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***We Were Ladies, We Just Played Basketball
Like Boys: African-American Women and
Competitive Basketball at Bennett College
1929 to 1942***

In recent years, scholars of sport history have begun to more fully explore the experiences of African-American women in sport. Some of that research has moved beyond the analytic categories of race and gender to also include class. Although studies pertaining to black female athletic participation and class ideology within the African-

American community are limited, such scholarship has exposed the diversity of sport experiences among black women and served to help eradicate the notion of a monolithic African-American female sport history. This paper contributes to the discussion of the relationship between class standing and sport among African-American women by examining black women's athletic activity in basketball within a middle-class setting, specifically Bennett College of Greensboro, North Carolina from 1929 to 1942.

Throughout this period Bennett supported a women's basketball program and as the decade of the 1930s progressed the team became enormously successful on the court and popular in the black press. By 1937 Bennett laid claim to several state women's intercollegiate basketball titles in North Carolina. Like most black colleges and universities during the 1930s, Bennett sought to uphold middle-class standards of refinement and respectability among its students. College personnel carefully molded and monitored student behaviour, especially among women, and deemed certain actions as unbecoming for a lady and therefore discouraged them. This paper examines the tension between a middle-class ideology which supported traditional conceptualizations of gender relations and the support given competitive female athletic participation in the game of basketball. In other words, the fundamental question here is how a class based ideal which did not appear inclusive of female athletic participation shaped and influenced women's basketball at Bennett College. In an effort to explore how Bennett College personnel, the athletes themselves, and the larger black community came to understand and view black women's college basketball I utilize oral histories, various published materials from Bennett College, and articles in the black press.

The decade of the 1930s is an interesting one in the history of black women's college basketball. While some black colleges and universities abandoned earlier support of basketball among female students, other institutions like Bennett. continued to encourage and provide women with the opportunity to compete on an intercollegiate level. By the early 1940s however Bennett had discontinued intercollegiate basketball and instead begin to participate in less competitive play day events. This paper argues that tensions surrounding women's physicality and sport existed throughout the 1920s and 1930s among middle-class African-Americans and contributed to the eventual demise of intercollegiate basketball on the Bennett Campus in 1942. The intent of this paper is to bring a class analysis to the study of African-American women's participation in competitive intercollegiate basketball during the first half of the twentieth century. The focus is on a single black institution and therefore, my conclusions do not attempt to speak to the athletic experiences of women at all black colleges and universities during the 1920s to the 1940s. Rather, this paper attempts to prompt further discussion among sport historians concerning the complex intersection of class, gender, and race.