

# WOMEN & GENDER

Elva Bishop  
UNC-TV, North Carolina

## *Women's Basketball: The Road to Respect*

From 1951 to 1953, the state of North Carolina could claim the best women's basketball team in the nation. The Hanes Hosiery team, sponsored by a Winston-Salem, N.C. textile manufacturer, won the national AAU title in 1951, 1952 and 1953. In the absence of a national collegiate title for women, the AAU champion was considered the national champion (although, as was typical of many such 'national' competitions, African Americans were not allowed to participate for many decades). Hanes recruited heavily in North Carolina and in other states, paid for travel and training, and celebrated the team's accomplishments with zeal. In contrast to the philosophy advocated at most of North Carolina's women's colleges, where strenuous sports competition was seen to contradict ideals of proper ladyhood, the working-class community that supported the Hanes team had few such concerns.

Still, while the accomplishments of women's teams were a source of pride within Winston-Salem and many similar communities, women's basketball received little attention outside these circles. In the mid- 1950s, when women's competition found itself besieged by the conservatism of the Cold War era, as well as the North Carolina legislature, the Hanes team was far from immune. In 1954, after the women lost a hard-fought battle for their fourth straight title, Hanes officials decided to disband the team. With the elimination of textile basketball, and of programs at African American colleges, talented North Carolina women had to leave the state to pursue their sport-among them Missouri Arledge, a Durham, N.C. native who competed for Arkansas' Philander Smith College,

and who became the first African American woman ever to win All-American honors. Memories of AAU triumphs were quickly obscured by rising enthusiasm for the state's men's college teams, and most histories written about women's sports have dealt almost exclusively with the non-competitive college game. In the 1970s, when women's competition began to revive, few of the new participants had any knowledge of this earlier history.

This paper discusses the social factors that influenced the rise and fall of the Hanes team, as well as the aftermath of its demise, in the context of the author's work on a public television film documenting AAU women's competition. It relies extensively on interviews with some of these top-level contenders, combining their assessments of their own experience with research into their historical context. It thus adds to the current historical discussion about the ways that class status has affected women's experience of sport. It also explores the workings of national historical memory, and details the challenges of confronting gaps in that memory, challenges that include overcoming skepticism, uncovering basic information and building an audience.