

# GENDER

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## **Autonomy and Obscurity, the Only Options for Netball in Britain?**

Netball, essentially a British counterpart to women's rules basketball as played in North America, became a staple of physical education classes at girls' schools by the 1920s. The All-England Women's Netball Association was formed in 1926 and the game enjoyed significant popularity among those who had left school. The growth of the game can, in part, be measured by the increase in adult leagues.

Until well after the Second World War, netball was a sport played and administered almost exclusively by women. Such female autonomy came at the price of almost total obscurity as far as the national press was concerned. This paper addresses the issues raised in such a situation. Did the women running the sport consciously value their autonomy and use it to develop and maintain distinctly feminine qualities within netball? Did they resent, and seek to correct, their 'invisibility,' or were they content to nurture their sport in isolation from the competitive and commercialized ethos of many contemporary male sports?

My tentative conclusions are that those administering netball were anxious to gain recognition for a 'national' sport particularly if that would result in the increasing availability of facilities. They were thus consistently seeking strategies to gain the attention of the press and radio. Leaders of the sport were ambivalent on the defense of what they viewed as the particularly female qualities of netball. They recognized the importance of the growth of competitive structures as a means of encouraging participation among school-leavers. On the other hand, they clearly saw an unrestrained competitive drive as a threat to the very qualities that they believed made the sport eminently suitable for women. As enthusiasts for netball they certainly overestimated the appeal of the game, appearing at times to believe that it was lack of opportunity alone that prevented every woman from playing the sport.

In addition to work by Kathleen McCrone, Jennifer Hargreaves, Sheila Fletcher, and Susan Cahn that sets up the context of the discussion, the paper is based on research into the journal *Netball*, published from 1933. It also draws on interviews with some forty women, all born before 1950, as to their experiences of the sport.