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Scrappy and Untidy? Physical Contact and Iowa Girls' Basketball

Women's basketball has occupied an important place in the story of women's sport history in North America. Controversies and conversations about the rules, participants, spectators. coaches, uniforms, and style of play have existed for nearly as long as the game itself. Sport and gender historians (Joan Hult, Susan Cahn, Mary Jo Festle, Rita Liberti and others) argue that women's basketball is an important site for looking at the way gender relations are constructed, re-constructed and contested. I take a similar approach in this paper but focus specifically on the discourses surrounding physical contact in women's basketball.

Many of the early rules for women's basketball were designed to prevent physical contact and overexertion; this has been well-established. The rationale behind these rules included a desire to preserve "lady-like" behavior and decorum in order to make the game acceptable for females to play. The divided court system (first three-court, later two-court) and limited dribbles were designed to limit the amount of space players could move in and ultimately minimize physical contact between players. Rules on guarding and possession prohibited physical touch. Cahn suggests that early rules against contact were based on concerns about female frailty, sexual modesty and mental health. Although some of these worries passed, rules remained the minimized physical contact, for example the two-court, six-player game ("girls' rules") was played in Iowa until 1993.

Despite these efforts to control women's bodies, many female athletes played differently than the rules intended. I argue that Iowa girls' high school basketball teams certainly contested "girls' rules" in this way. In a variety of sources I examine the ways that physical contact, femininity and masculinity were represented by, and to, a local and

national audience. I am particularly interested in the discourse on this topic during the negotiated and contested period encompassing the introduction of five-player ("boy's rules") game and eventual replacement of the six-player (girls' rules") game. My sources include oral histories, archival records, local and national popular press, *Iowa Girls' Basketball Yearbooks*, the *Official Basketball Guides*, and secondary sources.

Although much has been written about the rationale behind the rules for women's basketball, there is a need to explore the ways that these rules were "played out" on the court, in the community, and in the media. Likewise, the introduction of five-player rules for females must be included in this exploration. As the state which continued to sponsor six-player basketball until 1993, Iowa offers a particularly rich site for the endeavor.