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Mere Feminines: An Examination of the Five Versus Six-Player Rule Debate in the Black Press During the 1920s and 1930s

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, basketball competition for African-American girls and women flourished across many areas of the United States. In addition to secondary and college basketball, community teams, elementary schools, and faculty teams complemented the vast number of institutions supporting female participation in the game. Despite the popularity of female competitive basketball in this period, there were some that strove to discourage all participation by girls and women. Others encouraged female involvement but urged the use of the more restrictive, six-player game, which they viewed as a more appropriate and suitable game for girls and women.

This paper explores the debate in the black press of the 1920s and 1930s over the use of five or six-player basketball rules for girls and women. The sport pages of the black press routinely reported athletic activities for girls and women during this period. Beyond game summaries and player profiles, newspapers carried stories discussing, and sometimes featuring, the issue of five versus six-player basketball and these reflected the diverse opinions of members of the black community. Some African-Americans believed that female participation in basketball using men's rules encouraged behavior and conduct on the court that risked the health of the participants and tarnished a certain ideal of womanhood. Still others argued that girls and women had the strength and endurance to engage in five-player basketball, and that the notion of female frailty was wrong.

I argue that despite the general support for the game, the debate over game rules reflected constant unease and tension concerning African-American female involvement in basketball. Moreover, the oppositional views presented in the pages of the black press illustrated tensions and negotiations of the boundaries of black womanhood that were ongoing during the 1920s and 1930s.

This paper contributes to the continuing examination by scholars of African-American women's experiences in sport. Moreover, in exploring the dynamics of gender in the black community, as reflected in the black press, it serves to reinforce the notion that gender arrangements are constructed and reconstructed by communities within the context of existing cultural constraints.



John Lucas clocks up another few miles with friends.