

To illustrate the point, this paper considers the work of female physical educators at several colleges and universities in the United States between 1920 and 1950. Drawing on archival records of women's physical education departments, student organizations, and administrative offices, this paper explores the complex and dynamic circumstances in which female physical educators developed athletic policies and programs for women undergraduates at various schools. Examples include the University of Michigan (a coeducational public institution), Radcliffe College (a private coordinate college), Howard University (a private black institution), and the diverse schools that sponsored the "Triangle Sports Days" - Mills College, Stanford University, and the University of California-Berkeley.

Decisions about women's sports occurred at the intersection between general factors and local conditions, at the place where the forces of race, class, gender, and professional interests met specific institutional circumstances and constraints. To borrow a slogan from the environmental movement, women physical educators in America thought globally, but acted locally. Through case studies about collegiate sports from 1920 to 1950, the paper adds another layer of complexity to our understanding of women's physical education and athletics in twentieth-century America.