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# A History of Women in Sport Prior to Title IX

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## Abstract:

Women's opportunities for competitive physical activity were limited in America until Federal Legislation, commonly referred to as Title IX, became law. It required American society to recognize a woman's right to participate in sports on a plane equal to that of men. Prior to 1870, activities for women were recreational rather than sport-specific in nature. They were noncompetitive, informal, rule-less; they emphasized physical activity rather than competition. In the late 1800's and early 1900's, women began to form clubs that were athletic in nature. Efforts to limit women's sport activity continued as they became more involved in competitive sports. This paper will present a history of women's involvement in sport prior to the federal legislation enacted to eliminate sexual discrimination in education and sport.

## *Early Women's Sports*

Certainly, women engaged in sport three millennia ago. Homer, c 800 B.C., relates the story of Princess Nausicaa playing ball with her handmaidens next to a riverbank on the island of Scheria. "When she and her handmaids were satisfied with their delightful food, each set aside the veil she wore: the young girls now played ball; and as they tossed the ball..." (Homer, lines 98-102). Odysseus was awakened by the shouts of the girls engaged in their sport. Thousands of years later, the shouts of girls playing ball finally awoke the United States to the need for sport-specific opportunities for women.

Prior to 1870, sports for women existed in the form of play activities that were recreational rather than competitive and, being informal and without rules, emphasized physical activity (Gerber, Felshin, Berlin, & Wyrick, 1974). A dominant belief in the 1800s was that each human had a fixed amount of energy. If this energy

were used for physical and intellectual tasks at the same time, it could be hazardous (Park & Hult, 1993). Horseback riding for pleasure, showboating, and swimming became fashionable, but women were not encouraged to exert themselves. Such physical activity for a woman was thought to be especially hazardous because during menstruation she was "periodically weakened" (Clarke, 1874, p. 100). In 1874, as women were beginning to gain access to higher education, Dr. Edward Clarke published *Sex in Education; or, A Fair Chance for Girls*, which sparked a tenacious and acrimonious debate about the capacity of women for physical activity. He stated that, "both muscular and brain labor must be reduced at the onset of menstruation" ( p. 102). Manipulating science to reinforce established dogma prevailed for many years in spite of repeated examples of women who were perfectly capable of performing physical feats and intellectual tasks. Many early opportunities for women to engage in physical activity were thwarted as a result of this dogma (Park & Hult).

As more women sought to become involved in physical activity, they became more competitive. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, women began to form informal athletic clubs. Tennis, croquet, bowling, and archery were popular in clubs from New York to New Orleans. Many men's clubs allowed women to become associates and to participate in separate activities, though without according them full status. Parallel clubs in colleges began to appear during this time, but a major difference between the social metropolitan clubs and the college clubs was that the latter frequently sponsored coed competition as occasions for social gatherings (Gerber, et al., 1974).

### *College Sports for Women Prior to Title IX*

Early college sports for women have been largely unrecognized by historians because competition was within college between students (intramural) rather than between the institutions (extramural). Competitions included intramural, club, and sorority matches, in addition to 'play days'. These were special dates when women competed in sports and activities against students and teams from their schools. By 1936, 70% of colleges surveyed used this as a predominant form of sport participation for women (Hult, 1994).

Women's physical educators were aware of the problems and criticism surrounding men's intercollegiate athletics. They were determined to keep athletics in an educational environment for women. In the early 1900s, the Committee on Women's Athletics (CWA) and the American Physical Education Association (APEA) endorsed programs of broad participation for women

(Park & Hult, 1993). This occurred just as the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching produced its 1929 report, *American College Athletics*, reporting that amateurism was being eliminated or modified from athletics at the college level as colleges turned athletics into big business. The report argued that there should be a way to give "athletics back to the boys" (Thelin, 1994). These views were uppermost in the minds of many women's physical educators as they met to organize a governing organization for women's sports. In the 1920s, the Women's Division-National Amateur Athletic Federation (NAAF) was formed to organize intercollegiate competition among women (Park & Hult).

Women were not active in intercollegiate sport until basketball was introduced at Smith College in 1892 (Gerber, et al., 1974). Basketball quickly spread to other colleges, and students began to clamor for intercollegiate play. Women's physical educators opposed such competition because they were not ready to lose control over their programs (as they perceived the men had) (Gerber, et al.). The first intercollegiate competition among women was a scheduled tennis tournament between Bryn Mawr and Vassar. It was canceled because the Vassar faculty did not allow their women's athletes to participate in competition between colleges (Hult, 1994). The honor of being the first teams to compete in women's intercollegiate athletics belongs to the basketball teams of the University of California, Berkeley vs. Stanford and the University of Washington vs. Ellensburg Normal School; they played in 1896 (Gerber, et al.).

Competitive events for college women increased in the early 1900s. The nature of varsity competition was in conflict with the philosophy of women's physical educators in the 1920s and 1930s, so these events were still uncommon. This philosophical conflict contributed to a lack of support for women's varsity athletics. The NAAF provided a forum for women's physical educators and leaders of women's sports to formalize their beliefs regarding competition for girls and women by issuing a policy statement of the organizations goals for women. The goals were established to "play for play's sake," limit awards and travel, protect the participant from exploitation, discourage "sensational" publicity, and place qualified women in immediate charge of athletics and other physical activities (Gerber, et al., 1974). The motto was "every girl in a sport and a sport for every girl." This position was interpreted by many as negative to competition and, as a consequence, virtually all forms of competitive sport for college women decreased in the early 1900s (Gerber, et al.).

The women's suffrage movement in the late nineteenth and twentieth century resulted in the passage of the

Nineteenth Amendment in 1920. The right to vote for women renewed emphasis on women's freedoms. The first feminist movement resulted in modest gains for women in sports and intercollegiate competition, but these gains were negated by the depression in the 1930s. They would remain dormant for almost fifty years (Gelb & Palley, 1987). The depression left millions of Americans out of work, and the resulting campaign to keep women home and out of the work force left the women's movement for broadened equal rights stagnating. The expectations of society were that a woman's place was 'in the home,' which pushed aside the idea that there were psychological and physiological benefits to be gained from involvement in sport. This view remained largely unchanged until the events of the 1940s (Lucas & Smith, 1982).

The 1940s brought war to the United States and millions of men entered the military. Many women joined the military service or left their positions as homemakers to fill the void left in the work force, earning the moniker, "Rosie the Riveter." They demonstrated that they were equal to the task. The self-esteem and self-confidence gained by women during these critical times propelled the movement for women's equal rights. Many women believed that if they could compete successfully in the work force, then they could certainly compete on the athletic fields (Chafe, 1972). World War II also saw the advent of the first woman's professional athletic team. The All-American Girls Baseball League was started in 1943 as an attempt to replace Major League Baseball, which had been canceled due to the war. When World War II ended, organizations for women in sport began to increase as sport became more competitive and intercollegiate and interscholastic competition spread (Gerber, et al., 1974).

In the 1950s and 1960s, the social conscience of America was changing. The push for Civil Rights, which culminated in the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, helped increase the status of women and minorities. A wave of feminist activism was born (Gelb & Palley, 1996). Feminist activism propelled the movement for women's rights forward. The United States became embroiled in the debate for an Equal Rights Amendment. This debate raised the consciousness of those involved in women's sport. Collegiate women seeking greater athletic opportunities moved closer to their goals in 1957, when the long-entrenched official position statement of the Division for Girls and Women in Sport (DGWS) was amended to state that intercollegiate programs "may" exist. In 1963, the DGWS view of women in sport evolved further to state that it was "desirable" that intercollegiate programs for women exist (Gerber, et al., 1974).

In 1966, the DGWS appointed a Commission on Intercollegiate Sports for Women (CISW) to assist in conducting intercollegiate competitions. In 1967, it was renamed the Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (CIAW). The women's movement in sport was rapidly moving toward a status more in line with men's athletics. In 1969, a schedule of national championships for women's sports was announced that included gymnastics and track and field. Swimming, badminton, and volleyball followed in 1970 and in 1972, basketball was added. Women wanted an institutional membership organization similar to the NCAA. The CIAW was replaced by the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (AIAW) in 1971. This set the stage for the struggle to control women's athletics in the 1970s between the AIAW and the NCAA (Gerber, et al., 1974).

The increasingly positive attitude toward women in sport carried over into the 1970s (Hult, 1994). The AIAW began the 1971-1972 academic year with 278 charter institutions. By 1981, their membership exceeded 800. Their mission was to "lead and conduct" programs at the collegiate level that were competitive for women (Hulstrand, 1993). The AIAW focused on the female student-athlete's education, not on athletic performance, and thus rejected the 'win or die' attitude of the NCAA. Instead, the AIAW emphasized participation in sport as the most important aspect and de-emphasized winning (Sperber, 1990).

### *The Evolution of Title IX*

The new wave of feminism within the larger social reforms sought by the Civil Rights movement moved women closer to legislative action for greater equal treatment in athletics. The concept that federal legislation was to eliminate sexual discrimination was the main focus of women's groups in the late 1960s and early 1970s. At their first national conference in 1967, the National Organization for Women (NOW) adopted a platform that read in part "...the right of women to be educated to their full potential equally with men be secured by Federal and State legislation" (Boles, 1989, p.643).

Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 was paid little attention in the early legislative efforts to codify these rights. Court-ordered busing in the other Titles of the Omnibus Education Amendments took the spotlight (Palley & Preston, 1978). It was only after Title IX was passed, when the question surrounding implementation arose, that opposition to Title IX took place (Gelb & Palley, 1987). After the passage of Title IX, Congress built in a six-year period for secondary and post-secondary schools to achieve compliance. The date for compliance by colleges and universities was 1978.

Interpretation and enforcement were vested in the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (Carpenter, 1993).

The critical element lacking after the passage of Title IX was the implementation legislation that would specify how it was to be applied and to whom. Passage of the implementation legislation was not easy; many self-interest groups sought to erode the legislation. In 1974, approximately sixty women's and feminist groups formed a coalition called the Education Task Force (which would later become the National Coalition for Women and Girls in Education) (Gelb & Palley). It was largely as a result of their persistent and dedicated efforts through lobbying that Title IX was successful.

The NCAA became concerned by what it perceived to be the potential weakening of its position as the dominant and controlling body of intercollegiate athletics. If Title IX was to apply to intercollegiate sports at all levels and women were to be elevated to a status equal to the men, its financial assets and political power were threatened. The first approach of the NCAA, when faced with the threat of equality in intercollegiate athletics, was to attempt to limit Title IX's application. The NCAA tried to offer its interpretation of Title IX (Acosta & Carpenter, 1985). It encouraged a narrow interpretation of the law, excluding athletic departments from the scope of Title IX. The NCAA argued that because athletic departments did not receive federal funds, they should be excluded from compliance. Nonetheless, when the NCAA sought to limit the application of Title IX, it began to address the issue of control of women's athletics in earnest.

The NCAA observed the growth of women's athletics and looked to the increased financial base and political power to be gained from exerting control over women's intercollegiate athletics. It set out to force the AIAW out of control (Hult, 1994). The strategy was to absorb the AIAW into its current structure while offering women's championships outside the AIAW to effectively link schools to the NCAA. Because there was no alternative mechanism for determining college-level champions, this strategy could have been successful (Stern, 1979). The NCAA decided to form its own NCAA Women's Committee and exclude the AIAW (Carpenter, 1993). The NCAA had never shown an interest in women's athletics before Title IX because there was nothing that required female participation at a national level. Thus, it chose not to pursue women's athletics. "The formation of this committee was politically significant because prior to this time the NCAA had demonstrated no interest whatever in taking responsibility for women's sports" (Carpenter, 1993, p. 83).

In the fall of 1974, the NCAA agreed to a meeting with

the AIAW. The NCAA wanted the AIAW to affiliate itself with the NCAA; the AIAW hoped to form a joint committee to draw up rules. The NCAA did not consider the AIAW its equal and it would not agree to a 50-50 joint union and equal representation at all policy-making levels (Festle, 1996).

At its 1973 convention, the NCAA waived the regulation barring women from men's events, thinking that the compromise of allowing a token female to compete in the NCAA championships would help avoid charges of sex discrimination and help avoid offending the AIAW while avoiding any real commitment to women's athletics (Festle, 1996). The NCAA continued to be concerned about the loss of power and control over intercollegiate athletics as it began to sense that the idea of equal opportunity for women in intercollegiate athletics was the direct aim of the Federal Government. The NCAA needed to implement an acceptable policy without delay (Festle).

The NCAA was a powerful adversary for the AIAW because of its wealth, political influence, and long history. The NCAA decided to introduce women's championships for intercollegiate sports by offering the institutions sponsoring women's sports a proposition that ultimately led to the demise of the AIAW. The NCAA offered to: (a) pay all expenses for teams competing in a national championship, (b) charge no additional membership fees for schools to add women's programs, (c) create financial aid, recruitment, and eligibility rules that were the same for women as for men, and finally, (d) guarantee women more television coverage. The NCAA had earmarked three million dollars to support women's championships. The AIAW could not compete with the NCAA inducements and the loss of membership, income, championship sponsorship, and media rights forced the AIAW to cease operations on June 30, 1982 (Festle, 1996). The AIAW sued the NCAA for allegedly violating the Sherman Anti-Trust Act, but was unsuccessful when the courts ruled that the market for women's athletics was open for competition, therefore no anti-trust laws had been violated (Schubert, Schubert, & Schubert-Madsen, 1991).

Subsequent to Title IX, women and girls have become much more involved in sports. College women's athletic participation has increased from 15% in 1972 to 43% in 2001. High school girl's athletic participation increased from 295,000 in 1971 to 2.8 million in 2002-2003, an increase of over 840%. In 2004, the average number of teams offered for females per college/university was 8.32, up from 2.50 per school in 1972 (Carpenter & Acosta, 2005). In 1981-82, women's championships became a part of the NCAA program. Today, the NCAA sponsors forty women's championships, thirty-eight

men's championships, and three combined championships in all three of its divisions (NCAA, 2005).

It can be seen that women's involvement in sport was slow to develop. Opportunities for participation and recognition were almost non-existent for centuries. It was not until the advent of the equal rights movements and Title IX that women truly found a place as participants in the world of sport and in the public arena.

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