

GENDER AND RACE

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The Decline of Women's Basketball Competition at Historically Black Colleges and Universities in North Carolina, 1940-1945

During the first half of the 1940s several black North Carolina colleges and universities discontinued their earlier support of women's basketball competition. From the late 1920s there had been an extensive statewide program of basketball competition for female students at the dozen African-American institutions of higher education in North Carolina. This reached its zenith in the late 1930s when a number of schools routinely competed in ten to fifteen game schedules. However, by the mid 1940s only a handful of schools remained committed to women's intercollegiate competition and these played very limited schedules compared to those of the earlier years. Moreover, the colleges that continued to sponsor the women's game in the 1940s were forced to travel greater distances in search of competition. Using reports in the black press, oral histories, school newspapers, athletic committee minutes, and other archival materials, this paper explores the decline of African-American women's participation in intercollegiate basketball in North Carolina.

Without question, the entrance of the United States into World War II had a negative impact on black college sport in North Carolina. As students left college campuses to aid the war effort, athletic rosters were depleted. Yet, despite the wartime crisis, black colleges struggled to maintain athletic competition for men. Although football programs were decimated during the war, basketball teams continued to compete, and in some cases, flourish. This was not the case for women's basketball, however. The trend there was toward many fewer opportunities for competition.

I argue that the curtailment of women's basketball competition at historically black colleges in North Carolina had less to do with the war than with the constant and increasing tension surrounding female involvement in rigorous athletic activities. Although there was ambivalence in the black community concerning women's participation in basketball well before the 1940s for the most part college officials ignored those concerns and offered women the opportunity to compete. By the late 1930s and early 1940s, however, there were indications that educational leaders were questioning the compatibility of

women's participation in competitive basketball and their ideal of black womanhood. Intercollegiate athletics for women were replaced with less competitive forms of sport, such as intramurals and play-days which appeared to better suit the sensibilities of college administrators. Thus, by 1945 there was little opportunity for women to compete in intercollegiate basketball at historically black colleges and universities in North Carolina.