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“Cornography”: Selling Women’s Professional Basketball in Iowa: A Girls’ Basketball State

On March 21, 1978, the first team franchise for the newly formed Women’s Professional Basketball League (WBL) was awarded to Iowa. George Nissen, a long-time benefactor of amateur American gymnasts, bought the franchise and named the team the Iowa Comets. Nissen chose the name to reflect that this team belonged to the whole state and to recognize Iowa’s reputation as “the corn state.” He wanted Iowans to have pride in this team thus the Comets were named for the state, rather than a particular city. The Iowa Comets not only took the state’s name, but also played their home games in eight different cities in an effort to gain statewide support. Nissen compared his financial venture to growing corn, “The word corn is in there and if you put enough fertilizer on corn it will grow.” The team colors, green and gold, and a similarly painted team bus called the “Corn Dog” contributed to the characterization of this play on Iowa’s nationally known crop as “cornography.”

Besides corn, Iowans were also nationally known for their support of high school girls’ basketball, a phenomenon the Comets hoped would carry over to women’s basketball. Iowans seemingly and whole-heartedly embraced high school girls’ basketball, but only the version played in their state. At that time, in the late 1970s, Iowa still played by the half-court, 6-player rules that were

first utilized in the beginning on the twentieth century. This game was known in Iowa as "6-on-6" and the full-court, five-player game played at the professional, college, and high school level (in all but a few states) was referred to as "5-on-5." As Janice Beran and other sport historians have noted, Iowa girls played competitive basketball throughout the twentieth century, while many other states and localities gave up their programs in the 1920s and '30s at the urging of women's physical educators and sport reformers. However, despite the change in national rules to the 5-player game in 1969, and tremendous growth in the number of schools offering 5-player basketball following the enactment of Title IX in 1972, Iowa continued to play by the then-outdated rules. The Iowa Girls' High School Athletic Union (IGHSAU) came under fire for their staunch refusal to switch to the 5-player rules and as a result, faced legal challenges in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The legal challenges to 6-on-6 and the ensuing debate over the rules captured the attention of the state, its leaders, and the Iowa Cornets organization. In the middle of all this controversy, the Iowa Cornets were attempting to sell their brand of basketball (5-on-5) to a fan-base reportedly largely resistant to it. The marketing strategies and media coverage of and by the Cornets reflected both local and national debates concerning girls' and women's place in basketball, and more generally, within sport itself. According to Mary Jo Festle, the debates at the national level (concerning the WBL) were not so much whether females could play "real" basketball (i.e. 5-on-5) but whether those who excelled were "real" females. In Iowa, however, the debates were typically cast in terms of girls' physicality. Did girls have the stamina and strength to play full-court? Could all girls shoot a basketball? The purpose of this paper is to examine how the Cornets negotiated the tension originating in a need to promote the 5-player game to fans of 6-on-6, especially when many Iowans were concerned that girls could not effectively play full-court basketball. I argue that an awareness of the popularity and tradition of 6-on-6, the signing and promotion of Iowa players, and an acknowledgment of the anxieties concerning ongoing legal and cultural threats to this style of play were important parts of the Cornets' strategy. Through recruiting, marketing, press releases and media coverage, the Cornets were careful not to offend the basketball aficionados they hoped to attract. The Iowa Cornets

heralded the merits of the 6-player game while simultaneously promoting the 5-player women's professional game – the very game many Iowans were loath to see their high school girls play.
