Sweating Femininity: Women Athletes, Masculine Culture, and American Inequality from 1930 to the Present

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SWEATING FEMININITY: WOMEN ATHLETES, MASCUINE CULTURE, AND AMERICAN INEQUALITY FROM 1930 TO THE PRESENT

A Dissertation Presented

by

MICHELLA M. MARINO

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

May 2013

Department of History
SWEATING FEMININITY: WOMEN ATHLETES, MASCULINE CULTURE, AND AMERICAN INEQUALITY FROM 1930 TO THE PRESENT

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To Tony
Thank you. For everything.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the spectacular members of my committee for all their help and support throughout this process: Chris Appy, Joyce Berkman, Pat Griffin, Jennifer Fronc, and Brian Bunk. Together, they were my perfect team. I would also like to thank my academic lifemate Laura Miller. She practically knows as much about this project as I do. She’s read countless drafts, been my constant sounding board, and offered much needed advice throughout the past six years. And she’s an editing rock star. Chris Parcells’ diligent transcribing skills must be acknowledged as well as his encouragement. Thank you as well, my friend. I absolutely owe a heartfelt thanks and thanks again to each and every one of my interviewees: When times got tough, I was able to continue on because of your stories. All my family and friends have provided unwavering support, particularly my sisters Erin Flynn and Sara Crafton. And last but never least, I want to thank Tony Marino, my husband and self-described “mediator.” Yes, that’s male editor. Laura was my female editor. He transcribed, he researched, he read, he re-read (often against his will), and more importantly, he supported. Unconditionally.
ABSTRACT

SWEATING FEMININITY: WOMEN ATHLETES, MASCULINE CULTURE, AND AMERICAN INEQUALITY FROM 1930 TO THE PRESENT

MAY 2013

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Despite a long history of participation in sports, women have yet to gain equal access to this male-dominated realm. The national sports culture continues to regard them as marginal, if not invisible. For more than a century, women athletes have struggled against a subordinate status based on rigid definitions of female sexuality, an emphasis on white middle-class standards of beauty, and restrictive cultural expectations of motherhood.

This dissertation, however, reveals a vital story of feminist women who have consistently stretched the boundaries of gender and have actively carved out their own identities as women, athletes, and mothers while playing an integral role in the development of sports. Drawing on oral history, archival materials, and a wide range of other sources, I provide a comparative analysis of women’s experiences playing basketball and Roller Derby. These two sports have included women from their outset and at different times both challenged society’s restrictions on women’s femininity, sexuality, and physical abilities. One of my major objectives is to explore and explain
the tension between women’s representation and agency, between cultural constructs and women’s lives, between images of women and their individual identities. Both women and men struggle for self-definition in the world they inhabit, and they often surmount formidable obstacles on the path to change not only themselves but also the ideals against which they measure themselves. In a culture that champions individualism, women “sweat” their identities because they want to be themselves, yet realize that self-definition is still shaped by a powerful set of cultural ideals and pressures about what it means to be male or female, man or woman, boy or girl.

While these women sporting pioneers pushed their way into the public limelight, they worked to prove that athleticism could in fact be a part of the female identity, even while that identity was continually in flux. But until American society is ready to accept women as viable athletes, realize that athleticism can be a feminine and masculine quality, and allow women to play multiple roles, women will continue to sweat their femininity.
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INTRODUCTION

“There’s just nothing feminine or enchanting about a girl with beads of perspiration on her alabaster brow, the result of grotesque contortions in events totally unsuited to female architecture.”

“I watched those [male] players for clues to myself... I desired a certain way to be. Long-limbed and loose. Sweating victory.”
Megan McNamer, “Longing and Bliss,” in Whatever It Takes, 1995

I was a four-year starter on my Varsity basketball team at a small high school in central Indiana. I lived, loved, and breathed basketball. I loved the smell of popcorn that permeated the stale gym air. I loved the sound of the ball when it swished through the net without making any contact with the orange metal rim. I loved stealing the ball from my opponents and sprinting down to the other end of the court on a fast break. I loved the sound of my high-top Nikes squeaking on the wooden floor. But more than anything else, I loved the competition. I loved to win.

My late 1990s high school basketball career came a quarter-century after the historic passage of Title IX in 1972, which was supposed to grant women equal access to sports. I had never heard of Title IX growing up. All I knew was from a very young age I loved to play basketball. It was in my blood. My mother, aunts, and uncle played in the 1970s and 80s. My grandfather was a winning and highly-esteemd girls’ and boys’ high school coach. My great-grandmother played at our school in the 1930s. My entire family gathered after church on Sundays to play a half-court game on the goal behind our
house. No one had ever questioned my right to play just because I was a girl. In fact, I was encouraged to play hard, to excel, to win.

Yet before each of my high school games, I quickly ran out of the locker room and into the adjacent bathroom to take a final look in the mirror. Had my mascara smudged during the shoot-around? Was my eyeliner smeared at all? Was my ponytail high enough after warm-ups? Was my flip-bun securely yet fashionably in place? If it was too high and perky, I would look like a cheerleader. I despised the thought of that. If it was too low and unkempt, it would look masculine or dykish. That was completely unacceptable as well. After a couple of tugs and tucks, I would tell myself that was as good as it was going to get. It was time to play. But if I had not adjusted it just right, a nagging feeling would linger until the game started and bigger concerns emerged.

After the game, win or lose, we players would have to go out and face the crowd, our parents, friends, and boyfriends. We rarely showered but instead would throw on comfy clothes—generally some combination of sweats, a t-shirt, running pants, sweatshirt, and/or flannel pants. I would reapply my make-up and redo my hair the best I could despite the fact it was completely drenched in sweat. I would put on my earrings, grab my boyfriend’s letter jacket and head out to face the crowd and recap the game with my family and friends.¹

I increased this beauty-ritualized behavior during my basketball career at a small NCAA Division III college in southeastern Indiana, adding even more to my pre-and

¹ At my high school, it was not as popular for girls to buy or wear their own letter jackets. Even though I had plenty of Varsity letters myself, I reveled in wearing my boyfriend’s black and gold jacket adorned with patches and letter bars signifying his athletic accomplishments, not mine. This actually suggests that my real accomplishment, or rather more valuable one, was in landing such an athletic boyfriend.
post-game routine. I donned either a navy blue, white, or red hair ribbon in my ponytail before each game and wore colorful striped or tie-dyed knee-high socks that I was determined to make the new fad. But more importantly, I began to articulate my fear of how I looked on the court and felt I had to justify playing college basketball to any person I met. When asked if I played sports or what kind of activities I was into, I would always respond with “I play basketball, and no, I’m not a lesbian.” I tried to cut off what was almost always their next question by just addressing it upfront. Like many women athletes before me, I felt constrained by society’s sexual norms and expectations.

Women athletes have continually struggled with this identity conflict throughout the history of their participation in sports. It is this tension that I explore throughout my dissertation.

**Sweating Femininity**

The title “Sweating Femininity” highlights the core tension women experience when participating in athletics. Historically, Americans have viewed sweating as a male signifier, unwelcome if not impossible among women (“Horses sweat, men perspire, women merely glow” went one common expression). But this masculine act, one unbecoming in women, is ultimately the goal when playing sports. Success in sports requires athletes to play hard, endure intense competition, and push their bodies to their physical limits, all of which result in sweat. This sweat indicates manly vigor, masculinity, and heroism; indeed, every bead of sweat represents a dedicated effort.²

Yet women are not supposed to sweat except in the most basic female function of giving birth, i.e. reproductive labor. Although labor serves as a part of her very essence

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and human function, sweating at any other time detracts from a woman’s femininity. Sweat causes her make-up to smear and run, leaves stains on pretty clothes, and ruins the time-consuming voluminous hairdo. As Susan Brownmiller notes, “A sweating woman is a wrecked illusion.” This illusion insists that women are passive, weak, and in need of protection. Sweat, on the other hand, serves as signifier of hard work and success, which historically are traits linked to men, while the importance of appearance and beauty are attributes linked to the female sex. Traditionally, woman’s looks have been more important and valued more than her contributions to the world, her own personal success, and her enjoyment of exercise and sport. As the path-breaking neurological surgeon and female athlete Frances K. Conley recalled about her youth in the 1940s and 50s, “Girls were not expected to enjoy physical activity. After all, how could one attract boys with wet, sweaty hair that inevitably dried into unruly waves and curls?”

Sports have generally been defined and imagined as a masculine realm, enjoyed by men, controlled by men, and used by men as a space in which to define their manhood. However, American women have shared in the long history of athletics and

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3 Brownmiller, 149.
4 Brownmiller, 228.
6 For specific works on masculinity and sports, see Michael A. Messner’s Power at Play: Sports and the Problem of Masculinity; Michael A. Messner’s Out of Play: Critical Essays on Gender and Sport; Jim McKay, Michael A. Messner, and Don Sabo’s Masculinities, Gender Relations, and Sport; Michael A. Messner and Don Sabo, eds. Sport, Men, and the Gender Order: Critical Feminist Perspectives. For more on American masculinity in general, see Anthony E. Rotundo’s American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era and Mark C. Carnes and Clyde Griffen’s Meanings for Manhood: Constructions of Masculinity in Victorian American, and Gail Bederman’s Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917.
competition despite the tension between appearance, physical exertion, and sweat. Women participated in American sports almost from their inception and contributed to their growth and popularity. Even with their active participation, women have not yet gained equal access or full admission to this male-dominated realm. The persistence of gender discrimination in athletics inspired historian June Sochen to state, “No phenomenon illustrates the cultural divisions between men and women more dramatically.”

From the late 19th century onwards, women insisted that they too had a right to participate in and enjoy the benefits of sports. Long after the Victorian-era model of the inactive, physically weak woman who frequently fainted gave way to the modern athletic girl who enjoyed the wind on her face as she pedaled her bicycle down the street, critics insisted that women’s participation in the male-realm of sports would either masculinize the fairer sex or would feminize masculine sport. Women’s athletics were at times discouraged, downplayed, modified, and compensated. Yet they were also glorified, encouraged, expanded, and promoted. During the mid-twentieth century, tensions mounted between these competing schools of thought concerning the nature of women’s sports and women athletes. These concerns lingered throughout the second half of the twentieth century, despite the advance in young women’s access to organized sport through Title IX of the Education Amendments Act passed in 1972. Ultimately, the tension between remaining feminine while playing hard forms the central theme in

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women’s sports history. This issue has yet to be resolved even now in the first decades of the new millennium.

So the questions remain. Does playing sports actually negate women’s femininity? Must women exude femininity to be successful in sports? How, if at all, has women’s participation in sports changed dominant societal definitions of femininity? How have women athletes responded to descriptions of athletes, and in turn, defined themselves? How have women dealt with the physical aspects of sports and pregnancy and motherhood? With these questions in hand, I explore the tension between women’s representation and agency, between cultural constructs and women’s lives, between women’s images and identities. Both women and men struggle for self-definition in the world they inhabit, and they often come across seemingly insurmountable obstacles on the path to change not only themselves but also the ideals against which they measure themselves. In a culture that champions individualism, women “sweat” their identities because they want to be themselves, yet realize that self-definition is still shaped by a powerful set of cultural ideals and pressures about what it means to be male or female, man or woman, boy or girl. This dissertation examines how women athletes have struggled to shape their own lives and identities in the face of challenges from a variety of cultural and economic forces that have ultimately led them to sweat their femininity.

The national media and popular sports publications are in many ways to blame for women athletes sweating their own identity. Publications such as Sports Illustrated constantly reported on and continue to cover such famous male sports figures as Babe Ruth, Jackie Robinson, Joe Namath, Larry Bird, Magic Johnson, Kobe Bryant, and

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Peyton Manning. These are common household names. Occasionally, a woman sports figure works her way into the popular media and mainstream culture such as Babe Didrikson, Billie Jean King, or Pat Summit. However, other ground-breaking female athletes have helped transform the sports world and larger culture for women but they are largely absent from the national picture. Who, for instance, has heard of Nera White or Molly Bolin? Who recalls Gerry Murray, Toughie Brasuhn, Darlene Anderson, and Joan Weston? What prevents these revolutionary sports figures from becoming household names?

An important yet unknown or at least underground history exists for these women’s sports. On the national level, the dominant sports culture says that these women are largely invisible and marginal, but I have pulled back a heavy curtain to reveal a vibrant history that involved thousands of American women. This is a vital story of exceptional women, feminist women (even if they do not see themselves as such) who have consistently stretched the boundaries of gender and have actively carved out their own identities. These women were simultaneously shaped by societal norms and challenged the same norms throughout the twentieth century and into the new millennium. And in doing so, they exemplify the fact that women not only participated in sports, but that they played an integral role in their development. We cannot fully understand the history of sports without incorporating the contributions of women. It is imperative that we uncover these histories to see how they both support and undercut the dominant sports narrative. Otherwise the story is incomplete.

These women athletes played sports because they loved the game, the challenge, and the competition. They refused to be solely defined by the male-driven sports world
and social norms and critics that insinuated that sports were a masculine preserve. These women athletes actively redefined their own femininity and carved out their own identities for their benefit. They also advanced a feminist agenda both intentionally and unintentionally. We must no longer ignore the role women athletes have played in shaping our larger culture through their common and unique athletic experiences, and we must address the specific hurdles facing the woman athlete.9

This dissertation provides a fresh look at these issues through a comparative analysis of women’s experiences playing basketball and Roller Derby.10 These sports appear at first glance to be drastically different; however, they are similar in that they both share a long history of women’s participation and at different times both challenged society’s restrictions on women’s physical abilities and activities. As 5-on-5 team sports that emphasized teamwork, speed, stamina, and incredible athleticism, both offered

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10 I capitalize the term “Roller Derby” throughout this dissertation because Leo Seltzer, the sport’s creator, patented and copyrighted the phrase in 1935. Until the demise of the Seltzer family-owned Roller Derby in 1973, no outside leagues, units, or individual skaters were able to operate or compete under the official title of Roller Derby. If I have not capitalized the term, I refer to the general sport itself, including what came to be known as “outlaw” units, who continued to play the sport under modified names (as well as modified rules), such as National Skating Derby, Roller Games, and the thousands of leagues currently in operation. The Seltzer family, to-date, has not enforced their copyright in this modern revival of the sport that originated at the turn of the 21st century, so I do not capitalize the term when referencing this “new” version of the sport.
women, especially working class women, sports opportunities and careers throughout the twentieth century rarely found elsewhere. ¹¹

On the other hand, basketball represents a traditional sport rooted and supported in the education system yet also available on the community, amateur, and professional levels. Roller derby teams and leagues usually form from individual sponsorship or grassroots movements operating with a barnstorming-type model. They have generally remained on the fringes of the sports world despite periods of immense popularity, a large national fan base, and a steady ranking as the third most popular sport on television through the mid-twentieth century. Roller Derby never altered its rules for the so-called weaker sex, but basketball was continually modified to meet the “special” needs of women. These two team sports are not often compared or even discussed in the same sporting circles; however, their comparison sheds light on the different ways women athletes dealt with the varying image of the woman athlete as an individual and as a member of a group. For instance, how does a woman remain feminine in a more traditional sport, where some contact is unavoidable but is restricted by the rules of the game, versus one where rough contact is a requirement and often a fan-favorite? Were these women athletes held to different standards? Were women on the same team held to different standards? How did women view themselves as individuals yet also in relationship to other women athletes on their team and in different sports?

In the early twentieth century, modified basketball provided light physical exercise for young middle to upper class women at American colleges and universities.

¹¹ Many women played the 6-on-6 version of basketball throughout the twentieth century, although 5-on-5, even if the standard version now, never fully disappeared for women. See Footnote 12 for more on the different versions of basketball.
However, in the 1930s through the 1960s, both Roller Derby (which was invented during the Great Depression) and basketball provided opportunities and enjoyment for working-class women through barnstorming teams and community or industrial leagues. As women’s basketball became popularized through inter-school (both high school and college) competition in the immediate pre- and post-Title IX era, the sport became an acceptable pastime for all classes of women. Roller Derby, in contrast, was increasingly viewed as a non-traditional sport-and-entertainment combination and died down during basketball’s meteoric rise.

In the latter decades of the twentieth century, as women basketball players became more competitive, adopted standardized men’s rules, and excelled at the game, their success raised questions about their femininity and ultimately their sexuality.12 But women’s basketball players have tried to avoid confronting flagrant gender and sexuality issues in an effort to continue to play without dealing with the baggage these issues bring along.13 With its revival early in the twenty-first century, roller derby, although a much

12 Although I state that in the latter decades of the 20th century, women played under basketball rules more consistent with the men’s game, women have a long history of playing different forms of basketball, including playing under men’s rules as women’s AAU teams did in the 1930s. Various versions of women’s basketball rules have existed since Senda Berenson founded the sport for women in 1892. Even when Berenson and other women’s physical educators attempted to standardize women’s basketball rules in 1899, not all schools, leagues, and women players abided by these rules. See Susan Cahn’s Coming on Strong, Robert W. Ikard’s Just for Fun, Max McElwain’s The Only Dance in Iowa, Joan S. Hult and Marianna Trekell’s A Century of Women’s Basketball: From Frailty to Final Four, and Pamela Grundy and Susan Shackelford’s Shattering the Glass: The Remarkable History of Women’s Basketball, all cited in the bibliography.

13 What foremost comes to mind here is the WNBA’s unofficial “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy that was prevalent throughout the first fifteen years of their existence. Until 2012, no active WNBA player had publicly come out of the closet, yet everyone knew that there were lesbians in the WNBA, and the WNBA partially relied on the lesbian fan-base. However, the league did not fully embrace this open sexuality because they also marketed the league as a family-friendly, family-oriented one and often highlighted
rougher sport than basketball, has not faced this femininity crisis and has confronted the culture of the homophobic closet. As an amateur sport organized, guided, and funded by its own members with a Do-It-Yourself ethic, modern roller derby has not had to deal with outside forces imposing their social values—white middle class notions of femininity and heterosexuality—upon the sport. Roller derby, unlike basketball, has been a confrontational sport with open displays of sexuality and aggression that have appeared as a frontal challenge to women’s sports roles and identities.

I delve into the history of basketball and Roller Derby to see how each adhered to or challenged the feminized, sexualized, and commercialized expectations of women in sports. This exploration led me to several questions relevant not only to the past but also the present. Does the resurgence of women’s roller derby and modern women’s basketball teams like those in the WNBA represent a feminist attempt at women’s sports, or does it merely regurgitate old feminine expectations of women athletes couched in a modernized form of femininity or post-feminism? How have basketball stars and derby queens dealt with questions about sexuality and motherhood, and how has that
influenced, if at all, our current ideas about such topics? What, if anything, has changed in these two sports throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries regarding the sexualization, exploitation, and feminization of women and the idealization of motherhood? How have athletes of both sports come to terms with their identities as women athletes?

**Historiography**

I engaged with, relied on, and challenged several important works on women’s sports in an effort to contribute to the growing but still underdeveloped body of women’s history and sports studies. Historians and scholars including Susan Cahn, Helen Lenskyj, Pat Griffin, Allen Guttmann, Mary Jo Festle, Susan Cayleff, and Mary Jo Kane form the backbone of the field. Their combined work reveals the history of the American woman athlete and her struggles. It ranges from the early days of women playing modified versions of men’s sports to avoid physically and mentally draining themselves, to their active participation in highly competitive sports in which they may even earn a well-paid living. These scholars have investigated how factors such as race, class, sexuality, ethnicity, and of course gender have influenced the way women have gained and been denied access to American sporting culture.¹⁵

In 1994, historian Susan Cahn published the defining book on American women’s sports, *Coming on Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Women’s History.* Cahn highlighted the general trajectory of women’s participation in athletics while paying close attention to the “vital interplay between sport and the surrounding

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¹⁵ Susan K. Cahn, *Coming on Strong: Helen Lenskyj, Out of Bounds: Women, Sport, & Sexuality; Pat Griffin, Strong Women, Deep Closets: Lesbians and Homophobia in Sport; Allen Guttmann, Women’s Sport: A History; Susan E. Cayleff, Babe: The Life and Legend of Babe Didrikson Zaharias,* and Mary Jo Kane’s plethora of articles.
culture."\textsuperscript{16} She used women’s athletic history as a “lens through which to understand both the complicated gender dynamics of sport and the social experience of women athletes.”\textsuperscript{17} She demonstrated the cultural construction of gender and sexuality “within and through twentieth-century U.S. women’s sport.”\textsuperscript{18} Cahn’s path-breaking book analyzed the ways women athletes, coaches, administrators, and promoters sought to project an image of female athletes as distinctly “feminine,” first to challenge the assumption that sports encourage masculine behavior and appearance, and later to counter the assumption that women’s sports were dominated by lesbians. Cahn also explored lesbian culture and identity in the sports world, stereotypes and prejudices against African American women athletes, and the headway all women athletes have made in a male sporting culture. She outlined the difficulties women faced throughout the twentieth century yet concludes with the realization that until such qualities as speed, strength, and skill break free from their masculine gender association to “become human qualities,” females will not enjoy true “athletic freedom.”\textsuperscript{19}

Cahn provided a valuable framework in which to analyze the experiences of a variety of twentieth century women athletes and a starting point from which to explore and compare popular but nontraditional sports such as Roller Derby. Similarly, Mary Jo Festle’s book \textit{Playing Nice: Politics and Apologies in Women’s Sports} offered a useful comparison/contrast model of women’s basketball and tennis. She explores the “shared experiences” of women athletes while highlighting the “actual complexity that existed”

\textsuperscript{16} Cahn, 6.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 6.
\textsuperscript{18} Cahn, viii.
\textsuperscript{19} Cahn, 279.
within their sporting experiences and lives. Cahn’s and Festle’s discussion of women athletes adopting a variety of personal coping strategies to deal with the recurring tension between women’s sports and social expectations of femininity proved exceptionally useful for my work. Festle’s close attention to sport sociologist Jan Felshin’s “apologetic behavior” strategy helped me contextualize the responses of the women athletes I interviewed concerning their identities as both female and athlete. At the same time, my dissertation qualifies Cahn’s and Festle’s ideas about the tension between sport and femininity because many of the women I interviewed did not recall being especially concerned sports would give them a masculine or lesbian reputation. In fact, many women basketball players believed their sport held no gender or sexual attachment whatsoever. As I will suggest, however, it is possible that these women have, over time, forgotten the tension they once felt, or that they had so fully internalized the earlier era’s dominant constructions of gender that their identities felt perfectly natural and not affected by larger cultural forces and expectations.

21 Festle describes “apologetic behavior” to mean “behavior intended to reinforce the socially acceptable aspects of sports while minimizing the perceived violations of social norms.” Festle, 45.
22 Cahn focuses more specifically on female physical educators’ attempts to feminize sport and commercial promoters’ attempts to feminize the women athletes themselves, although she acknowledges the variety of “collective and individual strategies athletes” utilized to “defuse the tension between sport and womanhood.” (Cahn, 5.) Festle focuses on the “apologetic behavior” of the athletes and those attempting to control sport. She notes, “In essence, female athletes compensated for their lack of femininity on the court by making up for it in their language, looks, and behavior (often off the court).” Like Cahn, Festle understands that despite women athletes engaging in apologetic behavior, “it is also crucial to recognize that it was never the whole story for female athletes.” Festle, 45.
Cahn and other sexuality scholars such as Pat Griffin focus heavily on the critical cultural construction and interplay between gender and sexuality in sport, particularly the lesbian identity and lesbian threat. In her insightful book *Strong Women, Deep Closets: Lesbians and Homophobia in Sport*, Griffin shows how coaches, administrators, journalists, and Christian athletic ministries, amongst others in similar positions of power, use the threat of lesbianism as a social control in sport. They often view lesbians as social deviants and sexual predators, ultimately stigmatizing all women in sports.²³

I push these scholars’ analyses further by looking at how this same construction and interplay affect women athletes’ reproductive lives as mothers. As a society we freely sexualize women athletes and emphasize their real or imagined heterosexuality, but we remain uncomfortable acknowledging that “sexy” women athletes may also have sex, which can lead to pregnancy. Pregnancy disrupts the image of sexualized female athletes and can disrupt their sporting careers in multiple ways. Athlete mothers thus face a unique dilemma in juggling these dual roles. They inhabit an intensely masculine-defined realm and their livelihood and/or personal enjoyment depends on their body’s capability to compete.

This tension in many ways boils down to what American society and media see women’s bodies as capable of doing in terms of reproduction (giving birth) and incapable of doing because of reproduction (participating in masculine-defined physical activities).

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²³ Pat Griffin, *Strong Women, Deep Closets: Lesbians and Homophobia in Sport*, with a foreword by Donna Lopiano, (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 1998). Griffin’s book finally helped me understand and put into perspective many of my own athletic experiences. Her book not only touched me on a personal level but served as an invaluable resource throughout my dissertation. The fact the author took the time to listen to me explain how her book helped me process my own stories (and the fact she was willing to read this dissertation multiple times) meant more to me than I can express in a mere footnote.
Society and the media translate these reproductive abilities and “limits” into post-birth socially-defined expectations and norms of motherhood, meaning the continual primary care of the child once he/she is born regardless of the mother’s career, outside interests, or pleasurable pastimes. Works such as Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels’s *The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined All Women* and Arlie Hochschild’s *The Second Shift: Working Families and the Revolution at Home* helped me articulate this role conflict between social expectations surrounding motherhood and women’s identities as athletes, although they fail to specifically address the unique struggle of the woman athlete. While there is a growing collection of literature on one hand discussing the social implications of motherhood and on the other hand discussing women’s bodies, feminism, and physiology,24 I have yet to discover any collective body on the history of the woman-athlete-mother.

**Oral History Methodology**

The best way to tackle these vitally important issues surrounding femininity, identity, and motherhood is to allow the women athletes to speak for themselves. These women poured their blood, sweat, and tears into the sports they loved but rarely have they been asked about their own sporting experiences and the ways in which sports influenced their lives and identities. Since women’s sports history is a relatively new but burgeoning field within the larger scope of women’s history (itself a field less than a half-century old), a limited historiography exists on the relationship between women athletes

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and women’s larger roles in society. Few of these studies use the voice of women athletes prior to the 1970s and the rise of the Title IX era.

Oral history serves as a crucial methodology in understanding how women have defined themselves relative to complicated questions about sports, motherhood, and sexual and gender identity. They provide extraordinary insight into the ways in which people make historical meaning of their life experiences. Oral histories cannot be read naively as offering unmediated access to reality, but no historical sources do that. As in all historical research, oral histories are checked against other sources whenever possible. But oral history is invaluable in uncovering women’s experiences since the narrator has the opportunity to “tell her own story in her own terms.” This is particularly crucial for women athletes, since their stories have generally been told by male journalists and in relation to male athletes. Women’s sports have never received equal coverage, while

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27 As Anderson and Jack note, "A woman's discussion of her life may combine two separate, often conflicting, perspectives: one framed in concepts and values that reflect men's dominant position in the culture, and one informed by the more immediate realities of a woman's personal experience. Where experience does not 'fit' the dominant meanings, alternative concepts may not readily be available. Hence, inadvertently, women often mute their own thoughts and feelings when they try to describe their lives in the familiar and publicly acceptable terms of prevailing concepts and conventions. To hear women's perspectives accurately, we have to learn to listen in stereo, receiving both
the minimal coverage they have received has not always been preserved because of the
marginalization of women’s sports. Women’s oral histories can reshape the historical
narrative by giving voice to those whom the historical record has long silenced.28

The selection process and criteria for oral history interviews serves as an integral
part of any oral history undertaking and undoubtedly shapes the larger project in both
intended and unintended ways. I began this dissertation with the goal to interview
women basketball players, roller derby skaters, coaches, administration personnel, and
fans of both sports with diverse socio-economic, racial, ethnic, generational, and sexual
backgrounds to highlight the complexity that these factors provide to a singular and static
experience, narrative, and identity. I succeeded in amassing a wide variety of
interviewees ranging in geographical scope from coast to coast. I interviewed people of
Jewish, Italian, and African-American ethnic and racial backgrounds. I interviewed
athletes, coaches, administrators, management, and fans of the sports. I talked with
skaters and basketball players from different eras, and I interviewed both women and
men involved with their respective sports.

But despite my best efforts to diversify my interviewees, I still experienced
difficulties gathering a wholly representative sample. Outside factors, often beyond my
control, occasionally prevented me from interviewing important women athletes, which
could have greatly aided my research. For instance, the daughter of one of the most
famous Roller Derby skaters initially agreed to an interview with me but became skittish
after our discussion of the standard oral history consent and release form. She had

Press, 2000).
recently been burnt by some smooth-talking Hollywood men trying to make a quick buck off her mother’s story, which led to a lost opportunity for me. Another difficulty I encountered concerned lesbian women basketball players from the dominant AAU era who still hesitate to openly discuss their sexuality, making it difficult to locate these semi-closeted women for interviews or to discuss sexuality in a candid manner throughout an interview.

I also faced difficulties in gathering a representative sample of black women athletes in the mid-twentieth century. Only a handful of black women skated for the Roller Derby during its “Golden Era.” The most prominent African American woman skater, although sympathetic to my project, was working on her own research at the time and declined to be interviewed. Another popular black woman skater initially talked with me on the phone but I was unable to procure an actual interview. In terms of basketball, black women played on varsity teams at some black colleges, much like white women players during the peak era of the AAU. But the AAU did not include black women in their national tournament until the mid-1950s. Therefore, my focus on the AAU limited my ability to include black women’s experiences with the sport overall. Although I interviewed one black woman basketball player who played at Philander Smith College and in the AAU and utilized other transcribed and/or videotaped interviews of black women basketball players, I do not have enough primary evidence to fully analyze the impact of racial difference throughout the history of each sport. I certainly have engaged with racial issues at varying points throughout this dissertation where I had the documentary evidence to support my analysis. This is not to dismiss race as an unimportant category of analysis. In fact, the opposite is true. But the parameters of this
dissertation hindered my ability to give equal attention to the issues of gender, sexuality, and race. I hope other scholars can utilize my work for critical comparative race studies.

Race and sexuality were not the only problematic issues I encountered in terms of the interview process. When conducting oral history interviews, I had to take into account interpersonal relations and tensions within the Roller Derby community. At times contentious disputes between former skaters, their families, former management, and the National Roller Derby Hall of Fame had me toeing a fine line to avoid any interpersonal feuds. Conflict between skaters and fans of the Seltzer Roller Derby era and the modern roller derby revival has also emerged. There is a level of mistrust between the generation gap of older skaters and fans and the modern roller derbyists. Neither side fully understands the other, and neither side knows how to bridge the gap or even if they want to. Some Roller Derby skaters from decades past have reached out in the new millennium and offered guidance to local roller derby leagues in an effort to offer their skating and Roller Derby expertise. In most cases, this has turned out to be a mutually beneficial relationship. However, there have been noted incidents of modern leagues (short-sitedly, I might add) wanting nothing to do with the old game or its participants, leading to tension between the two communities at large. Many modern leagues associate Roller Derby with the antics of Roller Games and TNT’s Rollerjam, as opposed to the skillful and strategic game of the 1940s, 50s, and 60s. And many former Roller Derby skaters associate the new leagues with the Austin revival that originally hyped their alter-egos, fishnets, and hot-pants over skating skills and game strategy.

I attempted to position myself as both an insider and outsider to both the basketball and Roller Derby worlds. In November 2009, during the research and writing
phase of my dissertation, I joined a local roller derby league in Western Massachusetts. I initially attended a practice in an effort to understand the game better, but I stayed because I am competitive. I did not know how to skate. I did not know the basic rules of the game. But as an athlete at heart, I like to be challenged, and I wanted to be good. 29 I continued to play because I grew to love the sport. 30 This project was never intended to be an exposé of any sort. One of the first scholarly studies of modern Roller Derby was conducted as a “covert participant observation.” 31 This upset the revival derby community and made them wary of outside researchers moonlighting as one of their own. Therefore, I was forthright about both my personal athletic interests and my historical interests in the sport.

My involvement in modern roller derby essentially provided me with the insight, understanding, commitment, and networks to complete this project. My own experiences with skating, rules of the game, and team dynamics helped inform my questions for my interviewees. I knew what to ask, and I could relate. I understood their answers, and I could sympathize. And I understood the differences between what had been and what currently is—most skaters of both generations do not have this appreciation. But my insider status could also hinder the interview process, and I still had to be careful when interviewing the old guard of the sport. I had to let them know I was familiar with the rules of the game and the dynamics of skating. I had to let them know I had seen footage, I had read their publications, and I knew their big names. And I had to gauge their

29 The outcome of my being “good” is definitely debatable, but for over two and a-half-years I was certainly dedicated to my teams, my league, and the sport of both the past and present.

30 My bum right knee can attest to that.

feelings on the most recent revival, not all of which were positive, as well as indicate my awareness of the differences between the past and present versions of the sport.

My lifelong dedication to the sport of basketball similarly helped me appreciate the passion with which former basketball players played the game and their dedication to the sport. At the same time, my own experiences occasionally hindered my comprehension of older versions of the sport as described during my interviews. I struggled to envision the pace of a half-court basketball game and the dynamics of a limited dribble or roving player.\textsuperscript{32} Despite this, the willingness of former basketball players to share their stories with me and help put me in touch with their former teammates and rivals was both helpful and appreciated.\textsuperscript{33}

As a conscientious oral historian, I believe in sharing the fruits of my labor with other scholars and hope that my interviews can be of use for future works on women athletes. All of my interviews and transcripts have been donated to the Special Collections and University Archives at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst W.E.B. DuBois Library and are available to researchers as stipulated by my interviewees. To my knowledge, there is no such collection of oral history interviews of women basketball players, roller derby skaters, and related athletic personnel in existence housed in an academic institution, and I hope that this will not be the last.

\textsuperscript{32} One such humorous interaction can be heard in my interview with Women Basketball Hall of Famer Doris Rogers, where I could not, for the life of me, understand her explanation of a double dribble and an unlimited bounce due to my own understanding of a double dribble in the modern game. We finally got on the same court! Doris Rogers, interview by author, 8 September 2011, phone interview, digital audio recording, W.E.B. Du Bois Library, University of Massachusetts-Amherst, Amherst, MA.

\textsuperscript{33} A special thank you goes to Carla Lowry, who hosted a luncheon for both my husband and me during our interview of her in Texas and invited an engaging group of women and men, including coaches, athletic directors, former athletes, and sociologists, for a round table discussion that proved exceptionally fruitful and enlightening.
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As an ardent feminist completing her dissertation on women in sports, I am appalled and ashamed at the behavior I exhibited as a young woman athlete defending her heterosexuality with proclamations of "Yes, I play basketball, and no, I'm not a lesbian." Yet I do take comfort, for better or worse, in the fact that I at least now understand why I behaved in the manner I did. The social construction of the woman athlete has been in progress for well over a century and has reflected the continual subordinate status of women as well as her compulsory feminine heterosexuality. The woman athlete has never been a static identity, but it is one that has been consistently at odds with society and itself. This shaky relationship led me to sweat my own identity, my own femininity, just as it had for millions of women athletes before me.

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34 Well, not at wearing the striped socks at least. I still maintain that those were cool even if they did not become the popular fad I envisioned.
CHAPTER 1
RULES OF THE GAME, RULES OF GENDER

“If we’ve got glamor then it consists of 99 per cent perspiration.”
Lorene Daniels, All-American Red Head, 1947

“You are a lady—on and off the floor.”
“Rules and Regulation—Girls Basketball,” The Hawkette, 1971

In 1945, LIFE magazine published an article on the “unmistakable” look of the American woman. This “American look” included a “natural manner, freshness and enthusiasm, a friendly smile, and easy, confident stride with head held high, [and] an unaffected elegance in make-up and dress.” The author compliments American women on their natural, simplistic beauty but also their good grooming, cleanliness, confidence, agelessness, glamour, and domesticity. The largely pictorial article portrays women exhibiting all of these traits and more. The article’s clear focus is on this distinctive American Look, but it also alludes to the factors that influence this beauty. The author suggests that the distinctive look of American women evolved in part from their participation in competitive sport. According to the author, a woman’s youth spent as a “roller skating, ball-chasing tomboy” helped develop an appealing confidence, “graceful

36 “Rules and Regulations—Girls Basketball,” The Hawkette, 1971, Rhonda Penquite Papers, Iowa Women’s Archives, The University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City, Iowa. (From here on referred to IWA.)
37 “What is the American Look?: The Girls of the U.S. Have an Air All Their Own,” LIFE, (21 May 1945), 87.
38 “What is the American Look?,” 88.
athletic stride,” comely features, and a healthy glow, all key components to their distinguishing good looks.39

As the LIFE article clearly indicates, competitive sport was an acceptable pastime for American girls and women even before the birth of the modern feminist movement. But the article’s emphasis on the importance of women’s beauty also highlights the fundamental tension between ideas about women’s athleticism and femininity throughout the twentieth century. Namely, women’s sports were accepted and advocated only to a certain point, the point at which sports masculinized women. This leads to the question, what sports were considered appropriate for girls and women? What sports threatened women’s femininity, and who determined their acceptability? And how did women’s sports reflect or influence larger social issues of the twentieth century, particularly concerning class, race, gender, and sexuality? These questions were continually debated by both women and men in control of, vying for control over, or promoting and promulgating women’s athletics. This chapter lays out the necessary background on the sports of basketball and Roller Derby and the internal and external conflicts and tensions that influenced their evolution throughout the twentieth century. The argument over the appropriateness of women’s competitive sport and control over their sport highlights the pervasive problems in women’s basketball and Roller Derby, as well as the larger tension between women’s femininity and athletics in general.

The Origins of the “Mad Game”

A young physical education instructor named James Naismith invented the game of basketball at the YMCA training college in Springfield, Massachusetts, in the late fall

39 “What is the American Look?,” 90.
of 1891. Just a few months later, Senda Berenson introduced the novel game to her 
female students at Smith College in Northampton, located just twenty miles north of the 
sport’s origins. Berenson read about Naismith’s new game in The Triangle magazine and 
thought it would be beneficial for her students. As a physical education instructor and 
avocate of Swedish gymnastics, Berenson was directly responsible for keeping Smith 
students in good physical health and was looking to expand her exercise curriculum. A 
new game seemed just what her students needed since they had little, if any, experience 
in group games.40

Berenson introduced basketball to the students in her general freshmen and 
sophomore classes in early 1892. Using rope, she hung peach baskets to the bottom of 
the balcony on each end of the gym and split the class evenly into two teams. The 
purpose of the game was to get the ball into the opposite team’s goal while preventing the 
opponents from putting the ball in your basket. The girls loved the game so much that 
they requested a formal game between the freshman and sophomore classes. Thus, on a 
gray Friday afternoon in late March 1892, Smith students gathered in their campus 
gymnasium, filled to capacity with a female-only crowd decked out in class colors and 
sporting banners supporting their respective teams, to witness the first official women’s 
basketball game.41 Ten freshman and ten sophomore girls were chosen to represent their 
class, with one team donning handkerchiefs on their arms to distinguish between sides.

40 Ralph Melnick, Senda Berenson: The Unlikely Founder of Women’s Basketball, 
(Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), 26; Betty Spears, “Senda 
Berenson Abbott-New Woman: New Sport” in Joan S. Hult and Marianna Trekell, ed. A 
Century of Women’s Basketball, (Reston, VA: American Alliance for Health, Physical 
Education, Recreation and Dance), 22-23.
41 Melnick, 1.
Wastepaper baskets hung on each end of the gym to be used as the goals. One enthusiastic student wrote to her mother, describing the historic game:

> We had a football which was to be touched only with the hands, and the object was to get it into your opponent’s basket and keep it out of your own…It was great fun and very exciting, especially when we got knocked down, as frequently happened.⁴²

Although no men and certainly no reporters were allowed in the gym during the game, the local newspaper still published an article on the contest entitled, “The Gladiators Appear, One Dying” and described the sport as “a mad game.” They also published a hand-drawn picture of the “wild-eye[d]” players as gladiators.⁴³ This type of description would haunt women’s basketball for the next century and marked the beginning of a century-long debate over the appropriate nature of basketball for women. The journalist’s comments were cause for concern for Berenson, as she was aware of the potential for roughness during the game, but she was also proud of her players and their demonstration of excellent sportsmanship.

Berenson firmly believed in modified exercise and sport for women, so as basketball grew in popularity at Smith, Berenson continually tweaked the rules for the benefit of the game and her players. The day after the first game took place, Berenson met with her students to discuss ways the game could be modified to encourage teamwork and prevent overexertion. Shortly thereafter she implemented new rules to benefit the women players. Under these rules, nine players made up each team. The basketball court was divided into three zones with three players from each team restricted

⁴² As cited in Melnick, 2.
⁴³ Melnick, 2.
to a particular zone.\textsuperscript{44} The game consisted of 15 minute halves with a 10 minute rest break between periods. In order to limit overly aggressive play and to encourage participation by everyone, the rules prohibited stealing the ball. Players could not possess the ball for longer than three seconds at a time and were only allowed three dribbles before they had to either pass the ball or shoot it. Not all the students loved the new rules since they “weaken[ed] the game” and prevented individual star play, but Berenson remained convinced the new modified rules served her students’ best interests.\textsuperscript{45}

Berenson continued to advocate for a modified version of basketball for women in the early decades of the twentieth century. Her position on the importance and benefits of exercise for girls and women was crystal clear. But, so was her belief that women should not play the sport using men’s rules. In 1908, Berenson wrote, “Exercise to-day is acknowledged by all as a fundamental need in the life and development of the girl.”\textsuperscript{46} She viewed games and sport as crucial to the well-being of young girls and women, as they promoted self-control, self-reliance, self-confidence, and the delight of play. Berenson considered basketball as the ultimate activity for young women, once modified, as it “is by far the best to teach the importance of team play; to teach co-operation; to teach the value of subordinating one’s self for the good of the team.”\textsuperscript{47}

\textsuperscript{44} This meant that each zone had three offensive players and three defensive players, and these players were not allowed to leave their designated zone. They could only move freely within the restricted space.
\textsuperscript{45} Melnick, 3.
\textsuperscript{47} Berenson, 33.
Berenson promoted the idea of sport for the masses. She stated, “The *individual*
should be kept in mind always as the most important factor in all education, but...we
should look for [the] physical development of the mass...rather than [of] those who are
already superior.”

But if women played under men’s rules, Berenson was certain that
basketball would lead to moral and physical deterioration as well as an unhealthy
emphasis on specialized training of a small number of outstanding players. Men’s rules
promoted a rough level of play and an unhealthy level of competition unacceptable for
women. Berenson asserted,

The rules for men are injurious to girls physically because they give too
severe a test to her power of endurance. They also contain the elements of
roughness that are bad for her social and moral character.

Berenson saw women’s sports as headed down the wrong road unless physical
educators enforced modified rules for women. She witnessed firsthand the natural
aggressiveness, competitive instinct, and intense desire to win, which led to the rough
play young women exhibited when playing the game unchecked. Berenson viewed this
behavior as “the results at first of impulse and carelessness” and basic “exuberant
animal spirits” as opposed to an “inborn viciousness of character.”

She lamented, “I feel certain that women would be playing foot ball to-day were it not for the fact that in
the nick of time basket ball appeared on the horizon.”

Berenson supported the idea that physical, moral, and emotional differences
existed between men and women, but she saw that both sexes showed a tendency toward

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48 As cited in Melnick, 3.
49 Berenson, 33, 37.
50 As cited in Melnick, 81.
51 As cited in Melnick, 104.
52 As cited in Melnick, 81.
53 Berenson, 33.
aggression, competition, and roughness in sport if left to their own devices. Thus, women’s natural behaviors needed to be harnessed and channeled into appropriate outlets that would prepare them for their social, political, and economic roles in the world, especially as these roles expanded in the early twentieth century. Basketball provided women with the training they needed to help craft a more cooperative and just society. Berenson emphasized skills such as teamwork, which “both training and tradition have kept dormant in her—the power for organization, the willingness to surrender the individual to the common good, and the ability to meet success with dignity and defeat with courage. She believed that the physical and moral benefits of basketball would help women advance in society, providing them with skills to gain access to better jobs and equal wages, while simultaneously improving it.

Berenson and other physical educators who modified basketball rules for women believed they had eliminated the negative aspects of the sport while maintaining the “relaxation, recreation, the spirit of jollity and fun.” Berenson claimed that “basket ball played hours at a time [was] deadly,” yet she displayed no tolerance for those who insisted that all forms of the sport should be banished. She described those basketball naysayers as “unfortunate and unwarrantable.” She wholeheartedly believed and continually promoted that “the modified game of basketball not only proves safe but is

54 As cited in Melnick, 76.
55 Melnick, 82-83. Berenson believed basketball would improve women’s stamina and maintain good health which would aid her in the workplace. She stated, “One of the arguments in the economic world against giving women as high salaries as men for similar work is that women are more prone to illness than men. They need, therefore, all the more to develop health and endurance if they desire to become candidates for equal wages.” As cited in Melnick, 76.
56 Berenson, 35.
57 Berenson, 41.
58 Berenson, 39.
the most valuable of all the sports to develop healthy, graceful, dignified, sane, and happy women.” Berenson’s promotion of the sport of basketball initiated a new era for women’s athletics. But it was her insistence on the importance of sport for the masses (instead of specialization of the few), as well as the dangers of allowing women to play the men’s version of basketball, that sparked the debate over the appropriateness of women’s competitive sports and control over those sports that persisted throughout the twentieth century.

**A New Sport for a New Woman**

Women’s basketball spread rapidly across the U.S. in the 1910s and 1920s, buttressed by the continual expansion and support of physical education for women’s health. Many physicians, social reformers, and particularly women physical educators at the high school and collegiate level supported physical exercise and sport in moderation for girls and young women. These physical activities provided women, in their opinion, with “a taste of more satisfying and wholesome recreation” than other popular activities of the time period, such as jazz and dance parlors. Girls and women of all classes turned to athletics for their recreational outlets in much larger numbers than in the past, both in school and for community recreation. In 1922, the Public Athletic League in New York City published a report stating that 72,000 elementary and high school girls in the city demonstrated interest in such physical pursuits as basketball, tennis, hockey, skating, bicycling, swimming, and rope-jumping. Although findings in other cities were not as high as they were in New York, they all indicated a national upsurge in athletics for girls.

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59 Berenson, 41.
and women. In Baltimore, for example, Edna May Frances, the supervisor of the girls’ division of the Public Athletic League, reported roughly 520 girls participating in basketball, 275 in dodgeball, 160 in volleyball, 144 in hockey, and 25 in a fall tennis tournament. Other interests included women’s soccer and bowling. Outside of the public leagues in Baltimore, church and school leagues formed, providing even more outlets for recreation.

Similar enthusiasm for athletics, particularly basketball, spread across the country, as an outdated form of demure Victorian womanhood gave way to the idealized, yet often contentious “athletic girl” image. The athletic girl formed one component of the New Woman ideal. American culture began emphasizing female advancement and accomplishment. No longer tied to the customs of modesty and self-restraint, many contemporary women generally embodied the “spirit of modern womanhood,” which entailed adventure, vibrancy, enthusiasm for competition, and “a flirtatious brand of sexual appeal.” Curtis Mitchell, the author of “What Every Woman Should Know About Athletics,” which appeared in the September 1925 issue of Sportlife magazine,

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62 “‘Thinks ‘Jazz’ Bound to Yield to Sports.’”
63 Grundy and Shackelford, 39.
64 Cahn, 19.
65 Grundy and Shackelford, 39.
encouraged this new form of modern womanhood over the “slender-waisted, fragile, timidly demure and ineffectual lasses.”66 He stated,

If the modern conception of a womanhood freed from the prudery of concealed ankles and bodies camouflaged by voluminous and outlandish costumes, a womanhood facing life squarely and honestly, meeting it frankly and not retiring behind the shield of sex, forthright in her association with her peers; if that conception is more truly ladylike, then its advocates should stand up and cheer for [the people...] showing the way toward that ideal.67

In many ways, athletic women mirrored the flappers of the same era. They generally sported the bobbed hair-cut; edgier, risqué, and less-restrictive clothing; and an independent attitude. They enjoyed a sense of freedom provided by their public activities.68 Flappers and women athletes often embodied a particular “image of youthful sexual appeal” that highlighted their modern beauty, charm, and femininity.69 They participated and flourished in an increasingly commercialized consumer society, when new fashion “allowed for freer movement and greater exposure, when dance styles as well as sports were becoming more physically demanding, and when the greater acceptance of female sexuality had broken men’s exclusive hold on public physicality, leisure, and sport.”70 These women helped create a new womanhood defined by women’s access to public spaces such as sports arenas, movie theaters, and dance halls, as well as an expanding world of competitive sports.71

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66 Curtis Mitchell, “What Every Woman Should Know About Athletics,” *Sportlife* (September 1925), 86.
67 Mitchell, 86.
68 Cahn, 35-36.
69 Cahn, 36.
70 Cahn, 36.
71 Cahn, 44; Grundy and Shackelford, 39.
But while contemporaries compared women athletes to flappers in many ways, others, such as Dr. S. J. Vaughn, the President of Hardin College in Mexico, Missouri, viewed athletics as a means to tame the hyper-sexualized flapper. He believed the best antidote to the social evils of the flapper was to channel her excessive energy into more healthy and suitable outlets. 72 He insisted, “If you want to keep a girl happy and contented and keep her from being morbid and boy-crazy, keep her on the dead run from seven o’clock in the morning until ten o’clock at night.”73 President Vaughn recommended basketball, baseball, track, and soccer, among other sports and activities, as appropriate solutions to morally drain the “so-called flapper” of her “surplus physical and nervous energy.”74

The athletic girl’s entrance into the formerly male domain of athletics initiated a public discourse that simultaneously praised and denounced her sporting achievements.75 Many saw the female athlete as the “new type of American girl, new not only physically, but mentally and morally.”76 But as women’s sports grew in the subsequent decades, they further encroached on men’s athletic superiority. Women athletes clashed with men who controlled the sporting domain, but also with women physical educators, such as Senda Berenson, who opposed the aggressive, competitive form of sports that mirrored men’s athletics, and also critics who feared the masculinization or the hypersexualization of the female athlete.77 Athletes such as the beautiful, graceful, and wholesome tennis player Helen Wills embodied the accepted version of the athletic girl due to their

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72 Mitchell, 11.
73 Mitchell, 12.
74 Mitchell, 11.
75 Cahn, 19.
76 Quote by Anna de Koven as cited in Cahn, 30.
77 Cahn, 20-30.
combination of traditional feminine qualities and modern self-confident womanhood. The popular press contrasted feminine, seemingly innocent, and modest women athletes with the “more outrageous, excessive, and worldly flapper” who enjoyed the unrefined dance hall atmosphere or the highly competitive women athletes who engaged in rough, physical, and masculine sports.

**The Debate over Control of Women’s Basketball**

Many physical educators, both male and female, and amateur athletic officials agreed on the value of women’s basketball from its beginnings. They promoted not just moderated physical exercise for women but also more active sport. Dr. Luther H. Gulick, the Chairman of the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) Basket Ball Committee, wrote an article entitled “The Significance of Basket Ball for Women” in the Sept. 1908 *Spalding’s Official Women’s Basket Ball Guide* lauding the merits of the sport not just for health purposes but also for the social and political benefits teamwork provided women. Gulick wrote,

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79 Cahn, 50.


81 Despite this support, basketball and other competitive sports had detractors from their origins through much of the 20th century. In the last decades of the 19th century and the early decades of the 20th century, much of their criticism centered around the health and physical well-being of the woman athlete and her potential contrast with the Victorian ideal of womanhood. Concerns arose over the dangers of women partaking in sport during menstruation, which could negatively affect their reproductive abilities as could her participation in strenuous, rough, and competitive sport in general. Physical educators worked hard to show the healthful benefits of exercise and sport but they too believed “that it would be injurious to the health of women if they were permitted to engage in intense competition.” Gerber, etc. Quote on 16-17, 13-15; Grundy and Shackelford, 17-33.

82 This is the same gentleman who headed the Department of Physical Education at Springfield YMCA Training School who ordered Naismith to create a new game for
Such games as basket ball must be reckoned with as affording real
discipline with reference to the kind of life which women of the future is
surely selecting for herself; the power to have that larger vision by virtue
of which she shall not merely subordinate herself to her family and
children but shall co-operate with others, losing her own self in the larger
whole.  

Although Gulick promoted basketball as a character-building opportunity for women that
would help them break into the public male sphere in society, he still showed concern
about excessive exercise and exertion in women and ultimately individual excellence in
sport. He explained that extreme physical exhaustion from sports like basketball was a
more serious concern with the female sex. He believed the problem for physical
educators resided in how to promote teamwork and discipline for women athletes without
prompting the “physiological exhaustion which comes from intense work under
conditions of excitement.”

Women’s sports, with basketball at the forefront, experienced tremendous growth
beginning in the 1920s, which further fueled rising tensions evident in the media and
amongst women’s sports promoters and educators. While many women’s physical
educators were pleased with the increasing sport opportunities for girls and women, they
were displeased with the shift towards a more competitive, physical game of basketball
which emphasized winning and expert play. They worried about losing control over the
sport as well as potential sexual and commercial exploitation by men. Female physical

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student enjoyment during the winter months. Also, until the 1930s, “basketball” was
generally written as two separate words, but unless included in a direct quote, I will refer
to it as one word throughout this dissertation.

83 Luther H. Gulick, “The Significance of Basket Ball for Women,” in Spalding’s Official
Women’s Basket Ball Guide (September 1908), 53.
84 Gulick, 53.
85 Robert W. Ikard, Just for Fun: The Story of AAU Women’s Basketball, (Fayetteville:
The University of Arkansas Press, 2005), 14-15; Cahn, 25. Although Festle focuses on
educators’ fears were not wholly unfounded. Throughout the decade, girls’ high school teams formed and flourished at the same time that female participation grew in intra-and inter-collegiate basketball and in community and industrial leagues sponsored by YWCAs, YWHAs, local businesses, and large companies.86

The Rise of the AAU and Industrial Recreation

By 1928, basketball established itself as a popular community institution and reigned as the favorite sport of most young women in the US.87 In many instances, it was the only game available to America’s young female population.88 According to basketball historians Pamela Grundy and Susan Shackelford, “the game reached across boundaries of race, class and region, drawing in rural and urban, immigrant and native born, whites, Asians, Hispanics, Native Americans and African Americans.”89 But the level of competition, rule set, and decorum on the court differed depending on class, community, and governing body. Despite the enthusiasm for the sport on a local

the 1950s, she details the emergence of these concerns in previous decades as well. Festle, 28-52.
86 Grundy and Shackelford, 38. YMCA/YWCA is the acronym for the Young Men’s/Women’s Christian Association while the YMHA/YWHA is the acronym for Young Men’s/Women’s Hebrew Association.
87 Grundy and Shackelford, 38, 41-42.
88 Alline Banks Sprouse, interview with author, 7 February 2011, phone interview, digital audio recording, W.E.B. Du Bois Library, University of Massachusetts-Amherst, Amherst, MA. Even through the mid-twentieth century, basketball often remained the only sport available to girls at the high school level. Patsy Neal, phone interview by author, 13 September 2011, phone interview, digital audio recording, W.E.B. Du Bois Library, University of Massachusetts-Amherst, Amherst, MA; Rogers interview.
89 Grundy and Shackelford, 43. The rules of the game varied across the U.S. as well. Some still honored the three division court rules promoted by Berenson and the National Rules Committee while others switched to a two-court version that consisted of three offensive players and three defensive players on each end, with no one allowed to cross the center court line. Still others played a full-court 5-on-5 version practically identical to men, although this aggressive version of the game was not widely popular until the 1970s.
community level, basketball did not dominate the national sporting scene and received little national attention in the media in comparison to such male sports as baseball and college football and women’s and men’s tennis, swimming, and golf. It did dominate, however, in small towns and both rural and urban areas across the country. While residents in these areas might not be able to afford the expensive equipment or to assemble sufficient numbers to field a football team, basketball proved an ideal alternative. Basketball was cheap, its equipment could be makeshift, and almost anyone could participate. Urban youth flocked to the basketball gyms provided by the YMCAs and churches in their communities, while farm kids fashioned items like old foot tubs or peach baskets into rims to hang on a tree and then spent hours at a time shooting hoops.90

Since the last decade of the 19th century, the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) reigned as the supreme power in control of amateur sports, and in 1923 it officially recognized elite competition in women’s basketball in response to the increase of interest.91 Beginning in the mid-1920s and early 1930s, the AAU worked to create a national infrastructure for women’s basketball, thus providing the increasing numbers of female athletes with more sport opportunities and organization.92 This move put the AAU firmly at odds with female physical educators who remained steadfast in their dedication to modified basketball played only in intramural educational settings.

90 Grundy and Shackelford, 42; Rogers interview. Or like Patsy Neal, whose father hung up a basketball goal for her, but who constantly had to take into account the fish pond and her sister’s flower bed to the right of the goal. She explained, “It was not uncommon for me to be out shooting at the basket from daylight till after dark. I even learned to judge where the ball and the pond were by sound. When I misjudged, I shook the water, fish, and marigolds off my ball and clothes, and started over.” Patsy Neal, Basketball, Goldfish, and World Championships, (Bybee, TN: Play Backs), 33-34, Quote on 34.
91 Ikard, 14.
92 Ikard, 14-15; Grundy and Shackelford, 39.
As the popularity of both intra- and inter-high school basketball grew in the first couple decades of the twentieth century, the AAU worked to organize and increase amateur women's sports opportunities during and after graduation. They saw the next phase of amateur athletics taking place in industrial athletic clubs after they spread through private athletic clubs, colleges, and public and private schools. The AAU encouraged business and industrial employers to offer their workers more recreational opportunities as a benefit for the employees but also as a benefit to the AAU.\textsuperscript{93}

The idea of industrial recreation emerged in the mid-nineteenth century amidst concerns over the increasingly industrial society that created a host of social ills detrimental to the employee and thus the employer. Concerned industrialists promoted the idea of welfare capitalism to keep their workers healthy and happy.\textsuperscript{94} Athletic associations for employees began forming in the 1890s as an important aspect of industrial recreation, itself a vital component of welfare capitalism. Yet the success of the playground movement of the early twentieth century, originally intended to create public space and playgrounds for urban children and their families, led to the larger development of a recreational movement for adults and children alike. The decade following the First World War witnessed substantial growth in industrial recreation and

\textsuperscript{93} Ikard, 14.
\textsuperscript{94} Welfare capitalism has been defined as "any service provided for the comfort or improvement of employees which was neither a necessity of the industry nor required by law." Stuart D. Brandes, \textit{American Welfare Capitalism, 1880-1940}, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976), 5-6. A "new industrial philosophy" intended to improve relations and cooperation between the workers and management, welfare capitalism sought to fulfill workers needs and wants while helping improve their quality of life amidst the drudgery of industrial labor. David Brody, \textit{Workers in Industrial America: Essays on the Twentieth Century Struggle}, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 48-49. For more on welfare capitalism, see Brandes; Brody; and Sanford M. Jacoby, \textit{Modern Manors: Welfare Capitalism Since the New Deal}, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).
sports opportunities for both men and women.\textsuperscript{95} Labor experts promoted the idea that
"company teams would inspire worker loyalty while teaching the discipline, teamwork
and competitive spirit of the industrial age."\textsuperscript{96}

Taking in the popularity of basketball at the various school, community, and
industrial levels, the AAU decided to sponsor the first "national" women's basketball
tournament in 1926 in Los Angeles, California. The AAU strove to make the tournament
a true national affair, with teams as far away as Kansas and Chicago agreeing to play.
They even pushed back the tournament date to encourage more teams to enter, but, in the
end, only six teams hailing from the West Coast showed up. The AAU disregarded the
modified women's game in favor of the men's 5-player, full-court version. Their goal
was to entice fans and heighten interest in the game, but this extremely bold move
elicited heated responses from women physical educators across the county who
pressured local businesses, sponsors, coaches, and city officials to prevent the AAU from
hosting any more national tournaments.\textsuperscript{97}

Berenson and Gulick's ideas about the type of basketball suitable for women
stood in stark contrast with the type of game the AAU sponsored in their first tournament.
Even with its daring usage of men's rules, the first national women's tournament received

\textsuperscript{96} Grundy and Shackelford, 54.
\textsuperscript{97} Cahn, 87-88; Ikard, 15.
little local and no national press, yet the fact that the tourney was held at all marks an important milestone.98 The AAU national women’s basketball tournament resumed again in 1929 and became an annual event from that point on, with the AAU championship team generally being acknowledged as the best women’s team in America until the 1970s, when college basketball became the dominant arena for the sport.99

Industrial sporting opportunities grew exponentially for working women in the interwar period. By the start of the Second World War, men and women from coast to coast competed on approximately 10,000 industrial teams encompassing a variety of sports, including the ever-popular basketball.100 Industrialists and businessmen in this era recognized a two-fold purpose in sponsoring company sports teams and intercompany industrial sports leagues. On the one hand, company teams fostered a healthy and beneficial recreational outlet for their employees that fit soundly within the ideals of welfarism. Sports offered an opportunity for co-workers to engage in team-building activities, inspire team and company loyalty through competition, and ensure the health

99 Grundy and Shackelford, 54.
100 Elva Elisabeth Bishop, “Amateur Athletic Union Women’s Basketball, 1950-1971: The Contributions of Hanes Hosiery, Nashville Business College, and Wayland Baptist College,” (M.A. Thesis, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, 1984), 7. Many labor historians agree that the interest and function of welfare capitalism, including recreation programs, was dying by the late 1920s and 1930s, but Elizabeth Fones-Wolf maintains that the Great Depression served as a turning point of sorts and produced conflicting effects specifically on industrial recreation. Some companies were forced to cut industrial recreation because of the economic situation and conflict with labor unions and labor laws, but many programs remained intact or expanded to challenge union control and increase worker loyalty. Welfare capitalism was not completely abandoned during the depression, and the fact that the Industrial Recreation Association formed in 1941 shows the important and continued relevance of corporate-sponsored leisure. Elizabeth Fones-Wolf, “Industrial Recreation, the Second World War, and the Revival of Welfare Capitalism, 1934-1960,” The Business History Review, Vol. 60, No. 2 (Summer 1986), 235-242.
and well-being of the company’s employees. On the other hand, the businesses reaped advertising benefits with their sponsorship of sports teams through the publicity and marketing of the teams. The newspaper coverage of the games was free and put the company name into other segments of the paper outside of standard advertisements and business news. The company name embroidered across the front or back of team uniforms was particularly lucrative during a winning season.

The AAU continually tinkered with its rules to make the game more appealing to fans, sponsors, coaches, and players. In comparison to the men’s full-court 5-on-5 game, the women’s version often seemed dull and unexciting. To liven up the game, for instance, the AAU added a “rover” player in their 1936 national tournament. The rover was usually a guard who was allowed to cross the half court line to play both offense and defense. This new position allowed for a quick transition, more fast-breaks, additional passing, and increased outside shooting opportunities. Although AAU players welcomed the new roving rule, it was not widely adopted on a long-term basis outside of leagues and teams adhering to AAU rules. Many high-school players never even heard of the roving rule until they began playing AAU-sanctioned basketball.

Industrial recreation peaked during World War II when the American government partnered with industrial recreationalists to promote the health and well-being of its homefront citizens through a national campaign effort. The Industrial Physical Fitness

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301 Grundy and Shackelford, 54.
302 Ikard, 16; Grundy and Shackelford, 54.
303 Ikard, 40-41; 177-180; Grundy and Shackelford, 90-91.
304 Ikard, 41.
305 Neal interview; Rogers interview; Carla Lowry, interview by author, 15 July 2011, Georgetown, Texas, digital audio recording, W.E.B. Du Bois Library, University of Massachusetts-Amherst, Amherst, MA.
Program, sponsored by the Office of Physical Fitness during the war,\textsuperscript{306} was initiated and promoted by integral wartime figures such as the War Manpower Commission's Paul V. McNutt in an attempt to tie the war effort and the health of the nation together. McNutt believed sports could increase morale and production on the homefront. He stated, “Sports will help not only those who participate in athletic contests, but will also help to raise the morals of those watching from the sidelines.”\textsuperscript{307} Kentucky Senator A.B. “Happy” Chandler backed up McNutt’s beliefs about the important role of sports during the war and predicted that interest in sports would continue to grow after the war ended, igniting a “sports boom.”\textsuperscript{308}

Chandler was only partially correct in his post-war assessment. A sports boom did occur for men, but the overall cultural conservatism of the 1950s produced a backlash in women’s athletics, particularly in basketball. The new cultural conservatism stressed conformity to traditional gender norms and emphasized differences between the sexes.\textsuperscript{309} Although the AAU and industrial leagues continued throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, in general, women’s basketball experienced “a dark age.”\textsuperscript{310} The time period still produced some of the most outstanding athletes to ever play the game, but overall fan

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{307} Arch Ward, “Arch Ward’s Sports Previews,” Radio Program Transcript, 26 January 1944, New York City Regional Office Administration and Correspondence Files, 1942-1945, New York State Archives, Albany, New York.
\item \textsuperscript{309} Festle, 3-4, 9, 43-45; Grundy and Shackelford, 110.
\item \textsuperscript{310} Grundy and Shackelford, 110.
\end{itemize}
attendance declined, many once-prominent teams disbanded, and fewer tournaments were scheduled.  

The media barraged the 1950s woman with the message to embrace her “natural” femininity. Magazines, books, newspapers, psychiatrists, journalists, educators, and TV programs, both consciously and unconsciously, pushed the idea of femininity on American women. Revived social expectations harking from the Victorian era dictated that women and men display characteristics and behaviors different from the other sex. The underlying assumption of the era, often backed by Darwinian and Freudian theory, was that men and women were different. Accordingly, then, masculinity and femininity were viewed as dichotomous, defined only in contrast to one another. This logic, as backwards as it may seem now, has been defined as “bipolar dualism” by prominent feminist theorists. A person was expected to reside on one end of the spectrum or the other, and was then defined by those characteristics, without much wiggle room. If a person was not considered feminine, then they must be masculine, and vice versa. Yet, as Mary Jo Festle notes, “In practice people rarely exhibit all masculine

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111 Grundy and Shackelford, 110; Ikard, 114, 153.
112 Festle, 3; Cahn, 181; Elaine Tyler May, Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era, (Basic Book, 1999), 105; Lois W. Banner, American Beauty, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), 283-286. This idea of the feminine American woman was also pushed on American men. Ads like those produced by the Pepsi-Cola company in the mid-1950s that appeared in Sports Illustrated emphasized the femininity of the woman consuming the Pepsi, yet the ads were geared toward the largely male readership of the magazine. Sports Illustrated, Pepsi Advertisements, 25 April, 23 May, 18 July 1955.
113 Festle, 4, 21-22. Festle elaborates on the Darwinian explanation of a male teacher in 1906 who explains that in the Stone Age, men were responsible for hunting and protecting their families which allowed them to develop athletic abilities that aided them in their twentieth century sporting endeavors. Stone Age women, conversely, cared for the home and children and did not need and thus never developed the ability (on the level that men did) to run, throw, or attack. Women were unsuited for such activities as running and jumping in the twentieth century, according to this line of thought.
114 Festle, 4.
or feminine characteristics; they fall somewhere along a wide spectrum of behavior."¹¹⁵

A woman who displayed both feminine and masculine traits and behaviors could have been labeled more accurately as androgynous, but, instead, she was automatically characterized as masculine or mannish.¹¹⁶

While an unfeminine, mannish, or masculine label on a woman could be damaging to her identity or reputation in the conservative era of the 1950s, this label became particularly troublesome due to a shift that began two decades previous. In the 1930s, society began openly linking masculine women with homosexuality, which ultimately hurt all women participating in sports. It followed that if a woman did not subscribe to traditional gender arrangements and expected notions of femininity, then she must be sexually deviant as well. And lesbianism was not something most women, regardless of their true sexuality, wanted to be publicly associated with in the early to mid-twentieth century. Despite an increased awareness of a gay subculture by the 1950s, "society tyrannized lesbians."¹¹⁷ Psychiatrists labeled homosexuals as psychotic, while the U.S. government branded them immoral perverts. During the McCarthy witch-hunts of the Cold War era, homosexuals were purged from the government as well as other sectors of society. Lesbian women attempted to hide their sexuality in order to avoid

¹¹⁵ Festle, 4.
¹¹⁶ Festle, 4.
social persecution and ostracism. Heterosexual women attempted as much as possible to adhere to societal expectations of femininity to avoid the lesbian stigma.¹¹⁸

Those in charge of women’s sports were aware of the increasing association of lesbianism and sports and worked to counter the assumptions and stereotypes. They promoted that women’s sport actually “increased women’s heterosexual appeal,”¹¹⁹ and continually emphasized the femininity of women athletes. They often publicized women’s athletic events as novel spectacles featuring highly-skilled yet glamorous and beautiful women, or they shied away from women’s public competition in an attempt to protect them from the detrimental association with men’s sports and/or lesbianism.¹²⁰

The All-American Red Heads women’s professional basketball team fit precisely into this “highly skilled yet glamorous” promotional model of women’s sports. The Red Heads, as they were often called, consisted of an exceptionally talented group of ballplayers, many of whom first excelled at the high school level and then in the AAU. As to date, the Red Heads stand as the only women’s team inducted into the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame in Springfield, Massachusetts.¹²¹ Founded by C.M. (Ole) Olson in Cassville, Missouri, in 1936, the Red Heads enjoyed five decades of success as the preeminent women’s touring professional team.¹²² They remain the longest operating women’s professional team and perhaps the most traveled. The Red

¹¹⁸ Festle, 5; Griffin, 52-54.
¹¹⁹ Griffin, 35.
¹²⁰ Cahn, 42; Griffin, 37.
Heads crisscrossed the United States challenging all-male teams and playing under the men’s basketball rule set at a time when women playing for high schools, colleges, and AAU teams were still largely using modified rules deemed more appropriate for the female sex. The players, whose natural hair color quickly fell by the wayside, earned their team name by dying their hair red, “ranging in hue from near-tangerine to deep cinnamon,” or by sporting an auburn wig.

Olson sold the team in 1956 to his head coach Orwell Moore, whose wife Lorene “Butch” Moore, scored an astounding 35,000 points throughout her twelve-year Red Head career. Under both Olson and Moore, the Red Heads were held to strict rules and high standards. As Moore explained in a *Sports Illustrated* article, “This is a wonderful livelihood for a girl, but I insist on high standards, my standards…They are forbidden to smoke in the uniform of an All-American Red Head [and] the Red Heads are not to drink.” Moore acknowledged the double-standard of social expectations between male

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123 The Red Heads played in all fifty states throughout their fifty year duration and also challenged teams in Canada, Mexico, and even the Philippines, making them an internationally-renowned organization as well. The Red Heads, in 1940, were the first professional team to play in the Philippines and drew an audience of 10,000. However, the war in the Pacific was heating up and upon receiving a warning from the US military of a potential invasion, the Red Heads were promptly escorted off the island on cattle boats following closely behind a mine sweeper. “All-American Red Heads Recognized at 2011 Induction,” Women’s Basketball Hall of Fame Press Release, 11 March 2011, http://www.wbhof.com/pdf/Red%20Head%20Press%20Release.pdf, Accessed 18 October 2012; John Molina, “When it comes to the history of Women’s Basketball, the All American Red Heads ARE the Great American Story,” www.allamericanredheads.com, Accessed 18 February 2008; Beck.


125 Ikard, 26.

126 Olson hired Moore as the women’s head coach in 1948. Johnson and Williamson.

127 Johnson and Williamson.
and female athletes, but he was not one to completely upend women’s traditional roles. He stated, “These men professional basketball players can walk in a bar and drink all they want. But let one redheaded woman basketball player sit down on a bar stool and order up a beer and you upset the mores of a community…” Since Moore relied on the these very communities to make a profit, it was in his best interest to continue providing the Red Head brand of sport advertised on their programs: “thrilling basketball” and “rated family entertainment.”

Both Olson and Moore capitalized on the contemporary emphasis on women’s beauty, glamor, and sex appeal, at least the kind “merchandised by Hollywood” and approved by the thousands of fans that attended each of their games. The women utilized their beauty and feminine guile to overcome male brawn in their Harlem Globetrotter-esque style of play. But the Red Heads were not merely ‘pretty’ girls with ‘attractive eyes’ that were “very easy to look at.” They were outstanding athletes:

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128 Moore admitted that he was forced to recruit news girls every year to replace the ones lost to marriage. He retorted, “I sometimes call this the All American Matrimonial Bureau. They get married a lot.” Despite having employed women for decades in seemingly non-traditional jobs, Moore made it very clear in 1974 that his organization was not tied to the women’s movement: “We’re no part of Women’s Lib and if any of the girls were to get involved in it—well, they better not let me know about it.” His reasoning? “I don’t want the All American Red Heads tied to any causes.” They were to abide by his standards alone. As cited in Johnson and Williamson.

129 Johnson and Williamson.

130 As cited in Johnson and Williamson.


132 Moore insists that the Red Heads actually founded many of the schticks the Globetrotters utilize. He explained, “I make it a point never to mention the Harlem Globetrotters, but when they claim to have originated many of the tricks that the All American Red Heads actually began, then I feel I must speak out.” As cited in Johnson and Williamson. Lageman, 65; Bob Sansevere, “Hall and Fame Fin All American Red Heads, Women’s Basketball Pioneers,”
The Red Heads are slick ball handlers and their passes snap with precision. Many are thrown behind the back, perfectly. The women are wearing bright red lipstick and blue eyeshadow, as if they were going to the theater. But here they are, perspiring like mad and playing basketball like demons.134

The Red Heads provided another type of basketball opportunity for young women but not one that every female athlete wanted to take. Hazel Walker, one of the early standouts in the AAU women’s basketball world, left the AAU in 1946 to join the Red Heads. Although she flourished with the Red Heads and quickly emerged as a team leader, she quickly tired of what Robert Ikard refers to as “‘set up’ rules,” namely those that banned fast breaks for their male opponents and included “referee leniency on the Red Heads’ fouls.”135 Walker left the Red Heads and formed her own professional women’s basketball team that continued to utilize some aspects of showmanship and sex appeal but also emphasized a more competitive and legitimate type of basketball game, more akin to the game she previously played with the AAU.136

Younger players, fresh out of high school, were often recruited by both Walker’s team and the Red Heads. Moore explained, “They are easier to coach, easier to fit the Red Head way when they are young.”137 Not all the girls were interested in the barnstorming way, however, and preferred a more stable lifestyle. “The All American Red Heads contacted me,” recalled Wayland Baptist College player and AAU star Carla Lowry. “I knew immediately I didn’t want to do that, you know, run around the country

133 Lageman, 65; Springfield Armory News, (January 1942), Springfield Armory Archives, Springfield, Massachusetts.
134 Johnson and Williamson.
135 Ikard, 26.
136 Ikard, 26-28.
137 Johnson and Williamson.
and let guys beat up on me...but there just wasn’t anything else, any opportunity.”\textsuperscript{138}

When Lowry learned about the possibility of playing at Wayland Baptist College during her senior year of high school in Mississippi, she jumped at the chance: “Since it was gonna be in a college, I knew that the whole climate would be different, and that I would be more protected too, just as a female. And so that is why I went to Wayland.”\textsuperscript{139}

Lowry placed a high value on her education but also like Hazel Walker wanted to play against competitive teams. She stated, “I really very much wanted to play with people that were that good.”\textsuperscript{140}

Many women enjoyed, promoted, and participated in physical exercise and different types of sports throughout the twentieth century. Thus, a division occurred between acceptable sports and physical behavior for women, one that pitted college women physical educators against the mostly male industrial, barnstorming, and AAU sport promoters who valued and endorsed different forms of women’s sports and athletic endeavors. In essence, the argument by the mid-twentieth century “was not over whether women should participate in sports, but over precisely what kind of sports they should participate in.”\textsuperscript{141} Physical educators believed there was a “right” kind of sport for women, that they should be in control of these sports, and that these sports should be

\textsuperscript{138} Lowry interview.
\textsuperscript{139} Lowry interview. Doris Rogers was contacted by both the Red Heads and Hazel Walker’s traveling team, but like Lowry wanted to get an education first. Rogers explained, “But for some reason, [the traveling teams] didn’t appeal to me, just going out and just—I wanted an education, I guess, is why, but just traveling, traveling, traveling, and playing—I needed an education first. So...I did seek a place where I could do both.” Rogers interview.
\textsuperscript{140} Lowry interview.
\textsuperscript{141} Festle, 10.
different from those of men. They believed the sports promoters and the AAU did not always have the women’s best interests at heart.

Physical educators belonging to the National Section for Girls’ and Women’s Sports (NSGWS) maintained that the AAU employed the “same techniques, strategies, and philosophy as they did for boys.” This generally meant that winning was the primary goal and that women’s interests were ignored in place of what was best for the AAU or the United States in international standing. In fact, they occasionally accused the AAU of exploiting women. The female physical educators worried that women’s sports might become like the scandal-laden, money-driven, highly competitive, and winning-trumps-sportmanship ethics of men’s collegiate sports. They believed that “females should not be exposed to coaches who lost perspective, allowing their best

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342 Festle, 9-22; In many ways, this argument is still being played out today in terms of control of women’s basketball. Should men coach women’s teams? Should the women’s game mimic the men’s game?
343 Festle, 11. The main national governing body for women’s physical educators and basketball regulation originated in 1899 but was subsequently succeeded by a new enterprise every decade or so, with each group building upon the work of their predecessors. Many of these groups also oversaw other women’s sports and were allied with national groups promoting women’s athletics in general. The national groups were as follows: National Women’s Basketball Committee (1899-1917); Committee on Women’s Athletics (1917-1927); Section on Women’s Athletics (1927-1931); Rules and Editorial Committee (affiliated with the American Physical Education Association) (1931-1932); National Section on Women’s Athletics (1932-1953); National Section for Girls and Women’s Sports (1953-1956); Division for Girls and Women’s Sports (1957-1974); National Association for Girls and Women in Sport, which is an affiliate of the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance (AAHPERD) (1974-Present). In 1966, the Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (CIAW) formed to specifically regulate women’s intercollegiate sports which then led to the 1971 formation of the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (AIAW) whose purpose was to govern women’s college athletics and organize national tournaments. They served as a counterpart to the male National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). Joan S. Hult, “The Governance of Athletics for Girls and Women: Leadership by Women Physical Educators, 1899-1949,” in Hult and Trekell, 53-82; “Women’s Basketball Timeline” in Hult and Trekell, 427-430.
344 Festle, 11.
players to compete even if they were injured, or pushing athletes beyond what they were capable of.”145 And like the All-American Red Heads or Hazel Walker’s traveling teams, women should not “yield to the temptations of corruptions and commercialism, allowing unscrupulous, ill-bred promoters to use athletes to advertise products or take them on vaudeville-like tours to make a quick buck.”146

At the same time, physical educators worried that if they did not provide input to the AAU and other community leagues, they would further lose control over girls and women’s basketball. In some instances, they provided advice to industrial and community leagues and the AAU in an attempt to guide them in organization, policy, publicity, and rules for competition.147 But there was controversy among physical educators themselves as to what role they should play with the amateur leagues. Some of these women balked at any association with groups that sponsored state basketball tournaments, as they felt that it appeared as if they sanctioned that type of activity and level of competition. Yet other physical educators felt it was their duty to intervene, and as a physical educator from the University of Texas asked, “Can we as educators afford to criticize and yet do nothing about the matter? As educators isn’t it our job to see that the girls in our particular state are not being exploited?”148 If they offered advice and input then they could help influence and “control situations which are harmful to the

145 Festle, 12.
146 Festle, 12.
participants.”149 Florence Hale Stephenson of State Teachers College in San Francisco, California, understood that industrial basketball leagues might not be able to fully live up to physical educators’ standards, but maintained that even small changes and suggestions were better than offering no advice at all. She stated, “It seems narrow-sighted to wash one’s hands of a needy group, who because of lack of educational opportunity fail to hold a particular viewpoint. Working with such groups will spread the good influence of the Women’s Division of the National Amateur Athletic Federation much further than criticism or a ‘holdoffish’ attitude.”150

Stephenson’s advice proved fortuitous for those educators willing to help. For instance, over a four-year period where trained physical educators advised a state amateur athletic federation using the National Section on Women’s Athletics standards, they were able to influence the group to mandate all participants to have medical examinations before playing basketball.151 The amateur group now used rated women officials whenever possible and limited the schedule of basketball games played in order avoid overtaxing female athletes.152 They switched to a round-robin style tournament over the

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149 O’Gara, 60.
150 Stephenson.
151 See Footnote 143 for information on the National Section of Women’s Athletics (NSWA).
152 O’Gara, 60. In the early 1920s, women’s local officiating boards formed in the eastern U.S. to “ensure [that] an adequate and trained supply of officials” were available to officiate women’s basketball games. This led to the formation of a national organization called the Women’s National Officiating Rating Committee (WNORC) in 1928-1929, which was linked with the National Section of Women’s Athletics (NSWA). This group published official referee techniques to guide the women officials who oversaw women’s high school and college games played under the rules utilized by the NSWA. The Division on Girls and Women’s Sports organization also sponsored an officials group called the National Rated Officials (NRO). The NRO offered officiating services both in school and community-sponsored basketball games. The AAU, however, rarely used women’s officials, and in fact, no women officials were ever used in the AAU national
single-elimination tournament, strictly enforced the minimum age requirement of seventeen to play, banned all high school teams from competition, and planned social gatherings at the tournaments. Official rules from the National Section on Women’s Athletics were adopted and gate receipts were eliminated when possible. These changes were deemed a success.

Women physical educators promoted the notion that basketball could be beneficial to girls and women through potential character development and training opportunities. However, the type of sponsor and leadership determined whether the sport of basketball would offer these opportunities or not. Echoing Berenson’s sentiments almost a half century earlier, Thelma Z. Kyser of State Normal College in Natchitoches, Louisiana, claimed that the sport of basketball in itself was not moral. However, “it may develop moral as well as immoral character. The leadership, is, after all, the determining element.” Kyser saw girls and women’s basketball on the eve of World War II as having too much emphasis on winning, excitement, and commercialism, which to her undoubtedly meant a break from the “desirable character pattern.” If basketball was taught under weak leadership, the sport could influence women to exercise poor judgments, engage in unfair play, build up their egos, and instill a righteous self-esteem. Conversely, if taught in the appropriate way under good leadership, basketball could

tournament until 1964. So, O’Gara’s request for women officials to be used in the Texas high school tournament, along with the NSWA rule-set, was an attempt to maintain a level of control over women’s basketball and officiating. Fran Koenig and Marcy Weston, “Women’s Basketball Officiating,” in Hult and Trekell, 262-263, 267-268.

353 O’Gara, 59-60


355 Kyser, 62.
cultivate fair play, teamwork, good judgment, satisfaction in play, honesty, courtesy, and justice—‘appropriate’ female social tendencies.\textsuperscript{156}

Kyser and fellow mid-twentieth century physical educators firmly believed that “character [could] be made or broken on the basketball court.”\textsuperscript{157} Thus, it was of ultimate importance for the right type of people to be in charge of the sport and to ensure the cultivation of proper character development in America’s girls and young women. While the AAU and other community leagues certainly did not just let their women athletes run amok or mimic complete masculine behavior, the AAU goals did not always align with the women’s physical educators, and they did not always heed their advice. Sometimes they directly confronted their adversaries as they worked to develop their own competitive version of women’s sports programs. The male leadership of the AAU consisted solely of civic leaders, former athletes, and renowned businessmen, and they did not appreciate the women physical educators’ accusations as to their lack of “gender and professional authority.”\textsuperscript{158} The leaders dubbed not only the physical educators in the Women’s Division, but the entire National Amateur Athletic Federation, a “band of ‘grouchy reformers’ whose federation, by snubbing the AAU, would ‘continue to be impotent and destined for the scrapheap.’”\textsuperscript{159}

\textbf{A New Era}

While women’s basketball waned somewhat in the 1950s and 1960s in terms of fan attendance and team sponsorship, the time period also produced some of the sport’s greatest athletes, more international games took place, and many rule changes occurred to

\textsuperscript{156} Kyser, 63.
\textsuperscript{157} Kyser, 63.
\textsuperscript{158} Cahn, 72.
\textsuperscript{159} Cahn, 72.
alter the game, edging it increasingly closer to the men’s full-court game. By the mid-1960s an open-minded and progressive group of women physical educators began collaborating with the AAU and the United States Olympic Committee (USOC) and started promoting interschool competition.\textsuperscript{360} Some of these physical educators were products of states that accepted high school basketball as an appropriate female pastime and had gone on to play at one of the few college programs with highly successful competitive basketball programs for women. They were shocked when they realized the opportunities they received were not available to the majority of American women, and armed with the principles of the rising women’s movement, they vowed to change this. Others came to the conclusion that by denying women access to competitive athletics, they were limiting women’s potential in sports but also from the basic tenets of American political and economic life.\textsuperscript{361} Ultimately, these developments, both positive and negative, would provide a foundation for a new era in women’s basketball, bolstered by

\textsuperscript{360} The AAU and the United States Olympic Committee (USOC) had been partners in developing women’s elite amateur athletics and rules at the national level to improve American women’s competition internationally. But in the early 1960s, the Women’s Board of the USOC recognized “the renewal of interest in high level competition” by physical educators at the high school and collegiate level and organized a series of sports institutes to “improve the quality of teaching and coaching advanced skills in many of the Olympic sports.” This marked the beginning of an alliance between the Division of Girls and Women’s Sports (which took over as the national governing body for women physical educators starting in 1957), the AAU, and the Olympic committee in establishing a standardized set of rules and governance for women’s basketball at varying levels. The alliance was solidified by the adoption of the official rule set for women’s basketball established in 1971. Joan S. Hult, “The Saga of Competition: Basketball Battles and Governance War,” in Hult and Trekell, Quotes on 231-232; 234; Harley Redin, interview with author, 12 October 2011, phone interview, digital audio recording, W.E.B. Du Bois Library, University of Massachusetts-Amherst, Amherst, MA; Carla Lowry, interview by author, 15 July 2011, Georgetown, Texas.\textsuperscript{361} Grundy and Shackelford, 128-133.
the adoption of the full court game for women in 1971, followed by the historic Title IX legislation of the omnibus Education Amendment in 1972.

Several of these developments came about due to the increased competition American women’s teams faced when playing international opponents, an increasingly common occurrence in the Cold War era of the 1950s and 1960s. National teams were created for the inaugural women’s basketball World Championships in 1953 and the Pan-Am games in 1955. While in the quest to promote international goodwill, the AAU sanctioned international competition as a part of larger cultural programs to build friendly relations between different countries. “This was a cultural exchange program,” explained Carla Lowry, a star player from the AAU national championship team from Wayland Baptist College, “so we went over [to Russia], and then they would come over here and play in different cities in the United States... It was a really great opportunity.”

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362 Ikard, 84, 101. Individual college or AAU teams played against international competition beginning in the 1920s and 1930s, most notably against Canadian teams and Mexican teams, and a US team traveled to London for a “world” tournament consisting of three teams in 1934. Talk emerged about women’s basketball being included in the Olympics in the 1940s, but this failed to materialize. International competition was encouraged by the AAU in the 1950s onward and became a part of the goodwill tours popular in the Cold War era.

363 Neal interview; Rogers interview; Lowry interview; Ikard. All-American teams as well as some individual teams such as Wayland Baptist College and Nashville Business College would play a series of game against foreign teams.

364 Lowry interview. Although she loved traveling and playing overseas, Lowry also noted that the “Cold War wasn’t so cold.” According to Lowry, the Russians intentionally tried to make things harder for the American players while on their trip. She stated, “The Russians would always make sure that we would take flights that would get in like at 2 o’clock in the morning or something... Then they’d take us out sightseeing things... and then we get back and they’d say, ‘Oh, your hotel room is not ready,’ so that’s another delay.” Similarly, Doris Rogers believed that Cold War politics influenced the beauty contest held at the 1964 Women’s Basketball World Championship. Rogers was nominated by the American news media covering the tournament to represent the US in the beauty contest, but then fans sent in ballots to vote for the contest winner. The day prior to the official counting of the votes, Rogers was way ahead in the polls. “But,”
Joan Crawford, a 13-time AAU All-American player who helped Nashville Business College win eight straight national championships, recalled how special it was playing on these national teams that would occasionally get to play in such venues as Madison Square Garden when challenging the Russians. She stated, “It was something you never dreamed you’d be able to do...For a girl from Arkansas, it was something.”

As basketball spread internationally throughout the twentieth century, American women lost their prominence as international teams embraced a quicker, more physical and rough version of the sport. Cold War politics influenced the development of strong, highly competitive foreign teams, particularly in the Soviet Union, as both capitalists and communists strove to prove their way of life was better in every aspect. All-star Nashville Business College player Doris Rogers, who played on several different national teams, described the heated competition between nations: “At that time Russia...had the superior teams, for the most part. The international brand of ball was...more physical...The competition was just so intense, and I just loved it.”

As sports in general became an important part of mainstream society and also served as a reflection of that society, the federal government became concerned when the Soviets consistently dominated American women in sports competition. The U.S. government encouraged American women to play more competitive sports, but without

Rogers explained, “the big girl from Russia ended up winning.” She recalled a newspaper reporting stating that, “It is politics. They were afraid. They were afraid not to let Russia win.” Rogers believed that in fact, a girl from France should have won but that ultimately the contest was a publicity stunt “just to generate interest.” Doris Rogers, interview with author, 8 Sept. 2011, digital recording. See Chapter 2 for more on AAU basketball and beauty contests.

Joan Crawford, interview by Naismith National Basketball Hall of Fame personnel, 2002, videorecording, Naismith HOF.

Ikard, 127, 179.

Rogers interview.
national training centers and the reluctance of some AAU teams and physical educators’
to officially adopt the 5-on-5 full-court game, American women continued to lag far
behind the Soviet women in basketball.\textsuperscript{368}

Harley Redin, renowned basketball coach of the Wayland Baptist Flying Queens
whose team dominated the AAU scene in the 1950s, led the crusade to adopt the full-
court 5-on-5 men’s rules for women. He viewed the American women’s game as a
hindrance to American players in international competition.\textsuperscript{369} “Every year we played
international teams,” Redin proclaimed, “and we were really at a disadvantage because
that’s what they played all the time.”\textsuperscript{370} By this time, a national Olympic rules committee
existed for women’s basketball, which was responsible for rule changes and Olympic
admittance for the women’s game. Composed of various AAU coaches and university
personnel, the rules committee fought amongst themselves for several years over whether
to adopt the 5-on-5 game. Redin, a long-time member of the rules committee, recalled
that any time a rule change was proposed, members would challenge it. He recollected,
“[There were] some for it, some against it. That’s just normal, and for…several years,
we had it back and forth. Some wanted to change and some didn’t.”\textsuperscript{371} A dwindling
percentage of women physical educators at the collegiate level still believed the full-court
game “was too much exertion for women,” while a portion of AAU teams were simply
“used to playing the rover game and they just didn’t want to change.”\textsuperscript{372} But Redin and

\textsuperscript{368} Grundy and Shackelford, Cahn, Ikard; Festle, 84-86.
\textsuperscript{369} Kevin Sherrington, “Full-court hall credentials,” The Dallas Morning News, 22
\textsuperscript{370} Redin interview.
\textsuperscript{371} Redin interview.
\textsuperscript{372} Redin interview.
other supporters persevered, and the AAU temporarily adopted the full-court 5-on-5
game for women in 1969, with the formal adoption taking place two years later.

Further aiding these developments, the American Medical Association reversed
their long-time position on the inappropriateness of women’s exercise and sport in the
1960s, which further undermined remaining resistance to women’s sports.\textsuperscript{173} Along the
same lines, the women’s physical educators national governing body, the Division of
Girls and Women’s Sport (DGWS), shifted to friendlier terms with both the AAU and the
USOC. And with more physical educators open to the idea of intercollegiate sport, the
DGWS created the Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (CIAW) in 1966
to promote women’s sports, govern women’s intercollegiate competition, and organize
national tournaments.\textsuperscript{174} The AAU was on its deathbed in terms of governing industrial
and women’s collegiate sports, and the rise of the CIAW finished them off. With so
many of the AAU’s major industrial teams disbanding, the general quality of play
declining, the lack of national attention to women’s basketball, and collegiate teams
joining the CIAW tournaments, the AAU turned its attention to junior programs.\textsuperscript{175}

Colleges and universities, however, slowly began offering more competitive and
varsity sports opportunities for their female students, but it would take major federal
legislation to enact any real sort of widespread change. This boost came in the form of
Title IX of the Education Amendments Act signed into law by President Nixon on July 1,
1972. Originally intended to provide equality to women in higher education, Title IX
simply stated the following: “No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be

\textsuperscript{173} Grundy and Shackelford, 133; Ikard, 153.
\textsuperscript{174} Cahn, 248; Grundy and Shackelford, 133.
\textsuperscript{175} Grundy and Shackelford, 167-168; Ikard, 156.
excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance." Title IX was not intended to equalize the playing field in the sexist sports world, but, nonetheless, it very quickly became synonymous with women’s sports. Soon after Title IX became law, the Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) determined that Title IX extended to extracurricular activities, including sports. HEW decided Title IX did not mean that women would be forced to play on men’s teams, nor did it require schools to offer men and women the exact same sport. Rather, the development of separate women’s sports teams satisfied the act’s requirements. Title IX was all about proportionality. Thus, if a high school offered three fall sports for male athletes, the school was also required to offer comparable sporting opportunities for women. The school was not required to offer the same three sports for women but they needed to provide “effective accommodation of student interests and ability.”

The passage and further explanation of Title IX terrified many male athletic directors and coaches who were used to bloated budgets for their “revenue” sports such as football and basketball. The few girls and women’s sports offered existed on minimal to non-existent budgets, and they were fearful of the potential redistribution of their funds. Top male athletic directors, along with National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) officials (who set aside $1 million dollars to fight and dismantle Title IX)

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376 Title IX, Education Amendments of 1972, http://www.dol.gov/oasam/regs/statutes/titleix.htm; Susan Ware, Title IX: A Brief History with Documents, (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2007), 3.
377 Grundy and Shackelford, 148-150.
pressed Congress to protect their male domain. In response, Congress passed the
Tower Amendment in 1974, which excluded football and other men’s revenue-generating
sports from Title IX compliance.\textsuperscript{179}

Women coaches, athletic directors, athletes, and other women’s organizations
fought back viciously. They now understood what might be possible for women if they
had equal access to sports, and they refused to retreat. But this was not just about sports.
Equality was at stake. The awareness raised in the 1960s and 1970s by Second Wave
feminists and the Women’s Rights movement provided a framework for these women to
fight against gender discrimination in sport.\textsuperscript{180} In 1971, physical educators formed a new
national organization to replace the CIAW called the Association for Intercollegiate
Athletics for women (AIAW).\textsuperscript{181} The AIAW was now responsible for governing
women’s intercollegiate sports and served the same function as the NCAA did for male
sports at the college level. But the AIAW refused to govern in the same manner as the
NCAA. They viewed women athletes as students first and did not provide athletic
scholarships.\textsuperscript{182} They spearheaded the grass-roots effort to protect Title IX and defeat the

\textsuperscript{179} Grundy and Shackelford, 149-150.
\textsuperscript{180} While women involved in sports during the late 1960s and 1970s employed feminist
rhetoric to advance claims for equality, the larger feminist movement was not concerned
with women’s sports, as they viewed sport as a patriarchal institution that reinforced and
promulgated the very masculine and excessive competitive qualities they wanted to
challenge in society.
\textsuperscript{181} Cahn, 248-249.
\textsuperscript{182} However, Title IX had an interesting influence on the AIAW in terms of their no-
scholarship policy. In 1973, a group of Florida-based coaches and players utilized their
new rights under Title IX to file a lawsuit insisting that female athletics should be eligible
to receive athletic scholarships, since they were available for male athletes. This
obviously contradicted the philosophy promoted by the AIAW that promoted academics
first and athletics second. The lawsuit essentially forced the AIAW to remove their ban
on collegiate athletic scholarships for women. Donna Lopiano, interview by author, 17
Tower Amendment by pressuring their congressional representatives through letter campaigns and testifying against the Tower Amendment.\textsuperscript{183}

Their hard work paid off when a joint committee consisting of Congress members and HEW eliminated the Tower Amendment. The committee explicitly emphasized the need and importance of equal athletic opportunity for males and females in schools. They allowed a few exemptions for fraternities, sororities, and “single-sex pageants, which reward the combination of personal appearance, poise, and talent,”\textsuperscript{184} but football and other big-time male sports were not included. HEW established regulations for Title IX that would “consider whether the selection of sports and levels of competition effectively accommodate the interests and abilities of members of both sexes,” which included such things as facilities, coaching, equipment, and travel stipends. HEW finalized the regulations on July 21, 1975 and provided three years for all schools to obtain compliance.\textsuperscript{185}

**A New Debate over Control**

Women’s sports, including basketball, grew tremendously after the passage and mandated compliance of Title IX. For instance, the number of women playing college

\textsuperscript{183} Grundy and Shackelford, 149.

\textsuperscript{184} Grundy and Shackelford, 150. I find it interesting that single-sex pageants were exempted from Title IX. Women’s sports had long been tied to beauty contests and were themselves often used as examples where women could be judged on those same merits. Yet the term “single-sex pageants” almost always refers to women’s beauty contests so this exemption allowed further emphasis on women’s outward appearance as her defining feature. Title IX worked to bring women’s sports up to par with men, but also exempted such institutions that emphasized women’s looks as her most important feature. They did not force men into this type of subordination to women, but simply exempted them from it.

\textsuperscript{185} Grundy and Shackelford, 150.
sports doubled within the first five years, while women basketball players at the high
school level jumped in number from 400,000 in 1972 to 4.5 million within ten years.
Many men, however, were resentful of the law and challenged it in any way they could.
The NCAA was unwilling to give up the fight so easily and continued to fight the AIAW
and Title IX by “stonewalling efforts to increase women’s funding, continuing to lobby
congressional legislators and filing lawsuits aimed at limiting the measure’s reach.”186
Yet, they found themselves unable to defeat the bill, so they changed their strategy to a
form of the old saying, “If you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em.” The NCAA, under the
leadership of Walter Byers, was determined to take control over women’s sports from the
AIAW, in order to prevent what they perceived as a threat to the male sporting domain.187

And so began the second great debate between women physical educators and
male sports promoters. This time both sides supported competitive sports for women, at
least in theory. The conflict came down to who would govern women’s collegiate sports
and what model they would use to do so. The conflict lasted a solid decade and would
only be resolved in the court system. According to Donna Lopiano, former women’s
athletic director at the University of Texas and president of the AIAW, the NCAA
decided to make schools financial offers they could not refuse, particularly during the
economic turmoil of the late 1970s and early 1980s. The NCAA offered to provide
publicity, resources, tournaments, money, and TV contracts that the AIAW simply could
not afford. Lopiano stated, “We didn’t have the cash cow…so we knew we didn’t have
the financial wherewithal to compete with something like the NCAA.”188

186 Grundy and Shackelford. 169-170.
187 Lopiano interview.
188 Lopiano interview.
Schools were essentially forced to choose between organizations and ultimately between models of governing. Did they want to belong to a well-established, well-funded, big-time sports organization with a predetermined path to credibility? Or did they want a self-determining future with a different philosophical construct, one that valued scholarship first and foremost? Since most schools could not resist the lure of credibility and financial stability in the end, they transferred membership over to the NCAA.\(^\text{189}\) The AIAW, however, was not ready to go down without one final fight. They claimed the NCAA used their profits from the completely separate market of men's sports to enter and dominate the women's sports market, which violated antitrust and monopoly laws. The AIAW took the NCAA to court, but the judge ultimately ruled in favor of the NCAA. Without a court victory, Lopiano and the AIAW knew they simply could not keep up with the NCAA financially, so they did not appeal the court's decision.\(^\text{190}\) By June 1982, the AIAW disbanded after plunging into financial crisis.\(^\text{191}\)

Women's basketball, as it neared a century in age, continued rapid growth and exploded in terms of new teams, new players and new opportunities at all levels of the game. Despite the advances of Title IX and the backing of state and national organizations such as the NCAA, basketball would continue to experience a myriad of growing pains as conservative legislators attempted to chip away at Title IX. Larger social issues still plagued the progression towards equality in women's sports. Women's social roles remained largely rooted within the family, despite more women working

\(^{189}\) Lopiano interview; Grundy and Shackelford, 179-181.

\(^{190}\) Lopiano interview.

\(^{191}\) Lopiano interview; Grundy and Shackelford, 181.
outside the home. Similarly, the lesbian stigma continued to haunt women players as they pushed for more access to the sports world through the last two decades of the twentieth century.

**Everybody’s “Ma”: Femininity and Roller Derby**

While those attempting to control the evolution of women’s basketball fought amongst themselves and with the larger society, another set of women athletes challenged mainstream ideas of femininity by engaging in the more controversial, gender-equal, full-contact sport of Roller Derby. While the evolution of their sport in many ways varied from the development of basketball, these female athletes experienced similar tensions over appropriate demonstrations of femininity as their basketball-playing sisters.

Much like the 1945 *LIFE* article mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Roller Derby news publications constantly highlighted the beauty and femininity of their female skaters, even as they lauded the women for their participation in a rough, full-contact sport. Articles continually featured stories and pictures that emphasized the attractive looks, charming nature, and pleasing personalities of the women skaters. For instance, headlines and captions such as “Meet ‘Miss Glamour’: Roller Derby’s Newest ‘It’ Girl!,” “Petite and Sweet!,” “Charming Miss,” and “Pretty Kitty—Derby’s Darling” appeared regularly.\(^\text{392}\) But Roller Derby’s first gate attraction did not fit the image that the popular media of the Roller Derby and other sports of the era publicized. The first star of the Roller Derby embodied the contradictions and uniqueness of the sport. She

was portrayed as an average American woman, and at the same time, one who bucked all notions of conventionality.

In 1929, Josephine Bogash, a Chicago wife and mother who worked in the mail order department at Sears and Roebuck, was diagnosed with diabetes. Her doctor, concerned for her health, ordered the 41-year-old to begin exercising to help control her weight and suggested she go to a local gymnasium. Bogash, more interested in roller skating, decided to hit the local roller rink instead. Over the next few years, Bogash became a “roller rink buff” to help combat her diabetes and managed to keep her symptoms under control so long as she was skating.393

In August 1935, Bogash learned about an exciting new skating marathon that was opening at the nearby Chicago Coliseum. Bogash, her husband, her son, and a group of friends paid a nickel each to attend the first ever Transcontinental Roller Derby. Surrounded by band music and her family and friends, Bogash sat in the packed audience watching the male and female skaters whir round and round the long oval track as competitors tried to outlast each other in a marathon-style skating race similar to the six-day bike races, which were also popular at the time.394

394 Bogash, 14-15. The name “Six-Day Bicycle Race” aptly and accurately describes the sport itself. Essentially, a field of two-person teams rode for six-days straight with one cyclist from each team required to be on the track at all times while the other slept, ate, or provided entertainment from the track infield. Cyclists could gain extra laps (or later points) on their opponents during official periods called “sprints” or “jams.” During sprints/jams, cyclists would attempt to outlap their opponents to gain a lap advantage. At the end of the sixth days, whichever cycling duo had ridden the most laps (or earned the most points) won the race. “Bike Team Laps Field,” New York Times, 10 February 1925; “Walshour-McNamara Lead,” New York Times, 13 February 1925; “Belgian Bike Team Leads by Two Laps,” New York Times, 5 March, 1925; “Six-Day Bike Race Will Begin Tonight,” New York Times, 27 November, 1932; Keith Coppage, Roller Derby to
But as an avid roller skater herself, Bogash failed to be impressed by the female Transcontinental Roller Derby skaters. As her son later recalled, “My mother looked at my dad and said, ‘I can skate as good as or better than those girls are doing here.”’ In response, Bogash’s husband Richard, a longtime worker on the Wabash Railroad, dared her to try out for the next derby. So, when try-outs were announced in Chicago the following week, Ma Bogash dragged her 18-year-old son Billy with her. Roller Derby personnel were thrilled with Bogash’s skating ability, but were relatively unimpressed with young Billy, who failed to pass the required time trials. The loyal mother refused to join unless they took Billy as well, and the Derby gave in to her demands. Bogash and Billy officially joined the Roller Derby on September 6, 1935, and were immediately sent to Kansas City for the second Transcontinental Roller Derby.196

Josephine “Ma” Bogash and her son Billy skated as a mother-son duo and took the new sport by storm. The crowds loved Ma, and she and Billy became the first real gate attraction.197 Ma was far from the young, petite, and beautiful skaters like the popular Ivy King who fans aspired to be. Ma was their reality: A “stockily built” wife and mother with diabetes trying to keep her health in check while proving her husband wrong. The fans could relate to her, saw themselves in her, and lived vicariously through her. She was everywoman. Yet, if this aging “everywoman” could be a successful athlete, what did that indicate about the sport of Roller Derby itself? What did that say

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195 Bogash, 14.  
196 Bogash, 14-15; Coppage, 7.  
197 Frank Deford, Five Strides on the Banked Track: The Life and Times of the Roller Derby, (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1971), 75-76.
about women’s athletic capabilities and the women and men who participated side by side in derby? What type of sport was this, and where did it belong?

Roller Skating to Roller Races and Marathons

Roller skating originated in Holland in the 18th century when a nameless ice-skating enthusiast decided to extend the pleasure of ice skating to the summer months. Accordingly, the inventor “acquired large wooden spools, attached them to his shoes with strips of leather and thus the roller skating idea was born.” The activity did not take off until 1863 when James L. Plimpton, an American, improved the skate design with four smaller boxwood wheels. The next skate improvement emerged in the 1880s with the creation of the Richardson ball-bearing skate equipped with metal casters, increasing the durability of the skate and allowing skaters greater speed without the fear of the wooden


399 However, a Chicago Daily Tribune article published in early March 1885 claimed that a fellow named J.H. Fenton invented the modern wooden-wheeled roller skate. Fenton, supposedly an employee at a machine shop in Zanesville, Ohio, was a “fancy” ice skater, which prompted his creation of the modern roller skate. After his invention, he honed his skills to an expert level and proceeded to travel around the United States and Europe, giving skating demonstrations. The author of the article claimed that “Wherever seen the roller-skate became popular.” “Roller-Skating,” Chicago Daily Tribune, 1 March 1885. Other web sources, including the Smithsonian and the National Museum of Roller Skating, indicate that Plimpton was the first to spread the popularity of skating and the quad skate, as opposed to earlier version of inline skates. Plimpton was a businessman from Massachusetts who opened the first skating rinks in America in New York City and Newport, Rhode Island. Plimpton is also credited with founding the first roller skating association in 1863, the same year he patented his quad skate and opened the first rinks. “James L. Plimpton: Roller Skate Innovator,” http://americanhistory.si.edu/sports/exhibit/removers/plimpton/index.cfm; “History and Evolution of Roller Skating,” http://www.mooreamy.com/evolution/history.htm; Menke, 731.
rollers cracking. This revolutionary addition of the ball-bearing wheels led to a roller skating “rage” across Europe and North America in the early 1880s. Like the economy of the era, the sport went through dramatic cycles of boom and bust, exciting vast interest only then to be forgotten. A resurgence of roller skating occurred in the 1930s when the “pastime picked up enthusiasts by the hundreds and then the thousands.”

Not only was roller skating popular, but roller skating races and skating marathons have a long history in the United States. These races drew public attention as early as 1883 in the cities of Boston, Fall River, and Salem, Massachusetts; Providence and Newport, Rhode Island; and New York City. By the mid-1880s, roller skating entered a “craze” phase that spread rapidly across the nation. Reporters compared the enthusiasm for skating to other crazes such as that for tobogganing, teas, and progressive euchre. In early March 1885, an “international” six-day skating tournament and marathon was held in Madison Square Garden in New York City along with a number of other spectator events. Along with the six-day race, burlesque and fancy skating exhibitions, obstacle races, bicycle and skating races, orange and bean races, and carnival

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200 Menke, 731.
203 Jennifer “Kasey Bomber” Barbee and Alex “Axles of Evil” Cohen, Down and Derby: The Insider’s Guide to Roller Derby, (Berkeley, CA: Soft Skull Press, 2010), 11; It appears that the only claim to internationalism at this race was a fancy skater from Japan names Miss Yedo, who was scheduled to perform afternoon and evening shows around the races. Victor W. Clough was hailed as the “champion long distance skater of the West,” but there is no indication that he was or had competed against any international competition, nor if any foreigners were represented in the races. “The Roller Skating Tournament,” New York Times, 22 February 1885.
and masquerade events were also featured. After drawing in large crowds and planning for future marathon races, roller skating seemed to be a permanent fixture.

However, within two months of the March 1885 races, the popularity of roller skating, particularly roller races, declined after a series of deaths and “social transgressions” occurred in conjunction with roller skating. Two young men, including the winner of the Madison Square Garden race, died of conditions caused by or at the very least exacerbated by their participation in the skating marathon. A few weeks later, a young woman from Brooklyn and a young man from Philadelphia also died as an apparent result of marathon skating. In Connecticut two teenage girls ran away from their homes because “the girls were infatuated with roller skating” and had been banned from the local rink by their parents. Not only was skating a potential health risk, but detractors of the activity charged that America’s youth were misbehaving, intermingling in inappropriate and un-chaperoned facilities, and “[preparing] the way for long lives of wretchedness.”

Although the National Roller Skating Congress maintained that skating was “a healthful recreation and an exceptionally moral enjoyment,” the New York Times

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204 “The Roller Skating Tournament.”
211 “Another Skating Tournament,” New York Times, 17 April 1885. The National Roller Skating Congress was an organization composed of roller skate manufacturers who sought to prove to the public that roller skating was indeed beneficial and healthful if done
reported that “by many it will be regarded with great satisfaction as an indication that the mania for roller skating will soon become a thing of the past.” Perhaps, unsurprisingly, the activity and sport were popular amongst the younger crowd but “[had] not won the approval of thoughtful and sensible fathers and mothers.” “...Almost every day,” the author claimed, “stories in which the dangers that beset the young in the rinks were shown. Elopements, betrayals, bigamous marriages, and other social transgressions were traced to the association of the innocent with the vicious upon the skating floor.”

While not all of polite society viewed skating as so harmful, the National Roller Skating Congress did in fact speak out against the marathon skating contests, labeling them as “injurious.” As with any true craze, the popularity waned, attendance at races dropped, rinks went out of business, and moralists found other social ills to denounce. But roller skating did not die. Some rinks managed to survive the ebb and flow of skating popularity with enough business to keep their doors open, while skating races, tournaments, and championships continued to be held throughout the late 19th and early twentieth centuries.

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appropriately. In April 1885, the group “pledged itself to encourage the higher branches of the art...to be skated under the rules and according to the programme adopted by the congress.” Interestingly enough, one member of the National Roller Skating Congress was J.H. Fenton, who some sources claim invented the roller skate.

212 “The Skating Mania.”
213 “The Skating Mania.”
214 “Another Skating Tournament.”
215 “Milwaukee Notes,” Chicago Daily Tribune, 13 January 1886; “Morale of Roller-Skating.”
Origins of Roller Derby

Leo A. Seltzer, an entertainment businessman and promoter, owned several movie theaters in Portland, Oregon in the 1920s, but during the Great Depression became interested in the potential value of live entertainment and sporting events. He hosted a series of popular walkathons in the early 1930s and took the show on the road, traveling across the country. Dancing, bicycling, and walking marathons provided just the type of cheap, mindless, and lighthearted entertainment that struggling Americans craved to divert their attention from the difficult reality of the depression era. These marathons offered a spectacle but required no specialized knowledge from the audience or the participants. They promoted the everyday, working-man’s sort of hero without an attached superstar status. These ordinary skills of dancing, walking, and riding a bike evolved into a type of sport when done in a marathon style: Anyone could dance, walk, or ride a bike, but could they do it for twenty-four straight hours? Could they do it for days on end?²¹⁷ The promoters challenged participants to outlast their opponents in these ferocious competitions, which could rage on for days or even weeks as dancers, walkers, or riders collapsed in exhaustion one by one. The prize money for the winner was not much—usually about $1000 split between couples for over a thousand participation hours—but it was enough to attract a Depression beleaguered field.²¹⁸

Seltzer’s marathons were particularly entertaining since he added popular emcees such as Red Skelton to provide humorous commentary and amuse the audience with

²¹⁷ Coppage, viii, 2-3.
jokes during the event. Seltzer transformed the marathons into full-scale productions to ensure that audiences became repeat customers. He added side-events such as a cellophane wedding where the bride wore a dress and veil of cellophane, ice-sitting contests, ladies’ nights, south-of-the-border evenings, and Indian pow-wow celebrations to entice the audience with something different each night. The marathons were sometimes broadcast live on the radio to increase interest and allowed listeners to enjoy some entertainment from the confines of their own home, although the host would encourage fans to “come on down, there’s still plenty of room.”

In 1933, at age thirty, Seltzer moved his base of business operations halfway across the country to Chicago, Illino is, when he became the main lease holder on the historic and colossal building known as the Chicago Coliseum. He continued hosting walkathons and similar attractions in the Coliseum but decided to investigate more profitable, affordable, and exciting events after a series of disappointing walkathons. Walkathons, Seltzer concluded, were a temporary novelty: “They’ll buy it once, twice maybe—but a third time is pressing your luck.” He needed something else that would attract long-term fans. During this search, he claims to have stumbled across a Literary Digest magazine article with a surprising statistic. According to the article, some 97% of Americans roller-skated at some point in their life. With such an uncharacteristically high participation of the American population interested in skating, surely, Seltzer

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220 Deford, Five Strides, 73; Coppage, 3.
221 As cited in Coppage, 4.
figured, some sort of sport on skates would draw an enthusiastic, and more importantly paying, audience.  

Drawing on inspiration from this magazine article, Seltzer conceived the idea of Roller Derby, one of only three sports created from scratch in America. Yet, Seltzer’s idea may not have been quite as original as commonly reported. An early Roller Derby program from a 1936 race at the New York Hippodrome claims that in June 1934, Seltzer attended a Chicago marathon-style roller race that lasted six days. Apparently, “he was so enthused over the race that he sat there hour after hour marveling at the speed and thrills that these racers were presenting the public in their many jams.” There was no mention of the Literary Digest article that supposedly inspired Seltzer to create the sport from scratch. The program claims Seltzer combined the tenets of the Chicago roller race with the popular six day bike race and the transcontinental race idea to form the Transcontinental Roller Derby.  

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222 Deford, *Five Strides*, 74; Coppage, 4. Deford claims the article said that 93% of Americans skated while Coppage claims the article said 97% skated. I have looked through the Literary Digest from January 1934-December 1935 and have been unable to locate the original article. In an interview and conservation with Jerry Seltzer, Leo’s son, he thinks his father saw the Literary Digest article reprinted in the Chicago Tribune, but I have not been able to locate it there either. Leo Seltzer himself told a reporter in 1950, “I read in a magazine that something like 90 per cent of Americans had roller skated at one time or another. That gave me the idea of holding races on roller skates.” Hal Boyle, “Roller Derby Gives Women Something to Yell About,” *Spokane Daily Chronicle*, 5 June 1950; Gerald E. Seltzer, interview by author, 16-17 June 2011, Sonoma, California, digital audio recording, W.E.B. Du Bois Library, University of Massachusetts-Amherst, Amherst, MA.

223 Basketball and volleyball are the other two sports invented in America. They were created mere miles away from each other in Western Massachusetts in the 1890s.


225 “The Roller Derby,” *New York Hippodrome Roller Derby Sports Program*. It is commonly acknowledged that Seltzer took his cue from bike races and marathons of the 1920s and 1930s but not from similar roller races.
Regardless of his true inspiration, which was mostly likely a combination of events and ideas, sources affirm that Seltzer worked out his version of Roller Derby while dining out at the old Johnny Ricketts restaurant, a “sports hangout” then located on Chicago Ave. He hastily scribbled notes on a tablecloth that outlined a skating marathon-type of race. The race would occur on a flat-track where men and women would test their endurance and speed simultaneously on wooden wheels.\(^{226}\) Seltzer hurried to patent his idea and on July 14, 1935, the sport of “Roller Derby” was copyrighted.\(^{227}\) The copyright included “the rules, skates, map, plans, track, and special signal lights, giving him exclusive rights to present the TRANSCONTINENTAL ROLLER DERBY.”\(^{228}\) The early Roller Derby Seltzer promoted as a combination of the dance marathons, walkathons, and bike races of the early 1930s was in fact a more extreme version, conglomeration, and extension of roller skating races that had been around since the 1880s.\(^{229}\) The sport of Roller Derby became more of an original concept as it evolved to include physical contact and a unique rule set by the end of the 1930s.\(^{230}\)

Leo Seltzer’s Transcontinental Roller Derby debuted on August 13, 1935, on a hot Chicago afternoon. Twenty-five two-person male/female teams skated before a crowd of 20,000 curious, enthused, and paying spectators (including Ma Bogash and her family), jam-packed into the cool air-conditioned Chicago Coliseum. The goal of the derby was simple in principle if not in practice. The winners would be the first male/female skating team to skate the approximate 3,000 mile distance from New York

\(^{227}\) Deford, *Five Strides*, 74.
\(^{228}\) “The Roller Derby,” *New York Hippodrome Roller Derby Sports Program*.
\(^{229}\) Barbee and Cohen, 11; Menke, 731.
\(^{230}\) “The Roller Derby,” *New York Hippodrome Roller Derby Sports Program*. 76
to San Diego, the equivalent of 57,000 laps on the flat track sprawled across the center of the coliseum. Teams were required to skate for a period of 11½ hours a day, and one of the two team members had to be on the track at all times or face elimination. If a team did not meet a specified mileage each day, they were disqualified and forced to leave the derby. A giant map was constructed following Route 66, and small lights on the map were lit as skaters advanced along the replicated highway, marking their distance and mileage. Staying true to the crowd-pleasing antics in walk and dance marathons, sprints (later renamed “jams”) “signaled opportunities for skaters to attempt to lap other skaters” to increase their lap advantage and quickly became “a crowd favorite.” If a skater fell, collapsed, or was injured, their partner replaced them on the track to keep the marathon rolling. However, these substitutions required the team to receive a lap penalty.

The teams skated continually on the track from 1:30 p.m. to 12:30 a.m. A member of each team had to be skating on the track throughout the entire month-long

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231 Eighteen laps around the track equaled one mile. Coppage, 4. Some sources claim the skaters skated approximately 4,000 miles, but if the original flat-track was 18 laps to the mile and the first skating team had to skate 57,000 laps, it would appear the winning duo skated close to 3200 miles.
232 Each duo-team wore a jersey with the same number on it. Even after evolving into a 5-on-5 team sport, each male and female on the team would still be partnered with someone of the opposite sex, and the partners would share a jersey number. Into the 1940s, team jerseys featured advertising logos from their sponsors on the front. Sponsors included Kools cigarettes, Pepsi-Cola, Coca-Cola, Orange Crush, Milam Food Market, or Ross Insulation Company, to name a few. While the uniforms evolved somewhat in style, cut, and color over the decades, in general, they consisted of a long-sleeved jersey with a pair of tights/leggings with built-in leather knee and hip pads worn under a pair of satin shorts. Coppage, 14. Mary Youpelle Massro, interview by author, 8 April 2011, phone interview, digital audio recording, W.E.B. Du Bois Library, University of Massachusetts-Amherst, Amherst, MA.
233 Coppage, 4-5.
234 Deford, Five Strides, 74.
derby. While one team member skated, the other slept on cots in the infield portion of the track, read, cheered for their teammate, ate, or provided the crowd with another form of entertainment. After weeks of skating, the field of teams quickly dwindled due to the skaters' utter exhaustion and injury despite safety prevention and onsite medical care. By September 11, 1935, Bernie McKay and Corrisse Martin pulled ahead on the giant lit map tracking their eight-wheeled voyage to the West Coast and maintained a steady lead for the next week and a half. On September 22, the duo defeated the nine remaining teams by completing the 57,000 laps, thus winning the first ever Transcontinental Roller Derby.\(^\text{235}\) Despite the initial success of the first derby and his own victory, McKay never skated again, citing no real future opportunities with the derby.\(^\text{236}\)

McKay perhaps could not foresee a future in Roller Derby, but many were willing to give it a try. Despite limited financial rewards, a required dedication, and tough training for skaters, Seltzer’s Roller Derby provided unparalleled opportunities during the bleak times of the Great Depression. During the Roller Derby’s early years, Seltzer offered a modest salary but also opportunities for prize money. The first place winners won the grand prize of $1000.\(^\text{237}\) A little extra cash could also be made during special sprinting jams when the worn-out skaters trying to pace themselves would stop mid-stride and take off in a hard sprint around the track with “quick bursts of speed,” getting in a


\(^{236}\) Deford, Five Strides, 75.

few more laps to win immediate prize money. The skaters were always provided with housing, food, clothing, medical care, and a base salary.

Many of the early skaters in the Transcontinental Roller Derby joined for those very reasons. They had been unemployed and saw no other opportunities on the horizon. Former skater Gene Vizena Nygra remembered how these factors played a role in her skating career. She had recently graduated from high school and was attempting to get hired on at Sears and Roebuck but experienced a string of bad luck. She recalled, “I had been hunting for a job, and I would take the test at Sears Roebuck, and the next morning they’d call me when I’m out looking for a job, so I lost it.”

When presented with the opportunity to try out for the Roller Derby, even though she did not know how to skate, she decided to give it a whirl. “I was the fourth worst skater there,” she lamented about her try-out. “I would barely go round the track. I knew nothing about skating, except I had put skates on before...but you gotta remember, this was the Depression. Nobody had jobs. And we were guaranteed twenty-five dollars a week.”

Taking advantage of a popular trend, Leo Seltzer ultimately transformed the roller races and marathons of the past with his emphasis on two very important aspects: women skaters and spectacle. As an entertainment promoter, although he disliked the term with its less-than-reputable connotations, Seltzer “understood the value of a good

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238 Barbee and Cohen, 14; Deford, *Five Strides*, 77.
239 Deford, *Five Strides*, 76; Mabe, 26; Coppage, 5.
240 Deford, *Five Strides*, 76.
242 As cited in Coppage, 5.
243 Barbee and Cohen, 13.
hook and angle.” In the early years of the sport, participants who demonstrated crowd-pleasing talents such as singing, dancing, joke-telling, or even juggling, were often hired over those who could merely skate. Thus, Seltzer explicitly created a spectacle that combined sport and entertainment. He also realized that an entire audience demographic was largely ignored in the male-dominated sports world. He figured that by including women as competitors, as they had been in marathons, he could expand his sport audience. Women skaters would attract women fans, since Roller Derby was one of the only opportunities for women to see other women compete on a team, while men would be drawn to a sport that featured pretty women roughing each other up. What Seltzer failed to foresee was that the inclusion of women into his Roller Derby would raise continual doubt in the mainstream sports world about the seriousness of Roller Derby. In the eyes of some, the mere participation of women alongside men relegated the sport to a “sideshow novelty.”

Seltzer’s Roller Derby quickly developed into a highly organized, co-ed sport garnering large crowds, interested skaters, and media attention as he scheduled his derbies in city after city across the country. Skaters would try out in one city during the month-long race, and if lucky, they would be traveling with the troupe when the derby headed out to the next location. From the beginning, Roller Derby was a flexible and evolving sport, pursuing what worked and what pleased the audience while discarding rules and regulations that hindered its popularity. In some cases, rules added to a race or

244 As cited in Barbee and Cohen, 13; Coppage, 6.
245 This was similar to the hiring practices for other popular marathons of the time. Coppage, 5.
246 Coppage, 5; Mabe 25-26.
247 Barbee and Cohen, 13-14; Deford, Five Strides, 48; Bogash.
game on a Monday might be removed by the Wednesday match, depending on reaction
from the fans. Seltzer continually adjusted the game based on audience feedback and
informal surveys taken by spectators. He explained, “There was no AAU, no NCAA for
me to worry about. If I saw something that looked good, or if someone said, ‘Seltzer, I
like that,’ why, I would put it in for good the next night.”

Soon after the 1935 debut, Seltzer reorganized the partner and scoring format to
make Roller Derby more of a team sport. Skating couples were now placed onto either a
black or white team. Each team consisted of ten skaters, five females and five males, but
the skaters were still partnered with a member of the opposite sex and shared a uniform
number. The score was tallied by adding up the “individual duo scores” for the “team
total.” This meant that if the number of laps skated by the five couples on the black
team was more than the number of laps skated by the five couples on the white team, the
black team won the Roller Derby. Acting on the popularity of the sprints/jam, the
endurance race between skaters whose progress was tracked between cities on the giant,
lit map was “gradually phased out in favor of a pass-for-points system,” which
highlighted skater and team competition. Seltzer also switched from the large oval flat-
track to a forty-five degree banked track early on in the derby because when skaters tired
or lost control, they often skidded off the track and ended up sprawled into the laps’ of
fans in the crowd, which perhaps delighted some audience members but was ultimately a

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248 As cited in Deford, Five Strides, 77; Coppage, 8.
249 Coppage, 7.
250 Coppage, 7.
safety hazard. Seltzer knew the banked track would also increase the speed of the race, which would appeal to the audience as well.

The creation of larger squads, in particular, added a “more lasting appeal,” but as the sport struggled to stay afloat in the early years, prize money was reduced and eventually eliminated. At the lowest point, “salaries became an informal sort of thing.” Skaters did not bail on the fledgling operation since they enjoyed skating, liked the camaraderie, and needed the work. Plus, if the derby race earned a profit, Seltzer gave the players a cut. Towards the end of the decade, both the United States and the Roller Derby pulled out of the depression, but even then the top skaters still only earned around eighty dollars for a solid month of skating.

Yet the money issues that plagued the Roller Derby were not what almost led to its early demise. After the first race in Chicago, Seltzer took the Transcontinental Roller Derby on the road, travelling to and playing in Kansas City, Louisville, Detroit, New York, San Francisco, and Minneapolis. It was this cross-country, barnstorming travel that brought national exposure to the Roller Derby, but in a most unwanted manner. On March 24, 1937, twenty-three members of Seltzer’s Transcontinental Roller Derby

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251 Barbee and Cohen, 14; Mabe, 31.
252 Coppage, 8; Mabe, 31.
253 Deford, Five Strides, 77.
254 Deford, Five Strides, 77.
255 Deford, Five Strides, 77. To provide some background on pay during the Great Depression, Johnny Rosasco, who became a popular skater during the first decade of the sport, had been earning 35 cents/hour making golf clubs. So, if he worked 40 hours a week, he was only earning $56/month. Coppage, 5. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, hourly wages for manufacturing industry jobs averaged 58 cents an hour in 1935 while Construction workers earned 49 cents/hour, and those in the service industry made 42/cents hour. http://www.bls.gov/opub/uscst/1934-36.pdf.
257 Coppage, 13.
were traveling on a private bus on Highway 50 west of Salem, Illinois, en route from St. Louis to Cincinnati, when the front right tire blew out. The bus was driving down a hill at about 40 miles per hour when this occurred, causing the bus to careen wildly across the highway and then to crash into a concrete abatement of a bridge fifty feet away before flipping violently on its side, which smashed the gas tanks.\textsuperscript{258} The bus struck the abatement of the bridge so hard that the engine was completely ripped from the bus and flew through the air landing two hundred feet away,\textsuperscript{259} “Flames from its exploding gasoline tanks immediately enveloped the bus and reduced it to twisted junk.”\textsuperscript{260} The flames reached forty feet into the air and “turned the bus into a funeral pyre for those trapped in it when it crashed and overturned. The bus smoldered for an hour after the accident.”\textsuperscript{261}

According to the Associated Press, the bus accident was considered “one of the worst disasters in the history of motor-bus transportation,” as twenty of the twenty-three persons on the bus perished in the accident itself or of related burn-injuries.\textsuperscript{262} Many of the victims’ bodies were burned beyond recognition, according to reports. A four-year-old child, the daughter of Mrs. Emma Caldwell, the skaters’ dietitian, had been “so badly burned determination of its sex was difficult.”\textsuperscript{263}

Don Flannery, a surviving skater from Kansas City, described the awful scene to Chicago reporters: “I can still hear my pals’ screams of terror. They were trapped in a

\textsuperscript{258} “18 Die As Bus Rams Bridge and Burns Up,” \textit{The Baltimore Sun}, 25 March 1937; Deford, \textit{Five Strides}, 133.

\textsuperscript{259} Deford, \textit{Five Strides}, 133.


\textsuperscript{261} “18 Die As Bus Rams Bridge and Burns Up.”

\textsuperscript{262} “18 Die As Bus Rams Bridge and Burns Up.”

regular mass of fire. The boys as well as the girls were hysterical and all fought like mad to get out. Flannery escaped the burning bus by crawling out a window but realizing his fiancée Ruth Hill, also of Kansas City, was still trapped inside he attempted to rescue her and received first-degree burns as well as other injuries in the process. "She called to me twice," Flannery told hospital attendants. "I finally found her. I tried to pull her out, but she was pinned and I couldn't move her." The hospital staff "reported he wept as he asked, 'I did the best I could for her, didn't I?'"

Even at its worst point, a little bit of crazy Roller Derby humor was able to survive the horrific event. The master of derby ceremonies, Ted Mullen, was one of the few travelers to escape the bus before it exploded into flames. Nonetheless, Mullen sustained life-threatening injuries and was rushed to a hospital. As the story goes, "near death the next day, Mullen beckoned to a doctor and, through blistered lips, asked: 'Do you think I'll ever be able to skate?' The doctor quickly assured him he would. 'Funny,' Mullen whispered in agony, 'I never was able to before.'...He died shortly thereafter."

From that awful date in March, an honorable and "lasting if bittersweet legacy" emerged that has stood the test of time in the Roller Derby. The jersey number "1" was officially retired, never again worn in the Roller Derby as a tribute to those who died in the tragic bus accident. The famous skater Ann Calvello once stated, "If you see the

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264 "18 Die As Bus Rams Bridge and Burns Up."
266 Deford, Five Strides, 133; Barbee and Cohen, 15-16.
267 Coppage, 13.
number ‘1’ on a skater, you’re not watching Roller Derby.’”

This legacy has continued into the 21st century with the modern revival of the sport.

The bus accident killed the majority of Seltzer’s skaters and almost demolished the sport of Roller Derby, yet Seltzer scrambled to keep the sport alive and to fulfill the commitments already established, partially in response to the few remaining dedicated skaters who “convinced him to go on.”

Seltzer called back skaters who for one reason or another had not been on the bus and recruited skaters from roller skating rinks in Chicago, sending them to Cincinnati to skate. Seventeen year-old Mary Youpelle joined the Roller Derby only a month prior to the bus accident and had skated her first marathon in St. Louis. In an ironic twist of fate, Youpelle’s brother broke his hip in a car accident, so her parents drove down to St. Louis to take her home to Chicago to be with her injured brother during his recovery. Since Youpelle did not get on the team bus heading to Cincinnati, she assumed her derby career was over. Instead, she narrowly escaped death. After the accident, Seltzer travelled to Chicago to beg her parents to allow her to rejoin the derby, which they did. Youpelle traveled to Cincinnati and remained with the derby, proving herself on skates as she became one of the sport’s top skaters over the next few decades.

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268 Coppage, 13.
270 Aronson interview; Youpelle Massro interview.
271 Youpelle Massro interview; Joe Nygra, Gene Vizena, Wes Aronson, and Tommy Atkinson had been in Chicago instead of St. Louis with the other skaters and were to meet up with the troupe for the next race in Cincinnati. Nygra had just recently purchased a new Ford automobile and the group drove themselves to Cincinnati to meet up with the other skaters, thus avoiding the fate of their teammates who had skated in St.
As Seltzer and the remaining skaters regrouped, another important change
occurred that would permanently alter the history of Roller Derby. In 1937, Seltzer
changed the rules to allow physical contact between skaters, which transformed the
nature of the sport and severed its ties to the marathon races of days past. Apparently, at
least one skater flirted with this potential as early as 1936. At a race in Louisville,
Kentucky, the champion skater Joe Laurey threw a couple male skaters over the railing.
He stated, “They fined me $25 and disqualified me, so I threw my skates on the track and
left. Everyone else was pushing, so I thought, ‘What the hell?’ People loved it.”

Although Laurey claimed to be the first to add contact and melodrama to Roller
Derby, no official changes were made until a successful race series held in the Miami
area in 1937. In those days, according to derby fan and historian Keith Coppage, “the

272 As cited in Coppage, 8.
273 Conflicting sources exist on whether this Miami series took place in 1937 or in 1938,
but the evidence I have located suggests that contact was in fact incorporated by the end
of 1937. The derby had skated in Miami, Florida, four times by 1938. There was also a
race in Coral Gables, Florida, that began on Dec. 25, 1937 and then ended in January
1938. Coppage claims contact was added in 1937 but Deford and Barbee and Cohen
claim it was 1938. The program from Friday December 31, 1937 mentioned that illegal
blocking resulted in a penalty but did not explicitly denounce blocking in general. A
program from 1939 said the same about illegal blocking without denouncing all blocking.
Since blocking was definitely incorporated into the game by 1939, the program from that
year indicates that blocking was also allowed in 1937. Similarly, a program from the
Coral Gables race in 1938 already aligned Damon Runyan with the Roller Derby, the
man credited with encouraging Seltzer to add blocking: “This is the fourth time [Roller
Derby] has been presented in Miami. The DERBY has outgrown the experimental stage
and is now one of the outstanding events on the sports calendar, as can be attested by
such well known sports authorities as Quentin Reynolds, sports editor of Colliers Weekly
and Damon Runyan, outstanding writer of the day.” “Souvenir Program: The Roller
Derby, Coral Gables Coliseum, 1938, National Roller Derby Hall of Fame, Brooklyn,
speedier, shorter, more lithe skaters had always been able to maneuver around the larger skaters for laps, a fact of the game that vexed the taller, beefier players but seemed to entertain crowds to no end.”\textsuperscript{274} During one of the men’s races in Miami, the larger skaters became increasingly frustrated as the smaller, quicker skaters kept breaking away and lapping them, resulting in more points. The bigger skaters began pushing, shoving, and elbowing the speedsters, pinning them in the pack, despite the rules that forbade any sort of physical contact. The referees ended the sprinting jams and started penalizing and fining the bigger skaters, eliciting loud boos and hisses from the excited crowd. Seltzer, as usual, was tuned into the audience reaction. Curious to see what might develop, he ordered the refs to allow skater contact.\textsuperscript{275}

During the race Seltzer sat with famed New York sportswriter and essayist Damon Runyan, who was intrigued by the illegal scuffle between the players as well as the audience’s reaction to it. Leo Seltzer vividly recalled his conversation with Damon Runyan. Referring to himself in third-person Seltzer stated, “So Runyan leaned over

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\textsuperscript{274} Coppage, 12.

\textsuperscript{275} Coppage, 12. In my interview with Joel Justin Nygra, the son of original skaters Gene Vizena and Joe Nygra, he recounted the story his mother passed down where it was the women who started the illegal physical contact. In this version, Vizena and another female skater were the first to institute blocking. Joel Nygra stated, “And during one of the [derbies], my mom, with one of the gals, locked hands with one of the other girls there and started blocking, and wouldn’t let anybody around. And the promoters, you know, just perked right up when they saw this, because nobody had, you know, thought of this aspect of the thing. And my mom was a very aggressive person.” His mother then reported back to Leo Seltzer about all the cheers she heard from the crowd when she started blocking. After her report, according to her son, “she, literally, watched [Seltzer and his business associates] walk into the manager’s office...and they just, basically, rewrote the rules and everything right there. And that’s where it, kind of, started.” Joel Justin Nygra interview.
after a while, and he said: ‘You know, Seltzer, you ought to incorporate that into the

276 game.’ Over dinner that evening in Miami, Seltzer and Runyan scribbled details
modifying the rules of the game to allow contact, which changed the sport forever, and
established Runyan as an important figure within the sport.

The updated version of the Roller Derby called for five players from each team to
start on the track together. Upon the referee’s whistle, all ten players would begin to
skate counter-clockwise around the track and would group together to form what is called
a pack. Each team consisted of two jammers and three blockers. Once the pack was
formed, jammers, who began in the back of the pack, attempted to work their way
through the pack to break free from the blockers. The blockers’ job was to prevent the
other team’s jammers from breaking away from the pack while helping their own
jammers break out as quickly as possible. This was accomplished through strategic
maneuvering and blocking. As soon as the first jammer broke away from the pack, the
jam clock began. This meant that the jammers had two minutes to lap the pack and
attempt to score as many points as possible before the jam time ran out.277 Jammers
scored points for each member of the opposing team they passed after they had lapped
the pack once. However, jams did not have to last the full two minutes. As Coppage
explains, “the lead jammer (the one out in front of the others attempting to score) has the
option to stop the play by placing the hands on the hips.”278 A jam could also be called
off if the lead jammer fell down or exited the track. Although a few modifications

276 As cited in Deford, Five Strides, 83; Coppage, 12;
277 The jam clock officially started as soon as the first jammer broke free from the pack.
Any of the other jammers who broke free after the jam time began had whatever time
remained of that two minute jam to score.
278 Coppage, 120.
occurred throughout the years, the basic premise of the sport created that evening on a napkin in Miami remained throughout Roller Derby’s existence.\textsuperscript{779}

While the added physical contact to the sport of Roller Derby made it unique, women’s participation and equality in the sport made it revolutionary. Leo Seltzer’s Roller Derby was “America’s first real chance to see women compete on an equalized playing field.”\textsuperscript{280} Both male and female skaters were held to the same rule set, although they did not directly compete against each other on the track.\textsuperscript{281} They were on the same team though, were paid the same, and were held to the same expectations. Yet, despite this early version of athletic equality, some traditional roles remained. The women skaters, for instance, washed their uniforms as well as the men’s and mended the uniforms while the men would grind the women’s skate wheels and were responsible for the set-up and break-down of the track. However, both sexes were generally compensated with extra money for the traditional tasks.\textsuperscript{282}

In the early years of the sport, the female skaters were expected to dress like ladies when not on the track. They wore skirts and dresses since that was common clothing for women at the time. When traveling, the women sported brown and blue

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{779} Coppage, 12; Barbee and Cohen, 14. Modifications over the years include changing the amount of time in each period, adding a pivot player (which was a lead blocker), mandating helmets for protection but also to officially designate the jammers, cutting the jam time to one minute, and allowing jammers to fall down without ending the jam, among others. Coppage, pg. 118-121.
\item \textsuperscript{280} Mabe, 26-27.
\item \textsuperscript{281} In the early years of the sport, if a male player got hurt and no male alternates were available, their female counterpart would take their place on the track skating against the men. The reverse was true as well. If a female player was injured, her male partner would skate against the women. Mary Lou Palermo, interview by author, 7 April 2011, phone interview, digital audio recording, W.E.B. Du Bois Library, University of Massachusetts-Amherst, Amherst, MA; Youpelle Massro interview.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
traveling suits that matched the men’s in color and material, but appropriately fitted for their respective genders; the purpose of the outfits [was] to give the skaters a well-tailored, distinctive appearance during their hours off the track." ²²³ It was also generally expected that at some point, the women skaters would get married and have children, although this did not necessarily end their derby career. ²²⁴ Many gender roles were so deeply entrenched in society that even the Roller Derby was not immune, which serves as a clear reflection of the times in which the skaters lived. ²²⁵

The Roller Derby did not just provide sporting opportunities for female skaters. Female fans were drawn to the sport very early on and consistently made up over 50% of the audience throughout the sport’s tenure. ²²⁶ By 1950, Seltzer claimed women composed 70% of the Roller Derby audience. ²²⁷ As one sportswriter put it, “many women love to yell, but modern civilization hasn’t offered them much of a chance. [Leo Seltzer] has given them something to yell at.” ²²⁸ Seeing women participate in a full-body contact

²²⁴ I will address this topic in depth in Ch. 3.
²²⁵ Mabe, 33, 35.
²²⁶ Seltzer interview. Bert Wall, a skater who also partnered with Leo Seltzer in organizing some Roller Derbies explained that Seltzer fervently believed that men were reluctant fans at first, but women were not. According to Wall, women fans brought the men with them. Indeed, Seltzer reflected in the 1960s on this very issue. He stated, “It took years for me to realize the hardest thing to do was sell a new sport to men. They would only accept those sports, with which they had grown up. Instead of being tolerant, they refused it. But, on the other hand, women readily accepted Roller Derby.” Leo A. Seltzer, “The Roller Derby Story,” Jerry Seltzer Collection, 1942-1997, The Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin; Bert Wall interview. In 1971, Frank Deford wrote, “Slightly more than half of these [Roller Derby fans] are women, a statistic no other sport can claim.” Deford, Five Strides, 7.
²²⁷ Boyle.
²²⁸ Boyle.
sport made “teen-age bobby soxers and staid old grandmothers whoop for blood when the racing feminine skaters tangle and maul and spill each other on the shin-shredding track.” Seltzer capitalized on the female enthusiasm for the sport by selling tickets in places that women frequented such as grocery stores, department stores, beauty salons, and fabric shops. Seltzer knew women provided the key to keeping the sport alive. He stated, “Women spend the entertainment dollar, and where they want to go the men will follow.”

The mother-son team of Jospehine “Ma” Bogash and Billy Bogash has been credited with drawing in a large portion of the female population, particularly the housewives and middle-aged to older women. Ma’s determined drive and outstanding ability drew housewives in as long-term fans. Many women of the era could not relate to popular football or baseball stars, but they could relate to Ma, who was their own age, a wife, and a mother to boot. If the unlikely athlete of Ma Bogash could do it, maybe they could too, or they could at least live vicariously through her, channeling their pent-up aggressions and releasing them through wild cheers for their favorite skaters. Other sorts of entertainment available to women did not provide the temporary escape they desperately needed during the difficult times of the depression or from their mundane and ordinary lives, but Roller Derby did.

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289 Boyle.
290 Seltzer interview; Coppage, 7; Mabe, 29-31.
291 Boyle.
292 Coppage, 8; Mabe, 27.
293 Mabe, 27; Deford. Five Strides, 75.
294 Coppage, 8; Boyle.
295 Mabe, 31.
This idea that everyone could relate to and live through Roller Derby was, in fact, one of was one of the sport’s main appeals. “It’s hard to visualize you being a football player, or a basketball player or anything else, unless, you know, you’re nine feet tall and weigh 400 pounds,” explained long-time skater Bert Wall. “But with roller derby...we try to make the team up so that you had a big, tall hero...and then you have a little buddy...the small fast little guy that could skate.”296 Basically Roller Derby offered a hero for every type of person—male, female, big, tall, short, or fast. Fans would watch Roller Derby and say, “He’s a lot like me. If I hadn’t a got married. I could be out there skating.”297 And Roller Derby, unlike many other sports featured on television in the mid-twentieth century, appealed to women because women were competing on par with men. As Wall explained, “It game [women] a chance to be equal to the guys...In fact, they were more popular than the men were.”298

Leo Seltzer viewed women’s “blood-curdling enthusiasm” as a natural reaction.299 “Let’s face it—women aren’t the weaker sex,” the progressive Roller Derby owner stated in 1950. “Nature made them stronger. They are far sturdier than men,” he declared. Channeling their hostility towards derby was a healthy outlet, one which Seltzer believed prevented them from taking it out on their poor husbands.300 But sometimes the female

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296 Wall interview.
297 Wall interview.
298 Wall interview; Frank Deford, interview by author, 18 April, 2011, phone interview, digital audio recording, W.E.B. Du Bois Library, University of Massachusetts-Amherst, Amherst, MA; Bobbie Mateer, interview by author, 1 February 2012, phone interview, digital audio recording, W.E.B. Du Bois Library, University of Massachusetts-Amherst, Amherst, MA; Carol Meyer Roman, interview by author, 13 July 2012, phone interview, digital audio recording, W.E.B. Du Bois Library, University of Massachusetts-Amherst, Amherst, MA.
299 Boyle. This is much like what Senda Berenson saw in her early basketball players.
300 Boyle.
fans grew rowdy and got out of hand. At a Roller Derby game in the Chicago Coliseum in early April 1940, eggs flew from the balcony where 3,000 women were seated and landed in the track infield where they were aimed at the two male officials. Ushers raced up to the balcony to “stop the barrage.” The women were not to be easily subdued. A mere hour later more women fans began hurling lemons and ice cream cones at the officials and the opposing New York team. Chairs, vegetables, staples, purses hammers, and ball-bearings hurled from sling-shots have all been used as missiles from various audiences across the country.

When Seltzer’s son Jerry took over the enterprise in 1959, he still found the female fans using derby as an outlet for their anger. Like Ma Bogash, years before, the new crowd of fans channeled their aggressions through the play of derby’s biggest star, Joanie Weston. Sports journalist Frank Deford noted about Weston, “It is almost eerie how strongly a whole arena of women attaches to her. It seems as if the aggressions of every woman in the house have been willed to Joanie Weston, so that she might expend

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301 Male sports fans have a long history of acting out at sporting events. The term “hooliganism” refers to excessively rowdy, potentially violent verbal and physical spectator behavior at a sporting event. In Europe, hooliganism has long been associated with the sport of football/American soccer, and, according to sports historian Allen Guttmann, is often attributed to the “urban underclass.” In America, however, sports hooliganism can also be found at college campuses as well as among the lower urban classes, and in some countries such as India, hooliganism is often present at elite cricket matches. Aside from class, the key demographic distinction here is that hooliganism has historically been associated with men as opposed to women, like those who acted out at the Roller Derby. Allen Guttmann. Sports: The First Five Millennia, (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), 309-311.
302 “A Fan Starts an Egg Roll at Roller Derby,” Chicago Daily Tribune, 2 April 1940.
303 “A Fan Starts an Egg Roll at Roller Derby.”
them on behalf of those in the crowd. Jerry Seltzer shared similar feelings:

“Sometimes, I think we must be doing a service. I think we must be keeping that woman from going home and killing her husband tonight. And every night, there is some woman like that.”

One practically unbelievable story of fanatic fan behavior has grown into a Roller Derby urban legend. The story’s participants change depending on who was asked and when, but the storyline always remains the same. As the tale goes, an infuriated and annoyed woman fan caught up in the drama of the game chucked her baby at a skater on the track, which was fortunately caught by the surprised skater. In one instance, according to Joanie Weston, the fan hurled the baby at Toughie Brasuhn, the offending skater who was luckily alert enough to catch the wrinkled infant. As reported in a March 1950 article in the Chicago Daily Tribune, the baby tossing occurred in Columbus, Ohio. According to the author’s interviews with skaters who swore on its truth, “Russ Baker of the Chicago Westerners had just bumped a rival Roller Derby skater into a track post when he heard a woman fan screaming imprecations at him. Baker, now at the rail, turned just in time to catch the woman’s baby, which she had hurled at him in absentminded wrath. The baby was unhurt. The woman fainted.”

Yet, in an early 1970s television interview, Ann Calvello claims to have been the target

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305 Deford, *Five Strides*, 61.
308 Cromie.
in the baby-throwing episode. Calvello insists that a lady threw her baby at her, but
luckily a referee caught it.\textsuperscript{309}

In another instance of temporary insanity, most likely caused by drunkenness, “an
irate woman armed with a handbag holding a partly drained fifth of whiskey” attacked
Westerners skater Jack Walker.\textsuperscript{310} Calvello also claims that a crazy woman fan in
Stockton, California, tried to sneak up behind her and hit her with a chair in the back.
Another time, three little girls about ten or eleven years old apparently started kicking
and hitting Calvello when she went over the rail. She kicked them back. Calvello
believed that people did not intend to be vicious but rather it was a part of human nature
that the spectators want to see blood and to see the skaters get hurt.\textsuperscript{311} Fan violence and
intimidation were a real concern. Fans wildly waving scissors in their hands regularly
threatened Bobbie Mateer, who was known for her long, flowing ponytail, as she skated
off the track. Mateer recalled, “I had a long ponytail. It used to swish around…and
people used to bring scissors to the game and go ‘click-click’ and if you had to go off the
track, you had to go through the audience to get to the dressing rooms…You had to be
careful. I used to take a jacket and put it over our heads.”\textsuperscript{312} Loretta Behrens, a skater

\textsuperscript{309} “Great American Hero Segment” in “The Great American Dream Machine: Highlights
York. In some ways, this baby-throwing episode represents the frustrations of American
mothers attempting to juggle a variety of roles. The female fan, as the primary caretaker
of her child, is defined by her role as mother. But the Roller Derby gets under her skin so
much as a fan, she forgets her primary identity and literally throws aside her baby in the
process. Upon this realization, she faints in humiliation and fear.

\textsuperscript{310} Cromie.

\textsuperscript{311} “Great American Hero.”

\textsuperscript{312} Mateer interview.
with Roller Derby from 1949-1959, remembers needing police escorts off the track. She stated, “When you get into these vicious crowds, they’ll kill you.”

Whether all these instances are completely true or not is in many ways irrelevant. The Roller Derby served as one of the first sporting endeavors to draw heavily upon the female demographic as its primary fan base, and there is enough evidence to show it riled up women fans in ways other sports and entertainment activities of the time did not. Journalists and women basketball players never reported such fan violence, intimidation, or loss of control at women’s basketball games in the mid-twentieth century. Their ties to official institutions like colleges, civic centers, or businesses located in their communities perhaps prevented both players and fans from acting on their emotions in public. In contrast, the rougher nature of the full-contact sport seen on the Roller Derby track, with no lasting attachment to such organizations or their immediate community, allowed the women to let loose. But as with the baby-throwing incident, women fans could not be seen as completely acting outside of their gender boundaries, even in this untraditional sport. The baby is never injured in any of the tales, and often the woman is described as having lost control over her emotions only temporarily. She would surely never behave in such a manner under “normal” circumstances.

Although Roller Derby became a very popular sport and entertainment venue, perhaps even a quintessential part of Americana culture, not everyone was sold on its value and excitement, including a portion of American women. Their dislike and in some cases disgust of the Roller Derby highlighted class issues and the social respectability of

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313 Behrens interview.
314 Deford interview. Similarly, skater Bert Wall described it as “a slice of American life.” Wall interview.
different sports. Laura Elizabeth Kratz, a doctoral candidate at Ohio State University in the late 1950s, wrote her dissertation on women's participation in sports and the social implications behind their participation. She investigated how the "motives of the American people for participating or not participating in a sport, and how they participate, give an indication of the national character" of America.\(^{315}\) Kratz raised the important question, "What creates a social capsule around the lady wrestler and the roller skating derbyist?"\(^{316}\)

Ultimately, her purpose was to investigate the behavior patterns and concepts behind women's participation in sports and to place them in a larger context of the contemporary American society.\(^{317}\) To conduct her study of women's participation in sports, Kratz interviewed a sample of 150 women athletes between the ages of 21 and 45. Her interviewees ranged from very active to slightly active in their sporting endeavors. She did not interview any professional athletes, current women physical educators, or college students. Her interviewees were deemed white middle class by their occupations and residency, and all but two lived in or near Columbus, Ohio, which was described as a "typical fast-growing Midwestern city."\(^{318}\)

Many of the women who participated in Kratz's study gave Roller Derby one of the lowest ranks of acceptability, but often listed Roller Derby as "a notch or two above wrestlers," who continually ranked at the bottom of the lists.\(^{319}\) Kratz believes that the

\(^{315}\) Laura Elizabeth Kratz, "A Study of Sports and the Implications of Women's Participation in them in Modern Society," (Ph.D. diss., The Ohio State University, 1958), 3.

\(^{316}\) Kratz, 3.

\(^{317}\) Kratz, 6.

\(^{318}\) Kratz, 104-107, quote on 106.

\(^{319}\) Kratz, 174.
sports which ranked lowest in terms of respectability were given such marks because the larger society failed to endorse them. She notes that the sports' high risk of bodily injury may have influenced social disapproval. She states, "In American society, the concept prevails which demands the protection of women from bodily harm, and assumes that women, as the 'weaker sex,' are not capable of absorbing as much physical stress and strain. Going back further, the 'danger rationale' may be founded on outright fear and avoidance of any situation which would cause physical discomfort."  

While Columbus, Ohio, may have been a typical Midwestern city in terms of its sports participants, that does not necessarily explain the opinions of women concerning Roller Derby. The Roller Derby did not seem to have a regular pattern in terms of what cities and parts of the country embraced the sport, especially in its early years. For instance, Roller Derby drew huge crowds to Cincinnati, Ohio, but in Louisville, Kentucky, a mere 100 miles southeast, it was generally a flop. In Los Angeles and San Francisco, California, Roller Derby was a hot and trendy event to check out, but that was not the case in the large southern city of Atlanta, Georgia. Sometimes a bunch of money would be lost in one area such as Colorado, but would then be made up in places like Seattle, Washington, where the derby was well-received. So although Columbus might be an "average" city, that does not necessarily mean that the generally negative reaction these Midwestern women had to Roller Derby was typical.  

Many of the interviewees claimed that Roller Derby skaters were rough and tough, which some seemed to view in a negative light and others in a positive one. 

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320 Kratz, 174.
321 Coppage, 12.
322 Kratz, 293-298.
Yet, this labeling of sports as “rough” also indicates a class issue. Kratz notes that “many of the respondents volunteered the observation that sports participation sometimes depends on economic status.” Sports such as roller skating, Roller Derby, wrestling, and bowling had a certain stigma attached to them based on class values and “the company they keep.” All of Kratz’s interviewees who mentioned this stigma “claimed that there was usually nothing wrong with a sport per se, but that many activities were spoiled by the ‘roughness’ of the ‘crowd’ that took part in them, or the location of the place of participation in some ‘questionable’ district.” In many cases, the respondents flat-out judged participants in Roller Derby as a lower-class of people: “Socially, I look down on them,” “Roller-derby is not a sport; tough class of people,” “The clientele is bad; ice skating is better,” “Don’t admire that kind of person,” “These are rough women,” “They do this unfairly. A lower class of people.” Kratz used these examples to conclude that “social approval is an important factor in the acceptability of sports as appropriate for women’s participation.”

While Kratz’s observations may be true on one level, Roller Derby was the most popular television show on the ABC network in 1949. From 1949-1952, the Roller

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323 The interviewees usage of the terms “rough” and “tough” could potentially indicate some moral issues as well. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, women not exhibiting traditional female characters or looks would often be referred to as rough. This word was often used to describe women as being masculine, of a lower class, or possibly sexually deviant. Cahn, 111, 168-169, 184, 195-196.
324 Kratz, 174.
325 Kratz, 174. According to Susan Cahn, bowling’s close association with “working-class pool halls, taverns, and gamblers gave it a shady reputation” prior to the Great Depression. The sport’s appeal broadened to include “middle-class feminine respectability” but it always retained its “blue collar appeal.” Cahn, 219-220.
326 Kratz, 174.
327 Kratz, 294-298.
328 Kratz, 175.
Derby was telecast live, fifty-two weeks a year. ABC treated Roller Derby as a “prime-time TV show, not a Saturday afternoon staple like college football.329 But the Roller Derby continually rated higher than the few sports like boxing, wrestling, and the occasional college sport that was broadcast on TV which indicates a wide American fan base.330 And according to Keith Coppage, these other sports were never broadcast in prime time.331

This dismissal of Roller Derby as a lower class activity leads into a much larger conversation about the reception of the sport itself. Roller Derby offered multiple meanings to the American public, and, unsurprisingly, these meanings have never been static and have changed as the sport itself evolved. For instance, many mainstream sportswriters and male sports fans claim that women’s participation in Roller Derby made it an illegitimate sport. Most newspapers refused to cover the Roller Derby like they did other men’s and women’s professional sports or relegated it to the entertainment section of the newspaper.332 Yet, huge numbers of female, and male, fans embraced it and did so for decades, and most often it was the women skaters who drew in male fans.333 The longevity and popularity of the sport indicate that no real social backlash or opposition to women’s involvement occurred at a national level.

Many Roller Derby skaters came from working class backgrounds, but during the golden years of the late 1930s through the 1950s, the derby appealed to all social and economic classes. Fans ranged from high profile celebs like Joe DiMaggio, Jack Benny,
George Burns, and Kate Smith to a Chicago church group that purchased a 16” TV so the congregation and their children, could watch various television programs including the Roller Derby.334 When the Roller Derby played Los Angeles in May and June 1938, the Los Angeles Times reported that there was not a single “night that hordes of film, sport, and civic personalities do not attend en masse.”335 In fact, Hollywood starlet Betty Grable agreed to “start the field...in the first lap of the roller derby” at the Pan-Pacific Auditorium.336 Eddie Cantor, the famous singer, dancer, and comedian, attended the same Roller Derby series every night it was in town. According to the newspaper, Cantor procured a “permanent box and [cheered] and [booed] as wildly as the kids up in the stands.”337

Jerry Seltzer recalled meeting many of the famous stars in attendance at the Roller Derby when he was just a young boy around the age of six or seven. “[My dad] set up these kind of boxes, and all the Hollywood stars would come out,” recalled Seltzer.

“And, you know, I got to meet them, and I got kissed by Eleanor Powell, who danced with Fred Astaire in the movies, and Clark Gable and Betty Grable and, you know, W.C. Fields.”338 Seltzer reminisced about a particularly exciting yet mortifying encounter with a celebrity when he was sitting with his father in one of his “Hollywood” suites with a few of the most famous comedians of the era:

And suddenly Mickey Rooney came in with his entourage and sat there. Now, Mickey Rooney was the biggest Hollywood star, top box office

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334 Youpelle Massro interview; Palermo interview; “Church Finds TV Set Boon to Young and Old,” Chicago Daily Tribune, 3 December 1949; Coppage, 9.
337 “Roller Derby Scores Big Hit With Hollywood Sports Followers.”
338 Seltzer interview.
draw with the Andy Hardy series and all of those movies. And he turned to me, and he said, ‘Jer, I haven’t seen you for a while. How you been?’ I...turned red and crawled under the seat. And of course my father had set that whole thing up. 339

Like the Hollywood elite, famous athletes were often spotted in the audience at the Roller Derby. The boxing crowd in Los Angeles frequently attended while many baseball players in New York came out to watch. As Jerry Seltzer explained, ‘People like to go to a place where there’s excitement and there’s a lot of people...The atmosphere of derby was charged.’ 340 During its golden era, Roller Derby was something to see and a place to be seen.

While the Hollywood stars were great to have in attendance and provided extra publicity, Leo Seltzer was more interested in appealing to the masses to create a solid and lasting fan base. He attempted to draw in these crowds by offering discounted tickets which as Coppage describes was “one of Leo’s fondest promotional gimmicks.” 341 The Roller Derby actively sought sponsors to help subsidize ticket costs, so fans could buy tickets at much cheaper, discounted rates. 342 These tickets were placed in the aforementioned grocery stores, department stores, beauty salons, etc. where women were likely to shop and be tempted to purchase tickets for her family, since they were discounted.

339 Seltzer, interview. Mickey Rooney later starred in a movie called The Fireball based upon the sport of Roller Derby, which also featured Marilyn Monroe in one of her first films.
340 Seltzer interview.
341 Coppage, 7.
342 In the 1930s, tickets were priced around 25 cents and then discounted down to a dime. As prices around the country rose, so did ticket costs, but they were still discounted accordingly. By the 1950s and 1960s, tickets ran from $1-3 and would still be reduced significantly. A $2.50 ticket would be discounted to $1.50. Seltzer interview; Coppage, 7.
Contemporary observers, such as Laura Kratz and the women involved in her study as well as some journalists, often lumped Roller Derby fans in with wrestling fans. But Jerry Seltzer insists that it was a completely different crowd. According to Seltzer, Roller Derby fans tended to not like others sports, traditional or not. They were not the die-hard football fans nor were they the ones drawn into the “personality and the storyline” of wrestling. “Everybody always says, you know, [Roller Derby fans were] the same as wrestling fans, but they weren’t,” explained Seltzer. “And out [in California], wrestling could be at the Cow Palace on Friday night and we’d be there on Saturday, and we’d both sell out, and it wasn’t to the same crowd at all.”

Roller Derby fans belonged to a different crowd, at least during his tenure as owner. “[Roller Derby] was counterculture at a time when nobody knew what counterculture was. And once [fans] could get to a game, most of them just pretty much got hooked,” stated Seltzer. Arena owners often asked Seltzer where his fans came from: They often asked, “Who are these people...They’re never here for any other sporting event.”

Lenny Berkman, a Jewish boy growing up in a working-class neighborhood of Brooklyn during the late 1940s and early 1950s, was one such fan. Berkman corroborated Seltzer’s description of the counter-culture nature of Roller Derby. Berkman fell in love with the Roller Derby because he identified as a social outsider and thus related to derby’s marginal status. “As a Roller Derby fan, I felt like a freak,” explained Berkman. But when he was in the sixth grade, Berkman found another derby

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343 Seltzer interview.
345 Lenny Berkman, interview by author, 20 December 2011, Amherst, MA, digital audio recording, W.E.B. Du Bois Library, University of Massachusetts-Amherst, Amherst, MA.
fan: “Discovering Alan Dietz was a Roller Derby fan made our friendship, because he was the one person I could talk to about it, and the one! I mean there just was nobody else.” Berkman and Dietz established a friendship based solely upon their love for Roller Derby. Berkman’s experience exemplifies the accessibility of the Roller Derby to the masses but simultaneously highlights the stigma of openly associating with the sport. Roller Derby was widely popular, universally acknowledged, but not accepted into the mainstream sports world and thus was often relegated to the sidelines.

Roller Derby fan demographics, based off of weekly telecasts in the 1960s and 1970s, indicate that the sport’s viewers largely ranged in age from 18 to 49 and were split equally across the sexes or with the women occasionally edging the men out by a percentage point or two, “a statistic no other sport [could] claim.” The vast majority were deemed “‘blue collar’ with rather significant purchasing and political power.” “They feel relaxed with the Derby, and certainly many of them even identify with it, for it is the one celebrated thing that appears tough and obvious, like their lives,” observed Frank Deford. “It is easy for them to relate to the players, who are working class, like them, carpenters and laborers and bartenders.” “By contrast,” Deford notes, “football and baseball and basketball players are all college men and stockbrokers who shoot golf off-season at some country club.”

But the working class, “solid home folks” as Deford described them, were not the sole fans of the sport. As previously mentioned, Roller Derby was the “in-thing” with the

346 Berkman, 8.
347 Deford, Five Strides, 7.
348 Michelson, 133.
349 Deford, Five Strides, 28.
350 Deford, Five Strides, 28.
Hollywood and New York elite in the 1940s and 1950s, but in the 1960s and 1970s, the college crowd took to the sport. The Roller Derby increasingly booked dates to play on college campuses, often for Sunday afternoons. According to Deford, colleges preferred the Sunday afternoon time slot, “when the students have free time and the faculty kids can drag their curious fathers to see the phenomenon.” As former skater, manager, and coach Hal Janowitz described this newfound popularity, “It is just all cycles, good and bad. These new people come along, a whole new generation, I guess. There have always been cycles in the Derby.”

Another segment of the population, usually referring to the Roller Derby of the 1960s and 1970s, insists that the Roller Derby was spectacle or show as opposed to an actual sport. Yet most derby players swear that nothing was staged or at least no outcomes were ever fixed. Any set plays or repeated acts were instituted in response to positive fan reactions. Deford claims that any choreographed action does not negate the sporting aspects of the Roller Derby. Deford describes it as a “very physical sport.” He stated, “It involves not only the balance and the speed of skating but also the roughness of banging into one another...I don’t think anybody couldn’t call it a sport.” At the same time, by the late 1960s, Deford also acknowledged that there was a certain level of performance involved at the same time. He explained, “To say that it was the equivalent to a major league baseball game, that is suitably not true. There was a certain amount of choreography that took place.”

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353 Deford interview.
354 Deford interview.
355 Deford interview.
If Roller Derby was a theatrical event, as all sports are on some level, the skaters performed a play Americans understood, related to, and embraced. Through the common good guy vs. bad guy or hero vs. villain plot, fans could relate to their favorite skaters and cheer on whichever side they wanted to win. In many instances fans connected with and supported Red Shirt skaters as much as they did the so-called heroes or “good guys.”

By providing background on the skaters’ lives or highlighting a particular aspect on their road to success in the Roller Derby, average Americans could relate and empathize with the skaters in ways they could not with other professional athletes. The drama of the sport could be seen in their lives.

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Neither women’s basketball nor Roller Derby remained static throughout the twentieth century. In terms of the “rules of the game,” both sports continually evolved in their rules, regulations, and structure but different forces drove their evolution.

Basketball evolved from a top-down control model, pitting women physical educators against largely male sport promoters. Women physical educators largely controlled women’s basketball at the high school and collegiate level while male sports officials, promoters, and community members controlled the sport at the industrial and amateur level. These divided groups determined what type of game would be played for the girls.

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356 Keith Coppage defines the term “red shirt” as follows: “Skater from the ‘visiting’ team; also, skater who employs rough tactics on the track. Antics include helmet throwing, belting a skater who scores over you, blocking harder than necessary, protesting loudly to referees, yelling at the crowd (‘awww shuddup! ‘ being the preferred response to everything they say). Extreme situations may call for chair throwing. If the redshirt team wins, the skaters on that team must run off the track after the final whistle, partly to make them look cowardly but also for safety reasons, especially if that crowd starts to queue menacingly toward the track. ‘Red’ usually means evil. Related to blood red (very, very red), i.e., very, very rough.” Coppage, 80, quote on 127.
and women under their watch. Until the late 1960s and early 1970s, women physical
educators promoted a modified, less strenuous, and less competitive version of the sport
in contrast to the more competitive and commercialized yet still partially modified
version prevalent in industrial leagues and the AAU. After Title IX legislation passed in
1972, the women’s game at all levels more closely mirrored that of the men’s game.
However, the male and female game developed independently throughout the majority of
the century.

Roller Derby, in contrast, was a co-ed team sport from the outset and any changes
that occurred influenced both sexes. It evolved from bottom-up changes driven by the
sport’s fans; the majority of changes implemented by Leo and Jerry Seltzer were
generally prompted by fan reactions and responses to the game. While the sport was at
the mercy of the Seltzer family management, they usually gave in to the whims, desires,
and demands of the fans. Roller Derby was a popular sport concerned with athletic
performance but it was also a business. The Seltzers did whatever it took to put paying
people in the seats, ranging from discounting tickets to adding whatever antics excited
and riled up the fans or removing whatever dismayed them.357 Leo Seltzer, in particular,

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357 Sometimes skaters came up with their own crowd-pleasing antics. For instance, Joel
Justin Nygra, the youngest son of Joe Nygra and Gene Vizena, recalled his father telling
him about how he would sometimes hide fake blood capsules in his mouth and then
would intentionally trip up another skater, who would inevitably have it out for him. Joel
laughingly explained, “And they’d tumble him down, and then, of course, he would fall
and fake, you know, that he didn’t do it and that he got hurt. And he would bust a blood
capsule in his mouth, you know.” Joel attributed his father’s actions as a method of
entertaining the crowd, because if the fans loved it and kept coming back, the skaters
would be paid more. However, his father was reluctant to share such stories as these,
because much like Leo Seltzer, he believed he was a true athlete and wanted to be
remembered as such. Joel Justin Nygra interview.
wanted Roller Derby to be “the next major professional sport.” But he was still a sports promoter, and his job was to generate revenue for his business as best he could. From a skater standpoint, John Hall explained, “Every skater relied on his reputation, his image as a skater. But they also realized that this was a business and that the income they made depended upon the income of the operation they were skating in.”

The athletes in these two sports largely belonged to the working and middle classes. In the early decades of the twentieth century, upper and middle class women played basketball at women’s colleges. But by the 1920s, the popularity of the sport

358 John Hall, interview by author, 4 October 2011, phone interview, digital audio recording, W.E.B. Du Bois Library, University of Massachusetts-Amherst, Amherst, MA. Leo Seltzer held this view of his beloved Roller Derby from its outset to the sports demise in 1972. In the 1963, Leo reflected on his history with the sport: “I have dedicated 28 years of my life to bringing forth a sport which I feel is destined to become the greatest contact sport of all—Roller Derby. I do not mean it to be an exhibition or a show but a true sport.” Leo A. Seltzer, “The Roller Derby Story.”

359 Hall interview. Along these same lines, when Jerry Seltzer took over for his father in late 1959 and early 1960, he “mandated that all games would be skated totally and thoroughly legitimate.” “By this,” John Hall explained, “I mean that in the past, there had been a measure of give and take, especially in the flow of the game in relation to the fans. It was not fixed as far as fixing it. It was like, if my team was super powerful and we know we can win by 20 or 30 points, we won’t make that our goal. We’ll make it our goal to win.” The skaters understood the importance of pleasing their fans. Hall continued, “But we also realize that we’re in an area where you’re dependent upon the fans coming to the game more and more. We decimate that team, we’re going to cause them to lose fans.” This restrained domination of other teams occurred “a lot in days prior to Jerry initiating the ‘fully legit.’” Jerry instituted this policy in an attempt to rid the Roller Derby of the “negative image it had on the West Coast.” Hall explained, “He felt by going this way, the media would pick it up as being totally legit.” After Jerry’s insistence on this new type of skating, most skaters claimed that year was the best they ever skated and was some of the best derby they ever witnessed. But because some unexpected outcomes occurred and some of the fan-favorite skaters did not shine quite as much as usual, Roller Derby fans cried foul. They insisted the sport was being rigged—otherwise, how could their home team lose so poorly? In fact, the opposite was true. After skating fully legit for five months and receiving the harsh responses from their fan-base about the sport being fixed, Jerry Seltzer relaxed his policy on legit skating. In many ways, this was the beginning of the end for the sport of Roller Derby. Skater and management theatrics increased significantly at the demand of the fans, further relegating Roller Derby to the world of entertainment by the mainstream sports world.
spread beyond these schools to the masses. High school girls and working women began enjoying the benefits of the sport as it spread across the country in both urban and rural areas. Roller Derby skaters also hailed from the working and middle classes. Young women often joined the derby immediately after graduating high school, and some skaters even left high school early to pursue their skating careers. As a professional sport, Roller Derby met the athletic needs of the skaters, but it also provided career opportunities that they could not find elsewhere. The few barnstorming basketball teams such as the All-American Red Heads or Hazel Walker’s Traveling Team offered a similar career path but these teams never received the national exposure or held the national fan base of the Seltzer-owned Roller Derby.360

By the 1940s and 1950s, Roller Derby emerged as one of the most popular sports in America. They drew large crowds, filling up venues from 3,000 seat armories to a 16,000 person audience at Madison Square Garden for their annual play-offs.361 They played in big cities like New York and Los Angeles but also traveled to smaller cities as well. As a nationally syndicated television program, they earned high ratings and drew in new fans while also appeasing the fan base that could not see them skate in-person.

While women’s basketball was the most popular sport for girls and women at the community level, there was no real national fan base or exposure. In states such as Iowa, Texas, and Tennessee where hotbeds of women’s high school basketball existed, women’s teams usually filled their high school gymnasiums with devoted fans. Often,

360 Barnstorming teams like the All American Red Heads drew decent crowds and played in states all-across the country, but they did not appear on television and did not garner the same type of media attention as Roller Derby.

361 In June 1949, the Roller Derby brought in a five-day attendance of 55,000 fans for the World Series held at the Madison Square Garden, and in 1951, 82,000 fans attended the play-offs at the same location.
girls’ basketball was more popular in many of these communities than boys’ basketball. However, this was a localized fan base. The same could be said for outstanding AAU and women’s college teams in the mid-century era. Teams such as Nashville Business College and Wayland Baptist College drew in many fans from their respective communities, but they had no national following like college teams such as UCONN and Tennessee do today. Similarly, women that played on community or industrial teams generally played in front of few fans, mainly just friends and family out to support their loved ones.

The “rules of gender” remained more static. Although athletics became a more accepted pastime for women over the course of the twentieth century, an emphasis on femininity was still commonplace. Beauty was an inherent part of a woman’s identity, whether she was an athlete or not, but beauty was often emphasized to counter any associations with the masculine attributes of sport. This tension can be seen through both the women physical educators’ attempts to feminize basketball and the AAU and sport promoters’ attempts to feminize their athletes. Roller Derby skaters participated in a completely unmodified, full-contact sport, which blatantly challenged doubts about women’s athletic capabilities. Because women were competing on par with the men, their management and media still emphasized the women skaters’ femininity in an attempt to justify their women’s athleticism and to appeal to the average woman. However, by directly confronting gender norms, women skaters were relegated to a level of “spectacle” and “show” rather than being accepted as actual legitimate athletes. Roller Derby, it was believed, could not be a true sport if women competed on the same level as men.
The comparison between basketball and Roller Derby shows the different and often conflicting forces at play in women’s sports. These interest groups, including the athletes themselves, often had different goals and thus different outcomes. By exploring the history of these sports, we are introduced to the vibrant world of women’s athletics. Women’s basketball and Roller Derby were very popular amongst the female sex as well the male sex yet were continually marginalized for the whole host of reasons discussed throughout this chapter. These women athletes challenged ideas about women’s relationships to and participation in sports, yet throughout the century they could not fully shake the larger society’s emphasis on traditional white middle-class gender norms.
CHAPTER 2

THE BEAUTY OF SPORT & THE SPORTS BEAUTIES

"It seems the prettiest gals are also the ones with the most talent, as evidenced by last year’s Queen Jean Porter. But here’s where you elect the Roller Derby’s beauty, and if she happens to be a top skater, so much the better.”

“As always the crowning of the AAU Tournament Queen was an unusually well received attraction of Tuesday evening.”
Tennie McGhee, Chairman National A.A.U Women’s Basketball Committee, 1956363

Three young, poised, white women smile brightly for the camera in three different pictures taken during the mid-1950s. Each woman is a beauty queen. Each woman embodies the standards of 1950s femininity, at least upon first glance. One looks directly into the lens, showcasing her perfectly plucked eyebrows and full, rosy lips. Her sparkling crown rests high atop her head amidst a brunette coiffure. Dangly diamond earrings hang mere inches above her shoulders and sparkle as they catch the light. She proudly, but not conceitedly, holds her queen’s staff between her smooth and dainty hands, the same hands that helped earn a medal for sharpshooting from the National Rifle Association.364 A rich dark-colored, fur-lined cape cascades over her shoulders.365 She symbolizes the beginning of the Grace Kelly era, one that promoted beauty, talent, grace,

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365 Elissa Stein, *Here She Comes ... Beauty Queen*, with a foreword by Lee Meriwether, (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2006), 18.
elegance, and a measure of intelligence. In fact, this particular winner was even endorsed by Kelly herself as the ultimate representation of these ideals.\textsuperscript{366}

Another happy winner, even more slender and petite than the first at a mere 110 pounds spread thin on a 5’4” frame, sits on a bench, gingerly posed with her legs bent at the knees and enclosed by her long, trim arms as she looks over her shoulder, smiling, showing off her bright red lips and pearly white teeth. Something about her position indicates an innocent, feminine flirtation. This “attractive” and “beautiful”\textsuperscript{367} queen’s “pleasing personality” and “winning smile” led a group of 25 U.S. Navy servicemen to describe her as “one dish that has everything.”\textsuperscript{368} She is not wearing a crown on top of her honey blond hair to denote her title, but her svelte “All-American” beauty leaves no doubt that she is a beauty queen.

The third queen poses for a picture immediately after her win, flanked unevenly on both sides by the five runners up she just edged out to win the title. In her left arm, she holds a bountiful bouquet of flowers wrapped with a giant bow, the ribbons of which drape well past her knees. She stands tall, erect even, while smiling brightly for the camera. Like the first winner, she dons a fur-trimmed cape to signify her royalty which flows all the way down to the floor covering the tops of her feet.\textsuperscript{369} Contemporary reports indicate that this queen was “indeed beautiful, and was as gracious and charming as she was pretty.”\textsuperscript{370}

\textsuperscript{366} Deford, \textit{There She Is}, 234-235.
\textsuperscript{369} Ikard, 31.
\textsuperscript{370} McGhee.
By all accounts, these three queens epitomized American beauty and femininity. Chosen by various judges as a symbol of the American woman, each beauty queen “has everything, and has it in all the right places.”\(^{371}\) Despite sharing the All-American characteristics of beauty, charm, and personality, these three queens came from starkly different backgrounds. The first queen was Lee Meriwether, a twenty-year old California college student who won Miss America 1955.\(^{372}\) The second was Nellie Montague, a twenty-one year old native of New Jersey who was a three year veteran of the roller derby and newly crowned Miss Roller Derby Queen of 1956.\(^{373}\) The third was Mary Alice Jones, a member of the Cincinnati Rebels women’s basketball team and winner of the beauty contest at the 1956 AAU National Women’s Basketball Tournament.\(^{374}\) To the contemporary eye, the only discernible difference between the three beauty queens is their outfit of choice. Meriwether sports a lacy sweetheart-necked white ball gown under her cape while Jones wears a satiny, button-front embroidered basketball uniform under hers. Montague is pictured in her polyester derby uniform, tights, and white, mid-calf skates.\(^{375}\)

We do not usually think of Roller Derby skaters or basketball players when we think of beauty pageants or beauty contests. So why would they be participating in such events? The simple answer is that women Roller Derby skaters and basketball players constantly had to prove their femininity. From the 1930s to the 1960s in particular,

\(^{371}\) Douris, 4.


\(^{373}\) Douris, 4

\(^{374}\) McGhee.

\(^{375}\) Stein, 18; Douris, 4; McGhee.
women playing these sports were often considered to be of a rougher nature by social
critics and the male-dominated national media, so the promoters and managers of their
sports emphasized their athletes' femininity and heterosexuality to offset concerns arising
from their athletic ability. Sports sociologist Jan Felshin terms this phenomenon
“apologetic behavior.” Apologetic behavior included engaging in “behavior intended to
reinforce the socially acceptable aspects of sports while minimizing the perceived
violation of social norms.”

Although these women basketball players pushed the boundaries of acceptable behavior by playing their respective sports, they were also products of their time. These female athletes engaged in “compensatory behavior” both consciously and unconsciously when they participated in mainstream activities such as the ones promoted by those in control of women’s sport that emphasized their femininity. Sport promoters asked what better way to demonstrate these characteristics than through a beauty contest, where femininity is extolled? And what better way to counter stereotypes and negative press about the roughness and masculinity of women athletes than by offering the time-honored and sacrosanct tradition that continually reproduced “the ideal American girl”?  

The irony behind both the Roller Derby and AAU basketball national tournaments hosting beauty contests lies with the fact that in the early years of beauty pageants the pageant contestants faced the same critique that women skaters and basketball players faced decades later: the pageants were seen by conservatives as being too risqué and inappropriate for sensible, well-bred girls and women. The women who were drawn to

376 Festle, 45.  
377 Festle, 51.  
the contests were seen as having loose morals and belonging to a lower class. Yet all the women contestants did was transform the everyday activity of male gawking at women into a sport of sorts that yielded potential rewards in the women’s favor that their everyday lives could not produce.

“One Lucky Girl Wins the Crown”

The judging of women’s physical beauty has roots as far back as ancient Greek mythology. Phineas T. Barnum, the great American showman and circus founder,

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379 Stein, 37.
380 Savage, 55.
381 Stein, 25.
382 Many scholars cite the first beauty contest as the root cause for the Trojan War. Eris, the goddess of discord, upset over not being invited to Peleus and Thetis’ wedding, crashed the reception and flung a golden apple onto the banquet table, claiming the fruit belonged to the fairest woman. Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite each believed they deserved the apple, so Zeus named Paris, the prince of Troy and apparently the most beautiful man in the world, as the first beauty contest judge. Aphrodite bribed Paris to choose her with the promise of delivering to him as his wife the most beautiful woman in the world. Helen, the woman Aphrodite offered up, was inconveniently married to Menelaus of Sparta, but this did not stop Aphrodite or Paris from abducting her from her husband and homeland and taking her to Troy to marry Paris (add to the drama, Helen may have gone on her own free accord). Helen’s husband, unwilling to sit idly after his wife’s kidnapping, gathered all of Helen’s former suitors who had pledged an oath to protect her, and sailed for Troy to wage war and recover Helen. The war lasted a decade, proving that some will literally kill for beauty.

Beauty contests have, however, surfaced throughout history in the form of various cultural traditions generally linked to festivals where local queens and kings were crowned as symbols of royalty representing community cohesion and prosperity or where competitions were held to determine the most beautiful woman. The medieval Europeans crowned the “Queens of the May,” which later became the May Day celebrations and for centuries included the crowning of a beauty queen at that festivity. In Vienna, men attending the Annenfest were provided with a ticket to bestow on the woman each deemed most beautiful. Whichever woman collected the most tickets from male admirers won the contest. The Fete des Blanchnisseuses, sponsored by Parisian laundresses, elected the most attractive woman amongst themselves to represent their group. Colleen Ballerino Cohen and Richard Wilk, with Beverly Stoeltje, “Introduction: Beauty Queens on the Global Stage,” in Beauty Queens on the Global Stage: Gender, Contests, and Power, edited by Colleen Ballerino Cohen, Richard Wilk, and Beverly Stoeltje, (New York: Routledge, 1996), 3; “The Trojan War,”
initiated perhaps the first modern attempts at a beauty contest in 1854 through his American Museum in New York City.\textsuperscript{383} Historian Lois Banner asserts that public outcry was nonexistent so long as beauty contests were kept in working or lower-class establishments, “but when they attempted to broaden their appeal and to cross class lines, difficulties emerged.”\textsuperscript{384} P.T. Barnum addressed moral objections by asking women to mail in daguerreotypes, i.e. photographs, to be judged in the contest instead of women parading in front of judges. Barnum focused on art, beauty, and respectability by banning entries from all disreputable persons and by advertising in the most popular daguerreotype magazine and through leaflets. He offered to keep the photographs anonymous and to pay the postage for the women’s pictures to be mailed to his museum.

\textsuperscript{383} Barnum’s American Museum was located in New York City on Broadway St. He charged twenty-five cents admission, so it was still a respectable establishment. It was also the model for other museums dubbed “dime” museums for their admission price. The dime museums “were institutions of mass culture with only fleeting pretensions to respectability” due to their cheap prices and location on the Bowery. Barnum often held eclectic contests that proved very popular and drew in huge numbers of paying customers to his museum who enjoyed browsing the displays of flowers, dogs, birds, and even children to see which would win. His 1855 baby contest drew in approximately 61,000 museum-goers with more turned away at the door. However, his inaugural beauty contest dubbed “the Handsomest Ladies” was deemed too radical for the elite New York crowd. If a single woman won the contest Barnum planned on bestowing her with a dowry and if a married woman won, she was to receive a diamond tiara, but no self-respecting girls and women dared enter the contest causing it to flop. Barnum, who was generally in touch with the public mood, simply misjudged the vehement moral outcry by the middle and upper classes because he had gotten away with displays of physical beauty on the respectable theater stages of Broadway in the previous decades. But in this instance only women “of questionable reputation” entered his beauty contest, and according to one contemporary report, “No mother or husband—no matter how liberal—would allow a daughter or wife to appear thus in public.” Banner, 256, 258; Savage, 13; Sarah Banet-Weiser, \textit{The Most Beautiful Girl in the World: Beauty Pageants and National Identity}, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 34-35.

\textsuperscript{384} Banner, 255.
Barnum planned to have the women’s portraits painted based off the photos and to house them in a gallery at his museum. The patrons of Barnum’s gallery would then vote for the most beautiful portrait over the course of a year, finally narrowing the contestants down to the ten best-looking who would be featured in a French book entitled *World’s Book of Female Beauty*. Barnum played the patriotism card by claiming his contest winners would finally prove that American women were the most beautiful in the world.  

American newspapers employed Barnum’s photograph beauty contest as a promotional device for the next fifty to sixty years, discovering that attractive women helped sell papers, thus increasing readership and profit margins. The newspapers featured beauty contests on their pages while circus promoters advertised for photographs for their own contests. The winners were often used in advertisements, general interest stories, or as models for statues or sculptures. Although originally the mass circulation daily newspapers utilized the beauty contests, within a decade of the turn of the twentieth century, middle-class publications used them as well. In 1907, the male editor of the *Ladies’ Home Journal* condemned the contests when he stated, “It is inconceivable that any woman laying the least claim to be considered a woman should enter a photograph in a beauty contest.” But by 1911, they too held their own photograph beauty competition where winners from the five regions of America would travel to New York City to have the famous artist Charles Dana Gibson paint their portraits.

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385 Barnum sold his famous museum before the contest officially began but the new owners of the museum attempted to carry out his plan. Savage, 13-15; Banner, 256.  
386 Banner, 257.  
387 Banner, 257.  
388 Banner, 257-258.
The last decades of the nineteenth and the first two decades of the twentieth century saw the American public move toward acceptance of beauty pageants (with the contestants judged in person) due to the increase in popularity of the newspaper beauty contest as well as baby contests, rooted in the eugenics movement which extolled good breeding. The first beauty pageant on record (outside of Barnum’s) took place at the seaside resort town of Rehoboth Beach, Delaware, in 1880. Looking for more publicity to draw in tourists for their resorts, the town decided to host a “Miss United States” pageant to discover “the most beautiful unmarried woman in our nation.” No social outcry occurred because the clientele at the Rehoboth Beach resorts were largely working class, and a group of working women was holding a convention at that very time, thus providing a convenient pool of contestants. This did not mean, however, that the resorts were not taking a calculated risk in holding the event. While the Miss United States pageant occurred at the cusp of a working-class leisure revolution that promoted new forms of commercialized recreation, elite and middle-class conservatives might have protested such social degradation as young women appearing in bathing suits in public. Thus, the pageant attempted to market itself as a respectable event by bestowing the winner with a gilded plaque and a $300 bridal trousseau as well as “present[ing] their

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389 Savage, 12-13; Stein, 31-35. This acceptance had clear racial and class implications as well. For more on American eugenics, see Laura L. Lovett, Conceiving the Future: Pronatalism, Reproduction, and the Family in the United States, 1890-1938, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007).
390 As cited in Deford, There She Is, 110, and Stein, 31.
391 Banner, 266.
contestants as natural and unsophisticated.” The pageant lasted a week as the judges closely evaluated the contestants based on their face, figure, hands, feet, hair, clothes, grace, and poise, and by the final day of judging, the grounds where the contest was held were packed. Although entertaining to the spectators, the first Miss United States pageant did not draw in enough outside tourists to make it an annual event. However, after the Rehoboth Beach pageant, East coast beach resorts regularly hosted beauty contests, which became a staple of the summer tourist season.

Ultimately, the emergence of the woman’s suffrage movement, the professionalization of women models, the rise of the chorus girl, and the new acceptability of public bathing for women aided in the legitimacy of beauty contests. Dime museums, carnivals, local festivals, and seaside resorts increased the contests’ popularity, even among the middle class, but “there was still difficulty when it came to a question of presumably refined women publicly displaying themselves before judges or the public.” Simultaneously, as women shed their association with morality and refinement, they also became prey to the new commercial beauty culture. Women now downplayed any professional skills they had, and instead used their looks and their

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393 Banner, 266. Each social class abided by established rules and mores that governed the acceptable behavior of its inhabitants but as society shifted towards a more consumer-driven, mass market economy, lines between classes blurred as more opportunities opened up for the working and middle classes to participate in commercialized economy and in some ways imitate the elite while creating their own culture. Cahn, 33; Peiss, 3-10.
394 Deford, There She Is, 108-110; Stein, 31; Cohen, Wilk, with Stoeltje, 4.
395 Cohen, Wilk, with Stoeltje, 4.
396 Cohen, Wilk, with Stoeltje, 4; Banner, 262-263; Savage, 36-39.
397 Banner, 260.
physique as a selling point, and ultimately their most valuable asset.398 Women “became sex objects, competing in an arena where men were the judges and the promoters.”399

In the post-World War I period, women gained the right to vote, threw off the restrictive clothing of the Victorian era, danced to jazz music, displayed their athleticism, and donned the newly fashionable bobbed haircut as active participants in expanding the commercialization of beauty. These upheavals of the gender status quo caused a level of anxiety in terms of women’s new and much more public role in society. Within this context and as a backlash to these social and political changes, the modern Miss America beauty pageant emerged.400 In the fall of 1920, Atlantic City businessmen, hoping to prolong the summer tourist season after Labor Day, created the Fall Frolic, a weekend chock-full of entertainment “featuring an International Rolling Chair Pageant...The parade of these wheeled wicker chairs...lasted an hour [and] the procession was headed by a beautiful woman.”401 The following year, the expanded Fall Frolic included concerts, balls, parades, sporting events, and contests for a plethora of people, including children, men, actresses, and organizations. The main beauty contest, occasionally referred to as the Miss America contest but more generally as the Inter-City Beauty contest, featured the eight winners of photograph newspaper competitions from the East Coast. These young ladies, representing their home communities and newspapers, headed to Atlantic City in early September for a seaside vacation before the live pageant.

399 Banner, 264.
400 Hamlin, 29.
401 Deford, There She Is, 111.
A sixteen-year-old from Washington D.C., Margaret Gorman won over the judges with her sweet nature and became the first Miss America, although the winner was not regularly referred to as such until the second year of the contest.\footnote{Stein, 35-37; Deford, \textit{There She Is}, 111-113; Savage, 33. No women of color were eligible to participate in the Miss America pageant until the 1970s. Women of various ethnic and immigrant backgrounds were also not included except in menial production roles until the 1930s and 1940s. Banet-Weiser, 161; “People and Events: Breaking the Color Line at the Pageant,” http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/missamerica/peoplevents/e_inclusion.html, Accessed 19 March 2013. See Footnote 425 for more on racial and ethnic inclusion and exclusion.}

The Miss America competition was heavily influenced by the popularity of the “athletic girl.” The American public generally supported women athletes who competed in sports such as swimming and tennis. The famous Australian swimmer Annette Kellerman established and promoted the connection between athleticism and physical beauty in the 1910s, while French and American tennis stars Suzanne Lenglen and Helen Wills, respectively, built upon her precedent in the following decade.\footnote{Banner, 267; Cahn, 45-51.} The week-long festival surrounding the Miss America pageant featured such acceptable sporting events as a swimming exhibition by the Atlantic City women’s swimming club. Pageant promoters, concerned with their reputation, made sure to consistently use language that emphasized the contestants’ wholesome nature, virtuous qualities, and athleticism.\footnote{Banner, 268.} In fact, some contemporary social commentators speculated that Margaret Gorman won the competition due to her resemblance to “America’s Sweetheart,” actress Mary Pickford. Pickford’s image was carefully cultivated to portray innocence combined with a youthful independence, and her press releases often referenced her sports skills. At least in the

\footnote{Banner, 267; Cahn, 45-51.}
early years, Pickford was “neither a sex symbol nor a bathing beauty,” so Gorman’s resemblance added respectability to the Miss America pageant as well as indicated the acceptable type of American beauty the judges wanted to promote. For instance, in a 1922 New York Times article, Samuel Gompers, the head of the American Federation of Labor, described Gorman as the ideal American woman: “She represents the type of womanhood America needs—strong, red-blooded, able to shoulder the responsibilities of home-making and motherhood. It is in her type that the hope of the country resides.” And although the winner of the 1922 pageant looked nothing like Gorman, descriptions of her centered on her athletic build.

While beauty pageants increasingly gained popularity with the American public, particularly with seaside contests like Miss America, critics maintained that the pageants threatened the welfare of women and tainted their image of respectability. Conservatives continually claimed the contests were too salacious and drew in the wrong types of women. Many beauty pageant contestants hoped to launch careers in the movie or modeling industries instead of using their beauty to snag a husband. At the 1923 Miss America contest, all seventy-four contestants declared they would gladly take a movie career over marriage. According to some of the hotel owners in Atlantic City, contestants who sought publicity, fame, and a career smeared the name of Miss America,

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405 Banner, 268.
407 Banner, 269.
408 Stein, 37.
409 Savage, 60-61; Banner 264.
410 Savage, 61.
gave Atlantic City a bad reputation, and appalled their middle class patrons. The pageant was cancelled in 1928 and was not held again until the mid-1930s.

Just as class remained an issue with the beauty pageants, so did race and ethnicity. The eugenics movement and physical “science” experts, such as the physician and psychologist Havelock Ellis, promoted the notion that “there was, in nature, an absolute, objective scale of beauty along which the races were ranked, with Negroes at the bottom and Europeans at the top...When it came right down to it, white was beautiful.” Armed with these prevalent theories, the ladies of the “Green Twigs” social group in Flushing, New York, found themselves in quite the conundrum in 1924, when they held a popular ballot beauty contest to select a local community festival queen. Early in the voting, a seemingly exemplary candidate named Dorothy Derrick pulled ahead. Miss Derrick had been an honor student at Flushing High School, was a current student at Hunter College, the granddaughter of a respected Methodist bishop, and according to the New York Times, “handsome in her way.” But Miss Derrick was a “negress,” and thus thought to be unfit to represent the Green Twigs and their community. By the next day of voting, Miss Derrick had fallen into third place, and a girl by the name of Violet Meyer pulled ahead. But she was not the ideal candidate the “socially prominent” Green Twigs sought either, as Meyer came from a Jewish family of modest means (her

411 Savage, 61-62.
412 Banner, 269.
413 Savage, 62.
414 Savage, 62.
417 Savage, 62; “Negress in 3d place, Beauty Contest is off.”
father ran a corner newsstand).\textsuperscript{418} Unsure how to proceed and “completely flustered by this uncalled-for turn of events, the Green Twigs suspended the contest,”\textsuperscript{419} prompting some in the community to hurl charges of “racial and social prejudice”\textsuperscript{420} against the women’s group. Local merchants decided to sponsor the contest after the democratic process was abandoned by the Green Twigs.\textsuperscript{421}

Ultimately, beauty contests threatened white, middle-class control of the social order and challenged racial and ethnic theories of beauty. Middle-class reformers, fueled by their own righteousness, did not want to engage in “murky racial theories,” so they condemned beauty pageants by claiming they threatened the moral purity of women.\textsuperscript{422} The reformers also sought to protect the interests of working women and attempted to prevent them from falling prey to the dangers of the world. Returning to the rhetoric of the Victorian era, the reformers still believed that “young women should use their bodies to serve the public good; they must stand as shining exemplars of Motherhood. By forgetting their sacred calling of modesty and restraint, girls removed the holy mantle of ‘pure womanhood.’”\textsuperscript{423}

World War II provided the background for the Miss America pageant to gain general public acceptance and eventual idolization of the ideal American woman, an ideal that would come to influence even Roller Derby skaters and basketball players. A woman by the name of Leonora Slaughter took over as the pageant’s director in the years immediately preceding the Second World War. According to Frank Deford, “She

\textsuperscript{418} Savage, 62; “Beauty Contest On Again.”
\textsuperscript{419} Savage, 62.
\textsuperscript{420} “Beauty Contest On Again.”
\textsuperscript{421} “Beauty Contest On Again.”
\textsuperscript{422} Savage, 62–63.
\textsuperscript{423} Savage, 63.
salvaged an expensive gimmick that was altogether frivolous and usually discredited and
turned it into a responsible institution that came to possess respectability and a wide base
of popularity.” 424 After a few years of struggling to keep the pageant afloat, several
factors converged which allowed Slaughter to boost Miss America to a new level, thus
ensuring she was “enshrined in the nation’s imagination as America’s ideal woman.” 425

424 Deford, There She Is, 149. Leonora Slaughter’s story is in itself interesting. She was
the only woman pageant director in the United States in 1935 when she was hired by the
Miss America pageant in Atlantic City. Her boss died a few months after she started with
Miss America, and she suddenly found herself in control of the pageant. In November
1941, the Miss America organization officially appointed Slaughter as their executive
secretary, a position she held until 1967. On one hand, she was largely responsible for
the popularity and respectability of the Miss America pageant that in many ways judged
women based largely on their appearance. Yet, she also used the Miss America pageant
to create a space that provided new opportunities in employment and education for
American women. She was able to do this because pageantry fell within a more
traditional women’s sphere, a sphere that expanded during her reign yet still remained
oppressive overall. Deford, There She Is, 149-151.
425 Mary Anne Schofield, “Miss America, Rosie the Riveter, and World War II,” in
“There She Is, Miss America”: The Politics of Sex, Beauty, and Race in America’s Most
Famous Pageant, edited by Elwood Watson and Darcy Martin, (New York: Palgrave
Macmillan, 2004), 60. To be clear, this ideal woman was almost always “white” until
1970. Sometime in the late 1930s or early 1940s, the infamous “Rule Seven” appeared
on Miss America pageant contracts stating, “Contestant must be of good health and of the
white race,” although what constituted as white fluctuated throughout the decades.
2013) Women of various ethnic and immigrant backgrounds, as well as Native
Americans, were not included except in menial production roles until the 1930s and
1940s, when Americans began rejecting nativist attitudes of the 1920s and started
embracing America as a melting pot that “turned immigrants into Americans” and
shifted “ethnic persons from a ‘racially liminal position to a white identity.’” (Banet-
Weiser, 161) Despite a shift in acceptance of immigrant ethnicity, Native American
women were generally relegated to their own competitions such as Princess America or
Miss Indian America and with just a few exceptions served merely as official guests of
the pageant but not as competitors. Slaughter claimed Rule Seven was removed
sometime in the mid-1950s, but still no black contestant made it into the Miss America
pageant in Atlantic City until 1970, when Cheryl Brown represented the state of Iowa.
March 2013; Deford, There She Is, 249-251.
The first was the outbreak of World War II in Europe in 1939, followed by America’s entrance two years later.

As American women were called to “man” the homefront, they found themselves employed in traditionally unfeminine positions, but they nevertheless embraced these new roles. Some women worked to support their country, demonstrate their patriotism, and help bring the boys home from war. Yet many women jumped at the opportunity to work in traditionally male jobs because the pay was significantly better and the work more fulfilling and valued by society. Both black and white working-class women were members of the workforce prior to the war, although many married women had been pushed out due to the high unemployment rates of the Great Depression. But now the war offered new employment opportunities for them. No longer were they limited to domestic, service, or clerical jobs.\textsuperscript{426} Concern still arose over working women’s new masculinity (women were wearing pants for crying out loud!) during a time when American men were fighting, in part, to defend the wholesomeness and femininity of American women. Thus, the outward demonstration of femininity became increasingly important. Under Miss Slaughter’s revamped pageant, Miss America represented everything the American soldiers were fighting for.\textsuperscript{427}

This ideal woman came to fruition in the person of Jean Bartel, Miss America 1943. The young, “wholesome” California co-ed provided a huge boost to the pageant image and the American war effort. After her win, Bartel sacrificed a $1500/week salary


\textsuperscript{427} Savage, 79-87; Deford, \textit{There She Is}, 149-154.
offered by a New York theater to stay on tour with the pageant and their sponsors at $100/week to travel around the United States to promote the organization and raise money for the war. This move demonstrated her loyalty to the nation and to Miss America and showed Bartel was not influenced by mere commercial gain. Bartel made 469 appearances, signed 50,000 autographs, and single-handedly sold $2,500,000 of war bonds, more than any other person in the United States. A phenomenal accomplishment for sure, but more importantly for the Miss America pageant, eighty percent of Bartel’s bond sales were to women. Bartel brought in the woman demographic for the pageant, which had eluded the organization for decades. Previously, women held the pageant in disregard or at the least were suspicious of it, but everyone loved Bartel. She stated, “The fact that I approached [women] as their contemporary helped…I never kidded myself either. They were not listening to Jean Bartel, herself, or Jean Bartel, spokeswoman. They were listening to Miss America.”

The addition of a scholarship program and the partnership with the Junior Chamber of Commerce, i.e. the Jaycees, solidified the respectability and increased the growing popularity of the Miss America pageant. In late 1943, Bartel and Slaughter met with the student council at the University of Minnesota, and during their discussion the idea of a scholarship program emerged. Slaughter recalled, “The scholarship idea actually came from those kids, from the student council of the University of Minnesota in 1943. I don’t know any of the names, but I remember that an ugly little girl with spectacles was the head of it.” The scholarship program provided a benevolent aspect

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428 As cited in Deford, *There She Is*, 156-158, quote on 158.
429 Deford, *There She Is*, 158-159, quote on 159.
and a financial stability to the pageant that flourished over the next few years.\textsuperscript{430} A few months later, Miss Slaughter partnered the Miss America pageant with the Jaycees, an organization of young businessmen known for their conservative nature and active community involvement. The Jaycees agreed to sponsor the official local and state competitions whose winners were sent to the national Miss America pageant.\textsuperscript{431} Slaughter knew the alliance would lend further credence to the white middle-class respectability she sought for the contest. She believed, “What better than to have the ideal men of America run a pageant for the ideal women?”\textsuperscript{432}

As the Miss America pageant came to represent the ideal American woman throughout the next few decades, both local and national beauty pageants helped establish and redefine the actual characteristics of the ideal American woman through the community values and norms the winners supposedly represented. Indeed, they “offer a glimpse at the constantly changing and always complicated stories about the nation itself.”\textsuperscript{433} Feminist scholar Beverly Stoeltje sees the modern beauty pageants not just as a

\textsuperscript{430} Deford, \textit{There She Is}, 158-160.
\textsuperscript{431} Savage, 81,83.
\textsuperscript{432} Deford, \textit{There She Is}, 154. Slaughter used local Jaycees to talk to citizens questioning the propriety of the pageant which significantly lessened public resistance to the Miss America pageant. Savage, 83.
\textsuperscript{433} This is particularly relevant in terms of the 1945 winner, Bess Myerson. Myerson was the first winner with Jewish heritage. According to Banet-Weiser, “At the particular historical moment in which Myerson was crowned—1945—and in light of the racial genocide of World War II, Myerson as Miss America reaffirms the logic of assimilationist discourse: she does not threaten or disrupt, but instead represents the pluralist nation as well as American universalism.” Further, Myerson’s “ethnic identity confirms the logic of the melting pot, where different races and ethnic groups supposedly coexist in productive harmony; her difference is precisely the kind needed to sustain the promise of American pluralism, because this difference ironically serves as a point of entry for successful assimilation.” Myerson’s identity and acceptance in terms of representing American women tells a story about American nationalism during the
reflection of society and its ideals but also as a response to changing gender relations that challenged the patriarchal status quo. Stoeltje argues that pageants establish an ideal woman who holds no real power or authority and is simultaneously relegated to the social sphere. This powerless woman judged mainly by her beauty reflects the modern social system which still subordinates women even as these women make social, economic, and political advances in the larger, still mainly patriarchal society.\textsuperscript{434}

As with any other “ideal,” the American woman archetype changed throughout the twentieth century. Focusing attention on the woman athlete helps us refine our understanding of this evolving ideal and the context in which it belongs.\textsuperscript{435} Within the first couple decades of the new century, the “athletic girl” emerged as “a striking symbol of modern womanhood,”\textsuperscript{436} and descriptions of the New Woman often included female athleticism. Weak, passionless, and restrained Victorian prototype woman gave way to a new energetic, spirited, healthy and independent woman who represented a newer model of beauty. As with any cultural transition, the newer athletic standard “led observers alternately to praise and damn the ‘athletic girl.’”\textsuperscript{437} It makes sense that as women’s sports such as basketball and Roller Derby pushed the boundaries of acceptable female behavior and activities, beauty contests were utilized to demonstrate that the sports participants still fell within the realm of the ideal woman and that she was still

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\textsuperscript{435} Banet-Weiser warned of simplifying the beauty pageants as “obvious expressions of male dominance.” She stated, “Rather than understanding beauty pageants as simple, obvious expressions of male dominance, we must begin by situating contemporary pageants within the political context.” Banet-Weiser, \textit{The Most Beautiful Girl}, 21.

\textsuperscript{436} Cahn, 7.

\textsuperscript{437} Cahn, 19.
subordinate to men or at the very least different from them. Women straddled a thin line between an acceptable level of female athleticism and competitive “masculine privilege and pleasure.”

The femininity of derby skaters and basketball stars was often challenged in the press. A 1927 Baltimore Sun article described exactly what could befall young ladies when they throw caution to the wind and compete aggressively:

What started out last night to be a very ladylike affair finished in an epic display of Amazons using hands, feet, knees and bodies recklessly, relentlessly in a basketball battle...They ripped and plunged and bumped and butted like football backs in full charge...At the end there were two groups of disheveled girls standing panting on the court—girls with hair in disorder: girls who fought toe to toe, who asked no quarter and who gave none. Thus was demonstrated on the field of sport that Kipling was only partly right when he said: ‘Oh, woman is only a woman.’ Sometimes they are fighting tigresses.

Physical educators, sports promoters, and mothers did not want their daughters described as reckless Amazons. This type of coverage prompted rebuttals highlighting the benefits of sportsmanship, poise, confidence, and personal grooming. They almost always promoted something like the following: “You are a lady—on and off the court.”

Female derby skaters were sometimes described in unflatteringly terms as well. RolleRage, a roller skating and Roller Derby publication, battled rumors that their women skaters were aggressive and lacked appeal by publishing a self-described “cheesecake” photograph of three of the most attractive skaters in their August 1945 issue. They stated,

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438 Cahn, 30.
440 The Hawkette.
Unkind rumor has it that there are a few fans who consider the feminine half of the Roller Derby somewhat lacking in that important ingredient called ‘glamour’…according to them, our whirling lassies should be described only by some such word as ‘pugnacious’. If there be any who agree with that train of thought, we offer the above in direct rebuttal—note, if you please the pretty smiling faces of Tillie Mudri, Mary Gardener and Annis Jensen, not to mention the—ahem!—shapely ‘limbs’ so fetchingly posed. We admit that these girls CAN be pugnacious on occasion…but we will always maintain they’ve got plenty of glamour too!  

Participating in such rituals as beauty contests allowed these women athletes to push social boundaries while simultaneously adhering to “mainstream” values, as reflected by such social institutions as Miss America. After all, “a woman wants to be a woman regardless of her profession…Roller Derby or otherwise, women the world over want to be feminine.”

**“Prettiest Girl on Skates”**

Beginning in 1938, a mere three years after the first Roller Derby game, and continuing almost uninterruptedly until the early 1970s, the Roller Derby held an annual “Roller Derby Queen” contest. Thousands of Roller Derby fans voted for who they believed should be crowned that year’s queen. It is unclear who initiated the contest that first year, but the likely candidate is Leo Seltzer himself, who often held contests and gimmicks alongside his walkathons in the early 1930s. It seems, at least initially, that the voters for the queen contest elected the most popular skater with beauty only a secondary factor. Mary Youpelle won the first title of Roller Derby Queen in 1938. She described the contest as one where fans chose their favorite skater, which was probably based on

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the combination of skating ability and looks. She recalled, “I was a good skater. I was a beauty queen, or whatever—I don’t know, but it’s a favorite skater, whatever people chose, you know. When you go to anything, you pick…someone you like and that’s evidently what happened.” In 1941, Peggy O’Neal, described as “a ‘baby-faced’ nineteen-year-old youngster whose exploits on skates have made her a national favorite,” won the “Queen” of popularity. When a Chicago fan wrote RolleRage to ask who the editors believed to be the prettiest female skater, the staff responded, “We are afraid that if we attempted to answer your question it would start a ‘battle royal’ among fans and skaters alike, since a question such as this is purely a matter of personal opinion.”

The publication’s response in 1941 as the derby was still working hard to build a fan base and establish itself as a respectable sport is not surprising, given the history of the beauty pageant. It was not until the post-war era that beauty pageants, particularly the Miss America pageant, gained widespread popularity so the derby may have wanted to avoid association with disreputable events and unrefined women. Proving the women Roller Derby skaters were beautiful, feminine, and athletic was certainly an important thing. Officially engaging in a beauty contest, however, was perhaps a riskier move than the management was ready to engage in as they tried to break into the mainstream sports world.

Despite not having a formal beauty competition in the late 1930s and 1940s, the Roller Derby league and skaters worked hard to cultivate an image that appealed to the mainstream American public. As Bert Wall explained, “Leo [Seltzer] wanted girls to be

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443 Youpelle Massro interview.
444 RolleRage, February 1941
girls and to look nice." So an important aspect of that image was highlighting the femininity and good looks of its female skaters. For instance, the cover of the February 1941 issue of *RolleRage* magazine featured a professional portrait photograph of a female skater in a black sweater. The caption reads, "‘Gorgeous’ is the only word that can adequately describe this photographic study of Roller Derby skater Kitty Nehls." Later in the same issue, a small full-length picture of Nehls appeared with the following caption: “Kitty is one of the most attractive of all feminine Roller Derby stars—in or out of skating attire.” Quotes like this highlight the league’s insistence that the female skaters were indeed feminine, both on and off the track, and even if they were Roller Derby skaters, they were still ladies at their core.

Skaters like Bobbie Mateer and Mary Youpelle understood the importance of this image to the league. Mateer made sure she looked her best when skating in part to appeal to the fans. “I made sure my uniform fit me very, very well, and I had, when I skated, a long ponytail, and I used to flip that around—prance around a little here and there. It was good for business.” Along the same line, Youpelle explained, “I think we were all very conscious of how we dressed and how we acted because we were invited out to people’s houses. We met governors and mayors and what have you, and you have to be a lady to do that...We looked like ladies and gentlemen. We weren’t just tough sports people.” The skaters were clearly conscious of stereotypes about Roller Derby athletes as being rough, tough, or unfeminine—both class and gender issues. Despite their participation in

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445 Bert Wall interview.
446 *RolleRage*, February 1941, Cover.
447 *RolleRage*, February 1941, 6.
448 Mateer interview.
449 Youpelle Massro interview.
a physically demanding sport, they did not see themselves as part of these stereotypes and
thus actively worked to counter them.

According to skater Gloria Mack, Youpelle tried to instill this idea in the rookie
table, female skaters over the years. Mack skated with the Westerners team under the tutelage
of Youpelle. She credited Youpelle for showing her how easy it was to remain feminine
and how important it was for their image as women athletes. Youpelle served as a
surrogate mother for the young skaters, made sure they looked well-kempt, remained
polite to their fans, and refrained from using profanity. Mack stated, “As an athlete and a
woman, I like to think of myself as a lady... Despite the fact that derby is a tough sport,
there isn’t any reason why a girl can’t remember her femininity. Off the track, I try to be
neat and presentable. The same applies for when I’m in competition.”

Taking Youpelle’s advice to heart, Mack successfully won over fans and reporters alike who
described her as a “lovely honey-voiced gal who exudes charm and politeness.”

By the 1950s, the Roller Derby Queen contest shifted its focus, probably in
response to the growing acceptance of beauty contests and their new role in identifying
the ideal American woman. It was, in fact, during the 1955 live-television coronation of
Lee Meriwether as Miss America that the master of ceremonies first sang the lyrics now
synonymous with the pageant: “There she is, Miss America. There she is, your ideal.”

The 1956 Roller Derby News’s proclamation that their beauty contest was “one contest

450 Alan Ebert, “Skaters Can Be Ladies Too, Gloria Mack (a Lady) Insists,” Roller Derby
451 Alan Ebert, “Skaters Can Be Ladies Too, Gloria Mack (a Lady) Insists,” Roller Derby
452 “There She Is, Miss America,” Written by Bernie Wayne,
http://www.lyricstime.com/wayne-bernie-there-she-is-miss-america-lyrics.html,
Accessed Sept. 9, 2011; Elwood Watson and Darcy Martin, “Introduction” in Watson and
Martin, 7.
where skating ability is not the prime requisite” boldly demonstrates a revived emphasis on beauty over skill, one which had been temporarily reversed during the Rosie the Riveter era of World War II when the government depended on women’s abilities in the home and workforce to keep the country afloat.

Despite the emphasis on women’s skills during the war era, the media lauded a distinctly “American Look” as a direct link to the economic and psychological superiority of the United States. The Look was considered to be “an authentic national characteristic, a creation of the American way of life...[one] that has become as much a part of the national scene as the corner drugstore or the Mississippi River.” The Look supported the post-war reordering of gender with its emphasis on beauty as a defining characteristic of the American woman as she turned in her rivets and headed back into the home. This distinctive American Look entailed a “natural manner, freshness and enthusiasm, a friendly smile, an easy, confident stride with head held high, an unaffected elegance in make-up and dress.” It also included good grooming, which consisted of personal cleanliness, well-brushed hair, well-shod shoes, long legs, confidence, agelessness, domesticity, and a simplistic natural look that was simultaneously glamorous—surely an easy feat for the average woman!

But The Look acknowledged important components to the American woman that her previous sisters were denied. According to the LIFE magazine article analyzing The Look, this modern American woman had been raised in “a land where schoolgirls are encouraged to participate in competitive sports and where free medical clinics and

453 Angie Douris, “’56 Queen Contest Begins,” Roller Derby News, October 1956.
physical examinations are familiar features of academic routine. From these things have evolved the straight limbs and glow of health that distinguish the American girl.\textsuperscript{456} The modern American woman gained her very confidence from these competitive physical activities: “She walks erect, holds her head high, and she is not nonplussed by the admiring glances or whistles that follow her. Whether short or tall she does not mince as she walks but steps forward with graceful athletic stride she acquired as a roller-skating, ball-chasing tomboy.”\textsuperscript{457}

While the mainstream media acknowledged girls and women’s right to athletics at least on some level, they simultaneously reduced her to how she looked doing it. By the 1950s, the skater “most deserving of the title, Roller Derby Queen” was simply “the prettiest girl in Roller Derby.”\textsuperscript{458} The best or the most popular skater could win separate competitions that declared them the most valuable skater or the fan-favorite, but the Queen was the prettiest of them all. This was similar to how Miss America was now the “queen of femininity” with her “All-American face and form.”\textsuperscript{459} This separation of contests reveals the shift in American culture to the emphasis on and the importance of women’s beauty and beauty culture as their most valuable and defining characteristic. Ultimately, the practice of beauty “was the feminine road to fulfillment.”\textsuperscript{460} According to Dr. C. C. Crawford, Professor of Education, in his foreword for a beauty course book in its twelfth printing by 1953, “Whether in the office or in the drawing-room, or even

\textsuperscript{456} “What Is The American Look?,” 88.
\textsuperscript{457} “What Is The American Look?,” 90.
\textsuperscript{458} “Vote Again for Derby Queen; Beauty, Not Skill, to Decide,” \textit{Roller Derby News}, November 1957.
\textsuperscript{459} “There She Is, Miss America” song.
\textsuperscript{460} Savage, 99.
across the breakfast table, appearance and behavior make the difference between success and failure."\(^{461}\)

The voting for the new beauty contest was simple; the *Roller Derby News* printed ballots in their monthly derby publication for fans to fill out, cut-out, and mail back in, designating the one derby girl they believed should be crowned queen based on her looks alone.\(^{462}\) Fans were clearly instructed to allow "beauty, not skill, to decide."\(^{463}\) After receiving ballots for a full two or three months, the staff tallied the votes and a winner would be announced and honored during a game. Usually the contest winner was presented with a trophy from a sponsoring business and roses, but sometimes they also received a crown, sash, or even a cape, just like winners of other beauty contests around America.\(^{464}\) Unlike in other contests, particularly\(^{465}\) Miss America and the Jaycee-sanctioned pageants leading up to it, the female skaters were not paraded in front of a panel of judges in bathing suits and evening gowns one glamorous yet nerve-wracking night while the judges ranked them based on their poise, All-American beauty, and how well they filled out their clothing. Ultimately, the skaters were judged by these criterion every time they rolled out on the green Masonite track. The fans, whom simultaneously doubled as judges in the Roller Derby beauty contests, had the opportunity to pass their judgment every time they attended a game in person or every time they flipped on the television from the comfort of their living room La-Z-Boy. Hearkening back to the

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\(^{461}\) As cited in Savage, 99.
\(^{462}\) *Roller Derby News*, October 1956.
\(^{463}\) *Roller Derby News*, November 1957.
\(^{465}\)
advice of Mary Youpelle and Gloria Mack, it was continually important in this era for a
girl to “remember her femininity,” because the women skaters were constantly on
display whether they wanted to be or not.

The *Roller Derby News* diligently reported on the leaders of the contest in the
months leading up to the announcement of that year’s queen, informing the readers which
“skating beauties” were in the top rankings at that point. Once the winner was finally
announced, a front-page write-up on the contest and the queen herself appeared. In the
1950s, tens of thousands of dedicated fans mailed in their ballots in an effort to reward
whom they believed was the most attractive skater. For instance, in 1958, the year Joan
Weston won the crown, she received 9,142 votes. The top ten contenders that year
collectively drew in 58,487 votes. Two years previous, over 65,000 fans voted in the
contest.

But while the Roller Derby participated in such ritual as the popular beauty
contest, they were still leaps and bounds ahead of mainstream culture in terms of gender
equality. They held a beauty contest for their women to highlight their glamour,
downplay their roughness, and appeal to their fans, but the Roller Derby men were not
exempt from this ritual of legitimation either. A Roller Derby King contest was held
annually as well. As Jerry Seltzer stated, “We were equal…That was it.” Like the
early queen contests, the king was elected based on popularity. By the 1950s, the king
contest had also shifted its focus to appearance although apparently not to the same extent

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466 Alan Ebert, interview by author, 14 September 2011, phone interview, digital audio
recording, W.E.B. Du Bois Library, University of Massachusetts-Amherst, Amherst, MA.
467 “Vote Again for Derby Queen; Beauty, Not Skill, to Decide,” *Roller Derby News*,
November 1957.
468 Seltzer interview.
as the women’s contest. The Roller Derby King was noted for his good looks, but his
general popularity and personality were more integral to his election. Part of his purpose,
it seemed, was to serve as an accessory to the queen: “We must keep the women happy,
and the woman we mean is our new Roller Derby News Queen... A queen can’t rule
without a King... Who shall it be? Red Smartt again, or some other handsome skating
knight?... We will crown our ‘King’ in March, so he shall reign with our attractive
Queen.”469 For the king contest, fans were instructed to mail in their ballots for their
“favorite male skater,”470 as opposed to merely the best looking as was touted for the
women’s contest.

Unlike women, men have rarely been defined primarily by their physical beauty,
so it was not the foremost concern in the Roller Derby King contest. When fans voted
Russ Massro their Roller Derby King in 1956, they cited a plethora of reasons for his
coronation. Most of the fans who wrote in supporting Massro’s election as king
commented on his good looks but also highlighted other important aspects of his
character and skating ability. One reader wrote, “My vote goes to Russ Massro because I
feel he is just about the greatest male personality on skates... Being handsome doesn’t
hurt him one bit either and I feel he would make a very handsome King for a very
beautiful Queen—Nellie Montague.”471 Another woman stated, “…He is such a neat and
nice-looking guy. He also seems to love to skate and has a lot of charm. I think he’s the
greatest.”472 Yet another fan wrote “He is one of the cleanest skaters in Roller Derby.

469 Martin.
470 Martin.
471 Sandy Lepelstat, “Russ Massro Peoples’ Choice for 1956 Roller Derby King,” Roller
Derby News, March 1957.
472 Lepelstat, March 1957.
He is also a one-man team, and should be elected King, Coach, and anything else that requires a top skater.”

Just as in other aspects of the Roller Derby, the queen and king contests situated themselves within a larger, common cultural tradition, while simultaneously challenging mainstream popular culture. By hosting beauty contests for women, the Roller Derby attempted to showcase the normalcy of the female skaters and highlight their adherence to mainstream beauty culture: “…she is no different than any other girl,” Roller Derby publications adamantly declared. Yet the Roller Derby pushed boundaries by also hosting a male contest run in the same manner as the female one. This association made many people in the mainstream sports establishment question the legitimacy of the male athletes and the nature of the sport itself. As skater Billy Bogash remarked, “…A lot of people in the newspaper and radio business looked down on us because there had never been a sport where women and men were side by side.”

On the surface, both contests seemed to indicate that Roller Derby reinforced mainstream notions of “normal” femininity and masculinity, but this was not always the case. Jerry Seltzer claimed he did not view the later contests in terms of these traditional binaries, even though the fans may have. By the time he took over as commissioner of the league in the late 1950s, he believed that fans were again voting for skaters they really loved as opposed to voting on looks alone, because some of the elected skaters were not necessarily “raving beaut[ies],” although some of the women certainly were. While fans still voted on the queens and kings, the league management also had a say in

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473 Lepelstat, (March 1957).
474 Farley.
475 Bogash, 16.
476 Seltzer interview.
the winner during his tenure, and the management was privy to information that was not always public.\footnote{Jerry Seltzer’s tenure lasted from 1959 until 1973. Here he was referring to the skaters’ sexualities and/or sexual preferences.} Although the fans never really knew it, gay and lesbian skaters won both the queen and king contests,\footnote{Seltzer interview.} proving that if one looked the part of the heterosexual man or woman, they would be rewarded by the fan base.

Much like gender, sexuality was another contested social issue where Roller Derby was leaps and bounds ahead of its time. Still, the Roller Derby could not fully escape the sexuality conflicts that plagued the larger American society. The Roller Derby did not discriminate against skaters based on their sexual orientation. While some skaters were openly gay, what happened in their personal lives remained there, for the most part.\footnote{Behrens interview.} By and large, homosexuality was not a concern to the owners, management, or skaters. Leo Seltzer “just looked at people [as] good athletes,”\footnote{Seltzer interview.} and when his son Jerry took over in 1959, he upheld his father’s sense of equality. Jerry stated, “We had quite a number of gay skaters, and we knew it, but it didn’t mean anything. And I’m talking both men and women.”\footnote{Seltzer interview.} Frank Deford witnessed this acceptance when he traveled with the derby back in the late 1960s. He recalled, “It was a very, very fair culture that was sort of ahead of the time... All I know is that Roller Derby was [a] pretty free society, and everybody was pretty much allowed to be who they wanted to be and you never heard people saying things like “faggot” and stuff...—I never heard any of that stuff at all. And I sure heard it in a lot of other places.”\footnote{Deford interview.} Because the sport pushed boundaries in
their inclusion of women, because the skaters viewed one another as family members (and you take care of your family), and because the Seltzers personally refused to tolerate discrimination within their organization, the Roller Derby cultivated an accepting space for gays and lesbians that may have surpassed any other twentieth century sport.

However, with so many male and female athletes skating for the Seltzers from the mid-1930s to the early 1970s, some conflicts over sexuality occurred on occasion, in part due to personal bias and in part due to the lack of education on the subject. Homosexuality was not commonly addressed in mainstream society during the early decades of the Roller Derby, and the gay rights movement was still in its infancy by the time the Seltzer Roller Derby folded.483 But even in the early years of the sport, no discrimination occurred on a public level, according to management and a number of skaters.

Mary Youpelle recalled that the lesbian community assumed the female roller derby skaters were all lesbians because they “were doing something that was rough and tough.”484 Yet, she only remembered one lesbian skater in the late 1930s and early 1940s. According to Youpelle, all the rest of the skaters were heterosexual and “very

483 Faderman; Kennedy and Davis; Gallo. In the 1930s and 1940s, a small but burgeoning lesbian and gay community was forming, particularly through the bar culture. Although they were unable to change the stigma of homosexuality, they were able to end their isolation by meeting and socializing with other gays. With more women in the workforce and behaving more independently than ever before, lesbians were harder to identify and thus had more freedom to be seen in public spaces. Unfortunately, the conservative Cold War era of the 1950s established a hostile climate that openly discriminated against gays and lesbians but that ultimately led to the idea of private social clubs that paved the way for the gay rights revolution of the 1960s and 1970s.

484 Mary Youpelle Massro, 24.
feminine and acted that way."⁴⁸⁵ This caused some tension amongst the skaters and the lone lesbian because she, apparently, was actively searching for a girlfriend, which made the other female skaters uncomfortable. Youpelle stated, "She didn’t get along too well because she was kind of—she was a nice person, but I think the rest of us kind of didn’t enfold her as much as we did each other."⁴⁸⁶ Over seventy years later, Youpelle struggled to articulate the conflict with the lesbian skater. She stated, "She didn’t fit in with the rest of the girls. We were—the rest of the girls were that: girls. They weren’t, uh, I don’t know. They weren’t that lesbian-type...[and] she was looking for a mate."⁴⁸⁷ Youpelle’s trouble candidly discussing the tension between the gay and straight skaters also highlights the commonly perceived stigma of homosexuals as the “other”—lesbians were not seen as real women or “normal” women throughout much of the century.

Having gay skaters was not something the Roller Derby openly promoted, and they did not intentionally recruit gay skaters. “When skaters were picked up, they weren’t picked up because you were gay or you were straight or you were black or green or yellow,” explained Loretta Behrens. “You picked up talent.”⁴⁸⁸ But the Roller Derby also did not tolerate open discrimination or conflict between skaters based on things like race and sexuality.⁴⁸⁹ It was not a topic the heterosexual skaters openly talked about, and, as Youpelle remembered it in the early years of the sport, “We just kind of found it out because I think we were all pretty green on the subject at that point...because many,
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skater’s sexuality was not in question, Behrens described her as having “never flaunted her gayness.”\(^{496}\) Behrens stated, “Whatever she did on her time off, nobody questioned... You skated, you played your game. After the game, whatever lifestyle you had, you went your own way. There were people you knew were gay [and others] you didn’t—they’re all our family. They never presented themselves in any wrong way of doing things.”\(^{497}\) It seems that the Roller Derby fostered a relatively accepting community for gay and lesbian skaters, free of any personal and institutional discrimination, so long as their sexuality did not affect the game or the organization.

Whatever the skaters wanted to do on their own time was their own business. According to Behrens, “Nobody bothered [them], that’s your lifestyle...It wasn’t condemned.”\(^{498}\) Gerry Murray confirmed this semi-accepting, semi-closeted atmosphere: “They never talked about it. Nobody talked about it. It was just something that everybody kept to themselves.”\(^{499}\)

As with the larger society, there was the occasional skater who was not tolerant. Seltzer recalled, “Some...you know, made fun of them...just like real life. But they all had to live together, and get along together.”\(^{500}\) The management could not monitor or control every skater interaction, but Seltzer refused to accept anything less than the skaters’ toleration of each other and their differences. The Roller Derby had a clear “no discrimination” policy, so regardless of personal beliefs, skaters had to get along with

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496 Behrens interview.
497 Behrens interview.
498 Behrens interview.
499 Murray interview.
500 Seltzer interview.
each other. In the 1960s and early 1970s, gay and lesbians occasionally formed the majority of a few teams. Seltzer stated, “In a lot of cases there was more gays than, you know, straights... It never crossed my mind. Nobody ever came up and said, ‘You know we have too many gays on this team.’”

The Roller Derby also proved to be more progressive than most traditional sports on the issue of race in the mid-twentieth century. Derby historian Keith Coppage notes that “Roller Derby was free of the kind of institutional racism that dominated other sports... African American skaters were easily accepted into the game by management and fans alike.” Maurice Plummer became the first black skater to integrate Roller Derby when he skated with the New York Chiefs in 1953. Management predicted that the very athletic Plummer, who had played in the Negro Baseball League with the Indianapolis Clowns, would “be a hit.” This, however, proved to be untrue. Plummer’s tenure in the Roller Derby did not last long, and in fact, he is often left out of historical memory because he failed to develop into a star skater.

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501 Seltzer interview. There is one exception to this. According to Jerry Seltzer, the famous skater Ann Calvello, known for her shock tactics and blunt manner, accused Jerry of putting her on a team largely composed of lesbians. She stated, “You made my team all Nellies!” Seltzer recalled that the term “nelly” referred to the attractive, pretty lesbians, whereas the traditional masculine lesbians were referred to as the “bulldykes.”

502 Coppage, 50.


504 Ebert interview. An article published in 1958 in the New York Amsterdam News mentions John “Hank” Hershey, a black referee and trainer that had been with the Roller Derby since 1951. According to the article, “Hank is one of the best liked referees in the game. He has officiated or worked as a trainer since 1951... His fellow referees, Manny Salmon and Bill Morrissey, called him ‘a great guy and fine official.’” I located no other references to Hershey, and no skaters mentioned him in their interviews. Although not a skater, it is possible that Hershey was the first black person involved with the sport in some capacity.
Darlene Anderson became the first black woman to skate with the Roller Derby in 1957 and even won Rookie of the Year honors in 1958. George Copeland, the second black man to join the derby yet the first black male star, joined about the same time as Anderson. The Roller Derby did not hype-up these monumental occasions of integration. To the management and the skaters, it was not a ‘big deal.’ And it might not have been a big deal to them, but it was a big deal to the black skaters and the black community. As the New York Amsterdam News reported in April 1960, “Quietly but steadily the number of negroes participating in the increasingly popular Roller Derby has climbed from one in 1958 to eleven in April of 1960.” Darlene Anderson did not view herself as “the chosen one”—the person hand-picked by God and/or the white community to break down barriers—but she did see her skating career as integral to the process. She stated, “Just as other blacks were removing bricks one by one…I too was just another person. I believe, given talent—God-given talent—to make some type of a history mark on America.” She felt the eyes of her fellow Americans, both black and white, on her: “I was black and the only black female on that banked oval.”

Races and ethnicities besides black and white were represented in the Roller Derby as well. Skaters with Mexican, Spanish, Samoan, German, Italian, and Asian

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505 Various sources, ranging from major newspapers to a few of the skaters, claim that either Darlene Anderson or George Copeland was the first black skater in the Roller Derby. Although Maurice Plummer did not leave an outstanding skating legacy, he was in fact the first black skater. Ebert interview.
506 Coppage, 50.
509 Anderson.
backgrounds also played, such as Gil Orozco and Sam Tiapula.\footnote{Seltzer interview; Carol Roman interview.} Frank Deford attributes this to the accepting culture created by Leo and Jerry Seltzer: “There was equality in the roller derby. That’s the simple thing. It was absolute equality in the roller derby. He was ahead of his time. He walked the walk.”\footnote{Deford interview.} Jerry Seltzer, a little more modestly, stated, “I’m not saying, you know, that I’m the most tolerant or whatever person, but we just thought, who would help the team? Who would help the gate?”\footnote{Seltzer interview.}

Seltzer made sure to give everyone the same kind of opportunities, regardless of color and gender.\footnote{Deford interview.} Several black skaters rose to star prominence throughout their skating careers and were beloved by fans of all races: George Copeland, Darlene Anderson, Ronnie Robinson, Cliff Butler, Bob Woodberry, and Ruberta Mitchell were amongst the top skaters and fan favorites. Like the white skaters, these skaters were either heartily cheered or booed, depending on if they skated for the home team or were “red shirts,” not depending on their skin color. Ronnie Robinson, the fourth black person to join the Roller Derby and the son of legendary boxer Sugar Ray Robinson, acknowledged this color-blind fan dichotomy: “Fans in general are just about the same all over the world. If you are on the home team, they love you regardless of what color you are or national origin or what have you. If you are on the visiting team, they are going to dislike you regardless of what you do.”\footnote{Ronnie Robinson in Michelson, 109.} And despite tense racial relations in the South, Robinson found that fans pretty much acted the same regardless of their geographic location. He stated in 1971, “Now I’m primarily on the visiting team even in
the South. And I don’t think this encourages any more problems than you would find up here in the North. There are always going to be a few bigots that are going to call you names, no matter where you are. Derby fans are really the same everywhere.”

Robinson’s quote implies that Roller Derby fans, at least while attending games, were more concerned with cheering on their home team regardless of the skaters race.

In terms of skater relationships, Darlene Anderson, who won Rookie of the Year honors at the young age of nineteen in 1958, whole-heartedly believed that she was treated well by the other skaters. She said years later in a newspaper interview, “Myself being black, I don’t think ever mattered to anyone as I was respected, treated by all skaters on an equal level, and I don’t ever remember once that black was an issue. In fact, I think if you ask anyone of our age group, or of our skating group, we saw no color. No, black wasn’t an issue or, if it was, the person was kind enough to respect me and keep it to themselves. We were family. We were not color. I truly believe this.”

Other black skaters corroborated this line of thought. John Hall, a skater for Roller Derby in the late 1950s and early 1960s stated, “I’ve known, both being a Negro myself,

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515 Robinson, 109.
516 This color blindness in terms of fandom, particularly in the South, is reminiscent of historian David R. Roediger’s experiences growing up in St. Louis, Missouri, in the 1960s. Roediger described the contradictions between theoretical racism and cultural anti-racism. He stated, “We all hated Blacks in the abstract, but our greatest heroes were the Black stars of the great St. Louis Cardinals baseball teams of the sixties. The style, as well as the talent, of players like Lou Brock, Bob Gibson and Curt Flood was reverenced. More grudgingly, we admired Muhammad Ali as our generation’s finest sportsman.” David R. Roediger, The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class, Revised edition, (New York: Verso, 2003), 4.
and knowing how George Copeland, Ruberta Mitchell, Darlene Anderson, Janice Williams, and all the others were treated—there was definite equality.\footnote{Hall interview.}

This is not to say that occasional trouble did not emerge based on larger racial tensions occurring throughout the United States or that individual skaters never expressed racial animosity. For instance, in 1969, two Roller Derby games were cancelled by the local police due to recent racial tensions erupting in the Richmond, California, area after a surge in Civil Rights activity.\footnote{Coppage, 50.} After several black skaters joined the Roller Derby ranks, the skaters refused to travel to the South if that meant they would skate in segregated venues “where blacks were relegated to the ‘nosebleed’ section of the arena.”\footnote{Coppage, 51. This was mostly likely in 1959 or 1960. Coppage cites Ronnie Robinson for this detail, and Robinson joined the Roller Derby in 1959.} Seltzer encouraged the skaters to give the South another try and to trust him and his planning. He agreed they would not skate in any segregated venues, and they did not, which earned him the respect of many skaters.\footnote{Coppage, 51-52.}

Despite avoiding segregated venues, black skaters still had trouble finding local accommodations in the South in the 1960s, since they were denied access to certain restaurants, Laundromats, and motels. Carol Meyer, a skater of Spanish and German descent who grew up in the projects of San Francisco, revealed that she never knew what discrimination was until she traveled through the South with her black teammates. She recalled a story when a group of white waitresses refused to serve their mixed table of skaters, until the manager forced them to do so.\footnote{Meyer Roman interview.} White skater Mike Gammon recalled

\footnote{\textsuperscript{518} Hall interview.}  
\footnote{\textsuperscript{519} Coppage, 50.}  
\footnote{\textsuperscript{520} Coppage, 51. This was mostly likely in 1959 or 1960. Coppage cites Ronnie Robinson for this detail, and Robinson joined the Roller Derby in 1959.}  
\footnote{\textsuperscript{521} Coppage, 51-52.}  
\footnote{\textsuperscript{522} Meyer Roman interview.}
black skaters sometimes having to meet up with the team after staying in a different town. He openly shuddered when recalling the following:

When you go into a town and they’ve got these signs that say ‘Home of the Ku Klux Klan,’ and you walk down the street and the black people get off the sidewalks so you can walk by...Coming from the East, it was like they were twenty years behind the times. A hundred years of progress just doesn’t happen overnight. You know, I never saw that because I grew up in the Derby, where there was no black and white.523

Racial tensions were not just limited to the South. Bert Wall witnessed the blatant racial discrimination of his teammates while skating in Las Vegas, Nevada. He recalled, “The black skaters couldn’t stay at the same hotel. They couldn’t swim in the swimming pool.”524 An even more disturbing example of racism occurred in Kansas. Wall stated, “We stopped at a bowling alley and dance place...This is after the race...We’d dance with the girls, the black girls and think nothing about it. And what happened is they served us, the white people and wouldn’t serve the colored ones, and we just about tore the place up.”525

Despite both black and white skaters’ insistence on the lack of internal discrimination, an occasional snide racial comment could be heard among their ranks. Sometimes the skaters’ actions appeared to be a reflection of the politically incorrect language of the times, the vulgar nature of the locker room, or individual bias. Policy does not always govern individual behavior, and thus some racist remarks did occur.526 Frank Deford caught such an exchange between San Francisco Bomber great Charlie O’Connell, known for his lack of couth as well as his cockiness, and Bob Woodberry

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523 As cited in Coppage, 51.
524 Wall interview.
525 Wall interview.
526 Coppage, 50.
when Deford traveled with the derby in 1969. O’Connell, angry over a botched call at
the end of a game, turned his anger at rival Woodberry in the men’s locker room:

Naturally disposed to get mad at Woodberry under any circumstances, Charlie seizes on that mild utterance as an opportunity to turn on him. He whirls in his chair and points menacingly at Woodberry. ‘Listen,’ he says, ‘you stay out of this. And also, if you don’t mind, don’t bleed on my uniform.’ O’Connell holds up his bloodstained shirt, and adds more sarcasm to his voice. ‘It’s such dark blood anyway.’

‘Oooo,’ Robinson cries in mock anger. Besides Woodberry, he is the only black on the All-Stars. ‘Bitter, bitter, bitter. You see, Thumper [Woodberry]: bad losers.’

After this give and take between O’Connell, Woodberry, and Robinson, the male skaters turn their attention to a more pressing issue: beer. Nothing further is said about the game as the skaters knock back a beer while getting dressed. O’Connell’s racist remarks about Woodberry demonstrated that racial issues were never far under the surface, even among the seemingly harmonious community. At the same time, Robinson’s retort and insult of O’Connell suggests that he was not actually threatened by O’Connell in a real way.

Despite the official stance of the Roller Derby in terms of equality of race and
gender, the derby’s promotion of an “ideal” version of beauty and femininity in their
women skaters as seen through the Roller Derby Queen contest and coverage of the
skaters in their own publications reflected the ideals of mainstream society that heralded
white female heterosexual standards of beauty. Although the inclusivity of Roller Derby
sets it apart from many other sports of its era, even it could not fully escape the larger
social restrictions placed upon women, blacks, and homosexuals. These restrictions
objectified white women while excluding women of color and varying sexualities. This

527 Deford, Five Strides, 156.
hindered the Roller Derby as it sought a level of visibility and respectability in the mainstream sports world.

The Roller Derby, its beauty contests, and its emphasis on the femininity of the women skaters reflected larger social and cultural trends of society while they simultaneously complicated them. Along the same vein, Historians Elwood Watson and Darcy Martin found that “the microcosm of the Miss America Pageant provides invaluable insight into broader changes and trends in American culture for most of the twentieth century and into the present one. For better or worse, the pageant reflects commonly held values, beliefs, and attitudes that Americans share about women.”

The Roller Derby furthered stereotypes that emphasized women’s physical beauty as a partial measure of her worth, while they also provided women a forum to showcase their physical strength and endurance through a competitive and rough sport—a place where beauty could not stop an opponent from sending a skater flying over the banked railing, only to crumple in a heap on the ground after a fifteen foot fall, most likely with their hair and makeup in shambles.

The femininity and lady-like attributes of the white female skaters that were highlighted in the pages of the Roller Derby magazines, newspapers, and in cheesecake photo ops, particularly in the 1940s, 50s, and early 60s, reinforced the social and cultural hierarchies that promoted Eurocentric standards of beauty and excluded black women from the status of “ladies.”

Black and white women historically have been defined by different public meanings of womanhood, which “were partly grounded in divergent

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528 Watson and Martin, 2.
experiences of work and in the disproportionately black experience of poverty.”

Black women were most often defined by their ability for manual labor or their alleged hyper-sexualized and immoral nature, which put them at fundamental odds with the position of “lady.”

So while the white women skaters worked hard to prove they could simultaneously be skaters as well as ladies, this was at least a status they could potentially achieve but one in which black skaters never could.

Not only was the status of “lady” denied to them, but black women also were denied access to ideal beauty standards based on their race. Psychologist Rita Freedman found that in American culture, the idealized image of beauty “is built on a Caucasian model. Fairy-tale princesses and Miss Americas have traditionally been white. This fair image weighs most heavily on the brown shoulders of minority women who bear a special beauty burden.”

Though black women were also taught from a young age that beauty was imperative for success, they discovered that the ideal standards of American beauty did not entail traditional black features.

The Miss America beauty pageant, reflective of the larger society, historically has “rewarded the beauty of white bodies and disregarded the beauty of black bodies.” As Sarah Banet-Weiser explained in her book on beauty pageants and national identity, the Miss America pageant has utilized whiteness as “an explicitly racialized category” to develop an imagined community that “has historically maintained dominance precisely
by erasing its racial distinctiveness.”\textsuperscript{536} In the search for the “ideal” American woman, whiteness became a crucial element as it “defines typicality according to white, middle-class norms.”\textsuperscript{537} In fact, Rule 7 of the Miss America bylaws blatantly denied women of color from participating in the pageant.\textsuperscript{538} No black contestants were allowed to compete until 1970, and a black winner was not crowned until 1984.\textsuperscript{539}

While the Roller Derby did not have such overtly racist policies as the Miss America pageant, the fact that no black woman skater ever won the title and honor of Roller Derby Queen reflects the conscious and unconscious prejudice in terms of beauty standards of the fan base since they were the ones who voted for whom they thought was the prettiest derby skater. When Joan Weston won the beauty contest in February 1958, one fan summarized why Weston was elected queen: “Joanie personifies the lean, scrubbed look of the All-American beauty. She is tall and stately, and has the sense of humor the American male goes for.”\textsuperscript{540} Weston, a “big, beautiful blonde,” personified the ideal All-American woman through her white, middle class femininity, according to Roller Derby fans. But a good portion of American society could never live up to these standards based on their skin color, hair texture, and physical features. Staff writer Pat Farley determined that “Roller Derby or otherwise, women the world over want to be feminine,”\textsuperscript{541} but what is not acknowledged here was that femininity was a privilege and

\textsuperscript{536} Banet-Weiser, \textit{The Most Beautiful Girl in the World}, 154.
\textsuperscript{538} Banet-Weiser in Watson and Martin, 103.
\textsuperscript{539} Kinloch, 98-99.
\textsuperscript{540} Sandy Lepelstat, “Joan Weston Crowned Queen Of Roller Derby’s Universe,” \textit{Roller Derby News}, February 1958.
\textsuperscript{541} Farley.
“achievement only afforded to white women.” Even such progressive sports such as the derby were not immune to the latent racism entrenched deep in American society.

While black women were denied access to femininity and the status of lady, white women could often “play” roles in which they were not born. Some white skaters engaged in what can be described as “parody[ing] a social reality” or “play[ing] at what they are not,” in this case middle-class ladies. While the Roller Derby management worked hard to create an image of pretty, feminine women who simply happened to partake in a rough sport, in reality a majority of the skaters belonged to working class families prior to joining the derby. Many women were mere teens when they quit high school and left home to skate. Like many beauty contestants who “play into gender or play out race or play around with social class...[to participate] in her own construction as a hyperfeminine creation,” these women were not necessarily the “ladies” they or the management claimed them to be. Some skaters were considered rough women who used language that “would make a longshoreman blush,” but these women were not the face of the Roller Derby. While their behavior on the track might be classified as entertaining or as part of the competitive sport, it was certainly downplayed off the track, countered with images of them as faithful wives, dutiful mothers, or American beauties. Alan Ebert, former journalist for the Roller Derby News and lifelong derby fan, stated, “You know there weren’t too many women in Roller Derby that I would use the word “lady”...A lot of them were very rough. They quit school at sixteen. They had foul-

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542 Kinloch, 97.
543 Jerrilyn McGregory, “Wiregrass Country Pageant Competitions, or What’s Beauty Got to Do with It?” in Watson and Martin, 128. Also, see Laegreid, 43.
544 Seltzer interview.
545 MCGREGORY, 128.
546 Ebert interview.
mouths...They were rough people some of them, and others were not...”
Instead of focusing on unladylike behavior on the track, it was more important to maintain the veneer of white middle-class womanhood. Thus, the interview with Gloria Mack “(a Lady)” ends with the following:

As to Gloria’s eventual goals: ‘I don’t mean to sound corny, or pull the All-American girl bit, but I want what I think every girl wants—my husband to be happy in his work, own my own home, raise a family and live a normal, everyday life. When you come right down to it, there really isn’t much else that matters, is there?’

“Beauty, Brains, and Ball-handling”

Women basketball players who competed in the national AAU basketball tournament also confronted many of the same issues surrounding beauty, femininity, and respectability that emerged in the Roller Derby. It should come as no surprise then that the AAU tournament also featured beauty contests. In fact, the AAU utilized the contest as an attention-grabbing mechanism and a femininity-proving ritual almost a decade prior to the Roller Derby and only a mere decade after the Miss America pageant began. The AAU held beauty contests in conjunction with their women’s national tournament almost from its inception until it began focusing on its junior programs in the late 1960s. The first women’s AAU national tournament was held in 1926, a mere three years after the AAU endorsed women’s basketball as an appropriate sport for women. In their very first tournament, the women played an aggressive, 5-on-5 full-court game intended to enthral the audience. Unfortunately, the AAU misjudged the negative feedback they would

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547 Ebert interview.
548 Ebert, “Skaters Can Be Ladies Too, Gloria Mack (a Lady) Insists.”
549 Neal interview. This quote, according to Neal, was the philosophy of the Wayland Baptist College basketball coach Harley Redin and the team sponsor Claude Hutcherson.
receive in sanctioning the 5-on-5 game for women. Women’s physical education leaders heavily criticized this form of competition for women and exerted excessive pressure and “scathing attacks” on local city officials, businessmen, commercial sponsors, and male coaches to prevent the AAU from sponsoring future women’s national basketball tournaments and cities from hosting the potential tournaments.550

Due to this pressure, three years passed before the AAU ventured to hold another women’s tournament, and this time they played under a modified women’s rule set. It is unclear whether a beauty contest was held in the revived 1929 tournament, but by 1930 it became a regular feature among many other attention-grabbing activities. The Chairman of the National A.A.U. Basketball Committee described the tournament held in March in Wichita, Kansas, as follows:

With a location at the center of the United States and a people bursting with enthusiasm and hospitality, Wichita outdid herself and the local committee deserves a great deal of credit. The affair, in which twenty-eight teams participated, was advertised as a basketball tournament but turned out to be a three ringed circus. They had a beauty contest, free throw contest, pep contest, sportsmanship trophy, motor boat and aeroplane rides, sightseeing, parade, free movies for the players, dances, etc.551

The local AAU committee clearly wanted to draw people to the tournament, but since the concept of women playing basketball in public was rather new and in some ways suspect, they turned the tournament into a festival atmosphere and utilized the beauty contest in much the same way as did the seaside resorts of the late 19th and early 20th century, including the Fall Frolic in Atlantic City which produced the first Miss

550 Cahn, 87-88; Ikard, 15.
The beauty contest was not the focal point of the festivities but it offered a measure of appropriate femininity to those who might criticize women’s basketball or declare the athletes as too masculine. The excellent athletic skills and behavior of the women basketballers as well as the jovial atmosphere of the tournament influenced the opinions of the male National AAU chairman who admitted harboring initial skepticism of women playing such a competitive sport. He stated,

I can truthfully say that it was a revelation to me to see the type of basketball played by these teams. As an exhibition of sportsmanship, skill, speed, stamina, grace, beauty, enthusiasm, pep, or what have you, this tournament has no equal. Those girls play basketball because they love it...They wholeheartedly engage in sport for the pleasure and physical, mental, and social benefits derived therefrom. If you want to see three hundred girls have the time of their lives, plan to see this tournament next year. Incidentally, they were all well chaperoned and their conduct is beyond criticism at all times.

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552 Hamlin in Watson and Martin, 30-35; Festle, 43. Since the inception of basketball for women, women had been playing behind closed door at their schools and colleges under strict supervision of mostly women physical educators. But as the popularity of the sport spread amongst college women, it seeped out into the general populace, particularly working class women, who found themselves with more leisure time in the first couple of decades of the 20th century. Robert Ikard notes that “industrialists recognized the moral value of competitive sports for their employees and claimed that active athletes were better workers.” Factories, companies, and municipal and community organizations established sports leagues for their employees and local citizens, including women. The popularity of team sports such as basketball and softball continued to grow, forcing organizations like the AAU to endorse them on a national amateur level. The AAU governance of amateur women’s basketball was at odds with the goals of women physical educators who worked in the secondary school and collegiate settings, so conflict emerged on the status, progress, and control over the sport, and is discussed further at different points in this dissertation. It was this debate, however, that led women physical educators to oppose highly competitive sports as physically and morally dangerous to women as well as rebuff the sports model governing men’s athletics that had been linked to commercialization and corruption, thus the physical educators resistance to public women’s sports in the early 20th century. Ikard, quote on 13, 13-15.

553 Bingham.
The chairman was surprised to see such skill, composure, endurance, joy, and
sportmanship, and he wanted to confront the skeptics of women’s basketball:

To the critics of girls’ tournaments, I would suggest that they go to see one
of these championships. I will admit that I, too, was skeptical and
expected to see cases of hysteria, fainting and melancholia, with the air
permeated with smelling salts. What I did see was a group of girls at the
end of the game cheering their opponents and going arm in arm with them
off the floor; winners and losers to appear later at a dance apparently
having forgotten that they had been engaged in a U.S. Championship
game.\textsuperscript{554}

He seemed especially pleased that the players could quickly forget the competition and
once again become a “group of girls…going arm in arm.” The local organizers strict
supervision of the girls led the chairman to further endorse the tournament as a place for
respectable women, one appropriate for America’s daughters. He further countered
critics who state that basketball is harmful to women by declaring, “We can’t legislate
against the desire of youth to play and if we don’t provide controlled athletics, they will
play without control.”\textsuperscript{555} While most physical educators agreed with the chairman’s
statement, the two sides did not agree on who and how women’s basketball should be
controlled.

While the sport continued to grow in popularity within the AAU, some of the
other sideshow activities fell to the wayside, but the beauty contest remained a staple
feature to the national women’s tournament during its heyday from 1930 until 1970. The
AAU beauty contests closely resembled those held by the Roller Derby in terms of
criteria, but fans did not vote for the winners. It appears that each team or coach selected
a member from their team to represent them in the beauty contest. Then a committee

\textsuperscript{554} Bingham.
\textsuperscript{555} Bingham.
composed of the organization sponsoring the tournament selected a “Queen of the Tournament” based on her beauty, “personality, poise, and glamor.” Attendants, princesses, or aides (their titles varied) were also designated by the committee as those who were runners-up to the beauty queen in what might be dubbed her royal court. The hosts of the tournament announced the annual tournament queen during a lively ceremony which entailed “trumpets blaring and a spotlight following” the contestants around the gym as fans cheered wildly. The lucky player received the honor of the title as well as a crown, cape, flowers, trophy, sash, ceremonial ropes, gold decorative vase, or some combination thereof, while her attendants were bestowed corsages or flowers. In the early AAU publications, queens often were featured in a picture with the founder of basketball, Dr. James A. Naismith, or with her attendants.

Most years, the beauty queen was not the star of her team. The top players generally focused more on the games as opposed to the beauty pageant, since they were there to play basketball. Eleven-times All-American selection, six-times tournament MVP, and winner of multiple national championships, Alline Banks Sprouse had no time for such entertainment activities, although her good looks were often discussed with a particular focus on her “red hair and long legs.” She recalled, “I never did compete [in the queen contest]...I didn’t care about competing. Although the other girls did, but I

558 Neal interview; Ikard, 30. Some opted out of the contests to focus on the game but often coaches and teammates chose players who were not starters or who did not get as much playing time so these players could become more involved in the tournament.
559 Ikard, 47.
didn’t…I just didn’t want to.” She felt her time was more wisely spent resting between
games. Occasionally, though, a top player would be included in the beauty contest.

Jimmie Maxine Vaughn, member of the 1942 All-Star team and player with Nashville
Business College, won the 1944 beauty crown, although her team did not make the final
four that year. During the 1956 tournament, Raye Wilson who played for the Wayland
Flying Queens and Doris Murley who played for Nashville Business College faced off
against each other in the championship game but found themselves teammates on the All-
American squad as well as attendants to the newly crowned beauty queen.

The AAU utilized the beauty contest to cater to the idea that femininity was still
the most crucial aspect of womanhood while they simultaneously promoted the
importance and value of women’s athletics. They too insisted that their beauty queens,
as representatives of the AAU basketball players, adhered to the ideals of All-American
femininity and beauty. The female chairman of the 1941 national championship lauded
that year’s beauty queen for embodying these ideals: “Miss Gailya Smith, a very comely

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560 Banks Sprouse interview. During our interview and one with Robert Ikard in 2000,
Banks indicated that she had not been interested in the beauty contests at all. However,
in a 1988 interview with Susan Cahn, she recalled the contests with enthusiasm. Banks
told Cahn, “I thought it was great…We cheered and carried on as if we were winning a
national tournament…The spectators would…just roar. It was just like the Miss America
Contest.” Alline Banks Sprouse, interview by Susan Cahn, 8 July 1988, transcript in
author’s possession; Cahn, 106. Banks was significantly older for the Ikard and Marino
interviews, so perhaps her memory faded about the contests or she may have simply
changed her opinion on them. Regardless of Banks quote in Cahn’s interview, other
players expressed the same thoughts about their disinterest in the contest. Cahn also
quotes Evelyn “Eckie” Jordan who stated, “We were always more interested in the free-
throw championship. You know, that’s part of the game. As far as the beauty contest,
that didn’t interest us.” Evelyn “Eckie” Jordan, Interview by Susan Cahn, 18 July 1988,
interview transcript in author’s possession; Cahn, 106.

561 Ikard, 55, 204, 216.

562 McGhee.

563 Ikard, 30.
miss of Quinlan, Texas high school entry, was elected "Queen of the Tournament" and
will reign as such over the sport until a successor is chosen in 1942. Miss Smith is [a]
quiet and unassuming American School Girl type and carries her honor graciously."\textsuperscript{564}
Similarly, Miss Mary Alice Jones, the beauty queen in 1956 was described as "indeed
beautiful, and was as gracious and charming as she was pretty,"\textsuperscript{565} and Miss Betty Perry,
the 1960 tournament queen, was a "lovely representative of the refreshing young women
who participated in this year's basketball competition."\textsuperscript{566}

While the Roller Derby Queen contest shifted from a measure of popularity to one
based on beauty alone, the AAU Tournament Queen was based heavily on looks from the
very beginning. Poise, grace, and glamor were all adjectives the judges apparently
looked for in the contestants, but it was nonetheless a beauty contest from the outset and
was represented as such. This willingness to engage in a beauty contest as a way to
ensure the femininity of the women athletes reflects the goals both of the AAU's
leadership and the class realities of its participants in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s. Most of
the women playing AAU basketball in that era were "white" working-class women
employed by the sponsoring company or factory of their team. Single, working-class

\textsuperscript{564} Mrs. Irvin Van Blarcom, "National Women's Championship," \textit{AAU Official Guide
1941-42}, pg. 47, Naismith HOF. In an interesting turn of events, AAU officials
discovered that Miss Smith was, in fact, under the A.A.U minimum age requirement,
which caused problems when the notification of her winning along with her true age, was
sent out on the UP wires before the AAU straightened the mistake out. According to
Gene Sullivan of the St. Joseph \textit{News-Press}, Smith "did nothing more strenuous in the
tourney than win the queen title" so her age probably did not make a big difference.
Gene Sullivan, "Looking Back Over the Last Five National Tourneys," \textit{AAU Guide 1945-
46}. It is unclear though whether Miss Smith's "quiet and unassuming American School
Girl type" manner prevented her from listing her correct age or whether she was unaware
of the age requirements at all.

\textsuperscript{565} McGhee.

\textsuperscript{566} Lyle M. Foster, "National A.A.U. Women's Basketball Championship 1959-60," \textit{AAU
Guide}. 

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women in this era formed an integral part of the workforce as the livelihoods of their parents, siblings, and themselves often depended on their ability to bring home a paycheck. They rarely had the luxury of attending college or of staying at home prior to marriage, and, even then, sometimes after marriage. So they worked. What they did have was a luxury women lacked at the turn of the 20th century: engaging in leisure activities such as industrial sports teams sponsored by their employers. Good workers needed to be physically healthy and happy, so industrialists offered extracurricular activities to keep their employees, both men and women, physically and mentally sound.

The industrialists were not the only ones encouraging sports opportunities for their female employees. Many women also wanted to participate in sports. For instance, in the early 1940s a group of young women proved instrumental in getting the Des Moines Jewish Community Center to establish a city basketball league for working girls. In 1949, the Iowa Girls Basketball Yearbook reported,

Now girls who work at one of the sponsoring establishments, all of whom employ women by the hundreds, have the opportunity of continuing their high school or college exercise on the hardwoods. The teams have a lot of fun. The industries who pay the bill are happy because their girls are having a clean, good time. Too, the interest extends beyond the players; the entire company personnel feels close to their contests. And Lou Williams [the manager of the Jewish Community Center where the women play] is happy because he likes to watch young people enjoy themselves—and maintain their health.  

567 Cahn, 44.
568 The Jewish women’s active role in initiating a women’s basketball team highlights the insistence of labor historians “that workers...are historical actors who make (constrained) choices and create their own cultural forms.” Roediger, 9.
Even though the strict gender ideals of the middle and upper classes might not completely apply to them, working-class women were still held to certain notions of femininity by their families, communities, and sports organizations. While they may have been single working ladies who engaged in athletics, it was still their responsibility to uphold ladylike behavior. AAU officials expected their female players to avoid masculine behavior and engage in sport for the purpose of “building stronger physical bodies.” They wanted their women athletes to establish “a better mental understanding of the competitive problems to be met in the ordinary life period of any girl or woman.” The women were to enjoy a non-commercialized sport played for recreational activity, rather than experience the professionalization and corruption associated with highly competitive men’s sports. These expectations also included upholding traditional behavior and the display of physical traits linked to women such as beauty, modesty, and refinement. For instance, various AAU publications described All-American player Alline Banks as “a modest girl with a winning smile, she plays to win, but never plays for her own glory.” Another article describes her as a “typical Southern girl, home loving, quiet and unassuming.” Banks’ highlighted feminine traits placed her firmly within the boundaries of traditional womanhood, according to the AAU, even while she participated in a competitive sport, a more recent addition to appropriate feminine pursuits. The AAU allowed women to participate in more

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570 Cayleff, 16-17; Cahn, 44-51.
572 Van Blarcom, “Progress and Trends…”
573 Van Blarcom, “Progress and Trends…”
574 “Alline Banks—Seven Times All-America,” *AAU Basketball Guide*, 1946.
competitive sports typically associated with masculinity, but in order to do so, they had to feminize the women athletes.\textsuperscript{576}

Yet the AAU’s descriptions of Banks were not entirely accurate. The AAU media created a traditionally feminine persona of Banks that differed from the image and persona noted by other players, coaches, and AAU observers. Interviews conducted by Robert Ikard decades after Banks’s stellar basketball career ended paint a much different portrait. Apparently not all of Banks teammates held her in such abounding high esteem. In terms of scoring and assisting, Ikard notes, “There was no doubt though that Alline preferred being the assisted rather than the assistor. She wanted the ball, and coaches wanted her to have it. Some capable forwards begrudged a coach turning to Alline at tournament time after they had demonstrated their own scoring skills during the season.”\textsuperscript{577} Banks proved a dominant player and often scored the majority of her team’s points and frequently outscored entire teams by herself.\textsuperscript{578} Of course, jealousy could in part have fueled such observations, but it is clear that Banks displayed a rare confidence in her basketball skills, one she obviously could back up. Ikard described Banks as follows: “She basked in the limelight and bore herself as the star, which she was. George Sherman [a former AAU coach, official, and fan] felt her star quality was obvious and

\textsuperscript{576} Cahn, 4. Women physical educators chose to moderate and limit women’s participation in competitive sports while AAU official and commercial sports promoters opted to allow women to play competitive sports while feminizing the athletes themselves.

\textsuperscript{577} Ikard, 89.

\textsuperscript{578} For just one glimpse into her scoring prowess, in the 1946 AAU national tournament, Alline Banks (Pate) Sprouse scored a total of eighty points, “exceeding opposing teams’ totals for the third consecutive year.” Ikard, 58.
was intimidating to opponents. He compared her mystique to that of Joe Dimaggio’s in baseball. She definitely had an air about her.\textsuperscript{579}

Whether Banks was actually cocky or disliked by her teammates is irrelevant. What’s important is that on a basic level Banks embraced and acknowledged her exceptional athletic ability and displayed confidence rare for a woman in the 1940s.\textsuperscript{580} Some might even describe this as masculine behavior. Mid-twentieth century American cultural values associated masculinity with confidence, aggressiveness, competition, power, and physical dominance.\textsuperscript{581} Women were supposed to be modest, compliant, non-confrontational, and dependent.\textsuperscript{582} Glorifying Banks confidence in her own abilities, even though she was the nation’s premier player, contradicted the AAU’s cookie-cutter image of its players. It benefited the AAU to focus more on Banks’ feminine qualities like her fiery red hair and teamwork. These qualities fit into more traditional ideas of white middle-class womanhood and counterbalanced the AAU’s less traditional aspects—the sanctioning of competitive sports for women.\textsuperscript{583}

The AAU’s promotion of white middle-class womanhood in combination with women’s sports should not be understood as a lack of interest on the part of black women to play basketball, or that black women’s basketball teams did not exist. On the contrary, black women have a long history with the sport of basketball and enjoyed playing for the

\textsuperscript{579} Ikard, 89.
\textsuperscript{580} Banks Sprouse interview.
\textsuperscript{582} Brownmiller,16; Cahn, 3.
\textsuperscript{583} Festle, 48. This isn’t to say that the AAU did not acknowledge Banks outstanding basketball play. They actually lauded her ability on the court frequently but they never acknowledged her personal awareness or promotion of her abilities, and in fact, downplayed her dominance and confidence by highlighting her modesty and team spirit.
same reasons as white women. Basketball proved one of the most popular sports among black women, since implicit and explicit racial segregation forced blacks to organize their own sports activities within the black community. Both black men and women participated in high school sports, college sports, church leagues, YWCAs and YMCAs, and other local and independent black sports clubs.584

In the 1920s, popular women’s black basketball teams such as the Chicago Roamer Girls and the New York Blue Belts competed against other black community teams and occasionally white teams as well, oftentimes in front of large crowds numbering in the thousands.585 The New York Blue Belts won the black championships in the early 1920s and provided great entertainment for the black community of New York City. They often played on holidays such as Valentine’s Day and Christmas, and their games, similar to AAU ones, offered other entertainment such as dances and live music. The Blue Belts traveled up and down the East coast, playing squads from as far as Pittsburgh, Baltimore, and Washington D.C. They also challenged white teams such as the Winona Girls, which black papers labeled the “White Champions” of New York State, and the Quintalles, the “White Champions” of Brooklyn. Sometimes the Blue Belts games were the headliner attraction, but sometimes they also played as a preliminary game before men’s teams.586

584 Cahn, 36-41; Festle, 34-35.
As historian Susan Cahn has noted, black women’s sports teams were secondary to black men’s sports, but the women’s athletics were still respected and taken more seriously than in white communities. Black papers gave more coverage to men’s sports, but they “did report regularly on women’s events, with a respectful tone that only rarely hinted of condescension.”

Both black men’s and women’s sports served as popular social events “that could enhance racial pride and neighborhood identity.” This tie between racial pride, community, and sport continued throughout the twentieth century until most professional sports integrated.

The popularity of basketball in the black community continued to grow throughout the mid-twentieth century, particularly in black colleges, normal and industrial schools, and community-sponsored institutions. In stark contrast to the conflict between white femininity and athleticism, Susan Cahn observed that black women’s participation in the sport did not necessarily contradict the black conception of womanhood. Due to the legacy of both racial and sexual oppression, black women

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587 Quote on Cahn, 39; Festle, 41.
588 Quote on Cahn, 39; Festle, 35.
589 Neil Lancot argues in his book *Negro League Baseball: The Rise and Ruin of a Black Institution* that integration, at least in sports such as baseball which had a strong Negro League, offered black athletes more opportunities and a chance for upward social mobility but ultimately integration destroyed black control over their own sports and sporting destinies. William C. Rhoden furthers this analysis in *Forty Million Dollar Slaves: The Rise, Fall, and Redemption of the Black Athlete* by adding that although black athletes have made huge strides in “mainstream” America and the sports world by accruing large salaries and attaining superstar status, racism and slavery is still present because blacks have largely lost their sense of African American community in sports. Rhoden maintains that black athletes do not have their own real power and control over their own sporting destiny until they gain ownership of teams, networks, means of communication, and their own collective image.
juggled multiple roles in their daily lives such as that of homemaker, mother, wageworker and community leader, all of which earned them respect from their communities. Because these roles required a physical, mental, and emotional strength, black notions of womanhood varied from that of white society. According to Cahn, “Denied access to full-time homemaking and sexual protection, African American women did not tie femininity to a specific, limited set of activities and attributes defined as separate and opposite from masculinity.” Instead, the ideals of black womanhood were “rooted in the positive qualities they cultivated under adverse conditions: struggle, strength, family commitment, community involvement, and moral integrity.”

As a product of the times, the AAU beauty queen also represented the ideal beauty of the white middle-class woman, even if she was not such. Most of the participants clearly belonged to the working class and were of ethnic origins that only recently moved into the “white” racial categorization or, at the very least, still experienced social tensions and discrimination over their ethnic and racial origins. However, as far as the records show, no black women were elected beauty queens or as

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590 Cahn, 117-118, quote on 118.
591 Cahn, 118.
592 Race scholars such as Thomas Guglielmo and Jennifer Guglielmo acknowledge that ethnic groups such as Italians were officially defined as “white” by the U.S. Census since the late nineteenth century, but ethnic discrimination was still prevalent throughout society for such groups as Italians and Jews. In many ways, these groups had to both deal with racial discrimination based on their ethnicity but also privilege in comparison to other races based upon their color. Thomas A. Guglielmo, *White on Arrival: Italians, Race, Color, and Power in Chicago, 1890-1945*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 28-31; Jennifer Guglielmo, “Introduction: White Lies, Dark Truths,” in *Are Italians White? How Race Is Made in America*, ed. Jennifer Guglielmo & Salvatore Salerno, (New York: Routledge, 2003), 8; http://www.jewishresearch.org/projects_diversity.htm, Accessed 21 February 2013; http://www.census.gov/history/www/through_the_decades/index_of_questions/1920_1.html, Accessed 21 February 2013.
attendants to the queen, although a couple black players were chosen for the All-
American teams, based on their athletic ability.\(^593\) Not many individual black players or
all-black teams competed in the AAU. There does not appear to be an official
discriminatory clause in the AAU as there was with the Miss America pageant’s Rule
Seven, but there does not appear to be a no-discrimination policy as there was in the
Roller Derby either. As early as 1934, two black teams competed in an exhibition game
after the championship took place, but it is unclear whether this was an invitation for
more black teams to participate in tournament play or rather an entertainment match “to
provide tournament fans some athletic exotica.”\(^594\) A black team from Columbus, Ohio,
entered the tournament in 1953, and in 1955, a team from Philander Smith, the all-black
college from Little Rock, Arkansas, made it to the quarter-finals. Northern teams became
slightly more integrated in the late 1960s, including outstanding black players in their
line-ups.\(^595\)

Regardless of how black women defined the concept of womanhood, mainstream
society controlled by whites, and as mirrored in the AAU beauty contests, denied black
women access to their version of middle-class femininity. Because the AAU was largely
tied to the white working class though, they may have been more flexible in terms of
what exactly constituted respectable whiteness even as they tried to uphold white middle-
class femininity.\(^596\) The AAU embraced women of different ethnic backgrounds that

\(^{593}\) Ikard, 208-214, in reference to All-American selections.
\(^{594}\) Ikard, 184.
\(^{595}\) Ikard, 208-214.
\(^{596}\) Indeed, as Roediger argued, “the pleasure of whiteness could function as a ‘wage’ for
white workers. That is, status and privileges conferred by race could be used to make up
for alienating and exploitive class relationships…White workers could, and did, define
and accept their class positions by fashioning identities as… ‘not Blacks.’” Roediger, 13.
composed the industrial working class teams. They viewed themselves as providing a democracy in sports, yet as reflective of the larger American democracy, it was a mostly white one. In the 1932 minutes of the annual AAU meeting, the AAU described their achievement in offering sports opportunities to many young women who were unable for various reasons to complete high school or who were unable to continue on to college. The AAU saw themselves as providers of sports to “thousands of young girls of all nationalities, and from all classes of society.”

In terms of AAU women’s basketball, it appears that many of the players were from a variety of ethnic working class backgrounds. For instance, Babe Didrikson, the star player for the Employers Casualty Insurance Company Golden Cyclones was the daughter of Norwegian immigrants and grew up in a working class family in eastern Texas. Another of the most famous AAU basketball stars, Hazel Walker, was said to have Native American heritage from both of her parents. Walker claimed this lineage provided her with “dark, natural good looks” and earned her the nickname Squaw, which

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597 Various ethnic groups such as Italians experienced “fierce, powerful, and pervasive…racial discrimination and prejudice” in the American society largely built upon the creation of whiteness. Still, as historian Thomas A. Guglielmo noted, “Italians’ many perceived racial inadequacies aside, they were still largely accepted as white by the widest variety of people and institutions—naturalization laws and courts, the U.S. census, race science, anti-immigrant racialisms, newspapers, unions, employers, neighbors, realtors, settlement houses, politicians, and political parties.” In terms of color, Guglielmo explained, “one color line existed separating ‘whites’ from the ‘colored races’—groups such as ‘Negroes,’ ‘Orientals,’ and sometimes ‘Mexicans.’…Italians were consistently and unambiguously placed on the side of the former. If Italians were racially undesirable in the eyes of many Americans, they were white just the same.” Thomas A. Guglielmo, White on Arrival, 6. A body of literature has in recent decades challenged ideas on race theory, whiteness, and class. For more on the intersection of these categories, see such works as David R. Roediger’s The Wages of Whiteness; Steven Seidman’s Contested Knowledge; and Jennifer Guglielmo and Salvatore Salerno’s edited book Are Italians White?: How Race is Made in America, among others.

598 As cited in Cahn pg. 72, 1932 Annual Meeting of AAU, Minutes.
apparently was used as a “distinctive and not demeaning” term. Providing further credence to this assertion, the 1935 AAU national tournament beauty queen, Billie Turnbull, belonged to the Chillico Indians team from Oklahoma.

Despite or perhaps because of the varied ethnic backgrounds of its players and the fact the players were women, the AAU strove to maintain a level of respectability within the larger community. They continually aligned themselves with well-known, reputable organizations and created family-friendly and community-sanctioned tournaments in order to validate the women’s basketball skills. Their actions paralleled those of the Roller Derby and the Miss America pageant, both whom wanted to ensure the American public that the skaters and pageant contestants respectively were still “ladies” and participating in a legitimate sort of activity. The AAU ensured that their women were not playing or behaving in the same rough manner as male athletes. While the AAU stood in stark contrast to women physical educators who did not sanction competitive sports for women at all, the AAU still promoted a respectable white middle-class image similar to that of women’s physical educators. They felt it their duty even to “guard for our young women their precious heritage of gentleness and feminine charm.”

And who could better guard women’s gentleness and feminine charms than such respectable white organizations like local Chambers of Commerce and Elks clubs? Just like the Miss America pageant, the AAU national women’s basketball tournament aligned itself with reputable sponsors who gave credence to the women basketball players.

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599 Ikard, 24.
600 Picture caption, Spalding Basketball Rules Book AAU and YMCA, 1936-37, pg. 50.
601 The AAU created an identity by utilizing the cultural respectability of whiteness while pitting themselves against images of the “other.” Roediger, 14.
602 As cited in Cahn, 73.
and their tournament. From the very early years of the national tournament, local
branches of men’s organizations hosted and sponsored the women’s tournament. For
instance, the city of Wichita, Kansas, hosted the national tournament nine times from
1929-1939, and various men’s organizations such as the Wichita Elks, American Legion
Auxiliary, and Chamber of Commerce alternately sponsored the tournament. These
organizations continued support made the women’s tournament “one of the most
important events in the community.”

From 1940-1950, St. Joseph, Missouri, hosted the national women’s AAU
basketball tournament. Although the city had never hosted prior to 1940, the locals
quickly warmed up to the women’s game and turned into “dyed-in-the-wool fans rooting
for their favorite clubs and pointing out the skilfull [sic] tactics of the blonde from Texas
or the sun-tanned lass from Florida or California.” St. Joseph’s citizens apparently
enjoyed the tournament so much in 1942 that they extended an “urgent invitation…to
return” the following year. The Junior Chamber of Commerce (Jaycees) of St. Joseph
sponsored the women’s tournament for its entire tenure in the city. They began hosting
the national AAU women’s basketball tournament at roughly the same time the Miss
America pageant aligned themselves with the Jaycees. The association between the
Jaycees and the two women’s organizations was presumably for the same reasons: The

1931), 5; “Women’s Basketball,” *Amateur Athlete*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (March 1933), 14;
Spalding’s Athletic Library 1937-38; Mrs. Irvin Van Blarcom, “National Championship
for Women,” AAU Basketball Guide 1940.

\[604\] Mrs. Irvin Van Blarcom, “National Championship Tournament,” *AAU Basketball
Guide, 1940-1941*, pg. 65, Naismith HOF; Festle, 49.

\[605\] Mrs. Irvin Van Blarcom, “Women’s Basketball,” *Amateur Athlete*, (May 1942), pg. 4,
USC Grand Library.
Jaycee men served as local groundsmen and hosts for the national organizations who aided in practical manners as well as lending credence to both events through their upstanding reputation. The local St. Joseph Jaycees made sure the women basketball players, coaches, officials, and chaperones had adequate housing, food, entertainment, and hospitality.

The national AAU chairman, Mrs. Irvin Van Blarcom, was effusive in her praise of the St. Joseph Jaycees throughout their hosting years, particularly for the “splendid manner in which the championship was conducted,” “their hard work,” and “their gracious gesture of hospitality.”⁶⁰⁶ She considered the AAU “greatly indebted to the Junior Chamber of Commerce and the entire citizenry of St. Joseph for the splendid cooperation so willingly given.”⁶⁰⁷ By the mid-1940s, the Jaycees managed to build up the tournament into a successful and popular community event.⁶⁰⁸ Van Blarcom described the tournament as “much a part of Saint Joseph as the Court House and the Union Station.”⁶⁰⁹ She insisted that “the event is the pride of the city and provides a substantial profit to the AAU and the sponsors. All profits are used to further amateur sports and civic interests.”⁶¹⁰ The fact that both the AAU and the Jaycees put their money directly back into the amateur sports circuit and the community further separates

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⁶⁰⁹ “1948 National Championship.”
⁶¹⁰ “1948 National Championship.”
AAU women’s basketball from the professionalism of men’s sports and promotes the notion that the women participated for fun and not self-promotion or glory. They may have played a more competitive sport than women’s physical educators supported, but they still maintained a distance from the masculine preserve of the highly commercialized professional sports.

Part of the men’s organizations’ duties as host to the national tournament included providing a lively and entertaining program for the local fans and for the players. This included hosting the opening ceremonies where, for instance, in 1956 the color guard performed to live band music followed by all the women’s teams “perfectly groomed in colorful uniforms marching onto the playing floor as the fans cheered.”611 This particular opening ceremony was the largest of all the tournaments held thus far and was described as “an impressive spectacle.”612 They hosted special fellowship meals, offered continual refreshments, scheduled guest speakers, and invited local and national dignitaries to the tournament. And in an attempt to tie the local to the national, the mayor of St. Joseph invited the President of the Junior Chamber of Commerce to the tournament that same year.613

Similar to their involvement with the Miss America pageant, the Jaycees also ran the beauty contest ceremonies at the national tournament, at least when held in St. Joseph.614 When the tourney was not in St. Joseph, the contest was still held, presumably under the leadership of whatever male organization was in charge. The Jaycees tried to

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611 McGhee.
612 McGhee.
613 McGhee; “1947 National Championship Tourney for Women.”
614 As previously mentioned, the tournament was held in St. Joseph, MO, from 1940-1950, and then again at least in 1956, 1958, 1959, and 1960.
make the selection of the beauty queen into an entertainment attraction through a "colorful ceremony." A committee of their members was responsible for choosing the queen based upon criteria which, at least in 1949 included "personality, poise, and glamor" as well as beauty. They also chose runners-up to serve as the queens attendants.

In the mid-1960s, the AAU National Women’s Tournament Beauty Queen and the Miss America pageant came together in a very direct way. At the 1966 national tournament held in Gallup, New Mexico, a slew of local and national beauty queens "served as hostesses and presented the tournament trophies and All-American awards." Various basketball queens met various beauty queens. In an article describing the tournament, Nashville sportswriter Bill Isom described the different types of queens present. First, he dubbed Nashville Business College’s twelve-time All American and 1966 MVP Nera White “Queen of the Backboards” due to her contributions in winning the national championship. He also announced the official beauty queen of the basketball tournament, Dorothy Woodfin, a player with the Martin’s Market team from Pasadena, Texas. But "lending further beauty to this event was the presence of Miss Vonda Kay Van Dyke, Miss America of 1965 from Phoenix, Ariz.; Ellen Grownden, Miss New Mexico; Sharon Birkenbuell, Miss Albuquerque and Carole Ann Yazzie, Miss Indian American." 

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615 “1948 National Championship.”
618 Isom.
Isom unintentionally highlights the conflicting strands of womanhood through his different descriptions of the “queens.” By labeling all the women queens of something, he categorizes women by their sex, as representative of an ideal, and by their physical appearance and abilities. For instance, Nera White was considered by many players and coaches “as the finest performer ever to don a uniform in the National” AAU tournament and by some as “the most complete female player ever to set foot on a hardwood.” In the late 1950s, she was chosen as the “best woman player in the world.” White dominated the game of AAU basketball for a solid fifteen years, earning her a multitude of MVP titles, All-American selections, and national championships. Yet, White would always remain “Queen of the Backboards,” “Queen of the Hardwood,” or “AAU Women’s Basketball Queen” but she would never be voted Beauty Queen of the Tournament. Despite her plethora of achievements, White’s failure to win a beauty queen title hindered her overall accomplishments as a woman in this era.

White did not fit into conventional notions of beauty during the prime of her career. Her tall frame, slender hips, and muscular arms and legs served her exceptionally well on the court, but this athletic frame as well as a deep voice led many to describe her as masculine. Her phenomenal abilities and “unfeminine” looks did not mesh well with the proper image of the woman athlete, so sportswriters and the AAU highlighted other

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619 Isom “Nera White”; Many players and coaches who saw White play in person and have witnessed the outstanding play of current college and WNBA players, still consider her to be the best player to have ever played the game of basketball.


621 Isom, “AAU Women’s Basketball Queen.”

important womanly aspects of her being in an attempt to feminize the athlete herself.\textsuperscript{623} Isom tries to paint a picture of White as a “complete person” as opposed to a “robot geared to greatness,” but this can also be seen as an attempt to feminize an outwardly unfeminine woman.\textsuperscript{624} Isom describes White as humble, modest, considerate, warm, and tender-hearted.\textsuperscript{625} He also states, “While she loves sports and no one can deny that she excels in them, she also loves home life, raising dogs and horses and making and being with friends. In a grocery store she’s a shrewd shopper and she is as much at home in a kitchen as on a basketball court. In fact she can cook a meal that makes her appear a much better cook than cager.”\textsuperscript{626} Isom uses White’s domesticity to highlight feminine aspects of her being, since he thinks he cannot use traditional beauty. The best female basketball player in the world could not rely on her phenomenal basketball skills alone for total acceptance. The media and the AAU needed more traditional female skills to assure the public that White was still a “normal” woman, i.e. heterosexual and feminine.

White believed she may have been discriminated against at different points in her life based on her looks as well. She lost her job in 1982 after H.O. Balls, her former basketball team sponsor and printing shop boss, died. Balls’ nephews inherited his business and shortly thereafter laid White off after twenty-three years of loyal

\textsuperscript{623} Cahn, 4.
\textsuperscript{624} Isom, “AAU Women’s Basketball Queen.” Sports writers and other media made a similar comparison to Martina Navratilova in the 1980s based on her consistently outstanding tennis performances that resulted in her domination of the women’s game. As Susan Cahn notes, “they characterized her as a ‘bionic sci-fi creation’ of her training team—a kind of unnatural, even monstrous ‘Amazon’ who ‘has the women’s game pinned to the mat.’” Cahn, 1.
\textsuperscript{625} Isom, “AAU Women’s Basketball Queen,” 8. It is not my intention to take away from the compliments given to White. By all accounts I have read, White was a caring and compassionate person. The point here is how and why Isom chooses to highlight these attributes in the way that he does.
\textsuperscript{626} Isom, “AAU Women’s Basketball Queen,” 8.
employment to the Balls family business. White, with over a decade of printing experience under her belt, sought a new printing job in Nashville, but could not get hired on anywhere in the industry. White stated, “I was well qualified, but I probably didn’t look like they expected me to.”\textsuperscript{627} When asked what that might be, White responded, “Probably feminine. Not that I saw any beauty queens working.”\textsuperscript{628}

Sports journalist Steve Marantz wrote that “a woman’s appearance may be irrelevant to basketball, but never to life.”\textsuperscript{629} He was wrong though. As the AAU beauty queen contest and coverage of Nera White demonstrates, beauty was also important to basketball. Sadly, it was not enough to be the greatest player in the world, not if that meant that you did not live up to traditional notions of femininity and beauty. The fact that the AAU held beauty contests at all reveals that they could not rely just on women’s skills to reward the players and draw in fans. Upholding standards of beauty for women was too important. Carla Lowry, a former player with the Wayland Baptist Flying Queens, viewed the beauty contests as a public image gimmick, which sought to uphold these images. She recalled, “It’s kind of like a Miss America thing in some ways. I mean, you take the best of whatever you got and put that person forward.”\textsuperscript{630} She saw the contest as trying to draw interest in the tournament based on a “pretty face” that belonged to a basketball player.\textsuperscript{631}

It appears that most of the women who participated in the national basketball tournaments were not overly concerned or interested in the beauty contests. Patsy Neal

\textsuperscript{628} Marantz.
\textsuperscript{629} Marantz.
\textsuperscript{630} Lowry interview.
\textsuperscript{631} Lowry interview.
affirmed this general belief: “We didn’t think much about it then. They were just fun for our players to take part and to be chosen.” It simply was part of the festival atmosphere surrounding the tournament. Many of the female basketball players were more interested in the free-throw contest, which was held annually alongside the beauty contest. This competition required the women to actually use their athletic ability. The players had to make 45 of 50 free-throws just to be eligible to participate in the tournament contest. Lowry stated, “I think that kind of competition is always a good thing, ‘cuz it is a contest of skill.” Hanes Hosiery player Evelyn “Eckie” Jordan echoed Lowry’s feelings: “We were always more interested in the free-throw championship. You know, that’s part of the game.”

The players never really took a negative stance against the contests though. Rather they viewed them as sideshow rituals to entertain the crowd or humor the sponsors and did not spend much time dwelling on the reasons for such an event. Since beauty contests were a regular feature in 1950s and 1960s society, they did not necessarily seem out of place or unusual as they might to the contemporary observer. Doris Rogers, a star player with the famed Nashville Business College, participated in the contest one year, but struggled to recall why she did it or why the AAU even held such contests: “I guess it just reflected the times. I don’t know why, you know…It’s what they valued in women…the beauty.” She explained that in the 1950s and 1960s, women were still largely valued based on their looks, as opposed to their actual skills or accomplishments.

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632 Neal interview.
633 Lowry interview.
634 Cahn, 106; Jordan interview.
635 Cahn, 106.
636 Rogers interview.
As she looked back on the beauty contests, she stated, “It’s just kind of asinine in retrospect.”

The players also did not make fun of the beauty contest because it was their teammates who were winning, who were proud of their title, and who chose to participate. The beauty contest winners were fellow basketball players who were being honored and rewarded for their beauty. Lowry stated, “They were very proud to win that, you know, and we did not make fun of it, because…we didn’t want to hurt the feelings of people who won.” Neal confirmed Lowry’s sentiments: “It was an honor for them to be chosen…I still remember a girl on my team, Louise Short, who was just a beautiful individual and was elected to the beauty pageant, and I was so proud of her because I thought she should have been in it.” But most of the players never dwelled on the contests for long, including Neal. She stated, “It was just part of the tournament, and it wasn’t so unusual that it stuck with me.” For the women athletes, the beauty contests were relatively unimportant and fell by the way side to the real reason for the tournament: the game of women’s basketball. After all, “they had come to play ball.”

What the convergence of queens in the 1966 tournament demonstrates is that first, women were always judged by their beauty as this was the most important display of their womanhood. This was represented in the form of the national AAU tournament Beauty Queen. Secondly, women were always judged in comparison to a beauty ideal, as demonstrated by Miss America and her presence at the tournament. This ideal may

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637 Rogers interview.
638 Lowry interview.
639 Neal interview.
640 Neal interview.
641 Cahn, 106.
change slightly year to year—a long-haired blonde in 1952 versus short-haired brunette in 1960, but notions of whiteness and feminine heterosexuality were ever-present and continually reaffirmed. This ideal, at least until the 1980s, is representative of only one real kind of beauty, i.e. that of a white, middle-class heterosexual woman. All women are measured in some part by this very limited and inaccessible ideal. The fact that the Miss Indian America stood next to Miss America at the basketball tournament reveals a clear-cut hierarchy in beauty standards. The existence of a Miss Indian America competition in 1966 or a Miss Black America contest in 1968 shows that the ideal, as represented by the Miss America contest, ignored or blatantly discriminated against women of color and various ethnicities. Women of color sought access to and an expansion of the notions of ideal American beauty. Thirdly, since the top player or teams of the game were dubbed names like “Queens of the Hardwood” or “Queen of the Court,” the AAU and the media recognized their outstanding basketball abilities but also had to provide a counterpart, such as the Tournament Beauty Queen, or an alternate image, like the ones describing Alline Banks Sprouse or Nera White. If the best player was not beautiful, a beautiful player must be present to counter that image. In 1966, Nera White was the queen basketball player based on skill alone. Dorothy Woodfin was the beauty queen of the basketball players based on looks. Carol Ann Yazzie was the beauty queen of American Indians. And Miss Vonda Kay Van Dyke was Miss America, the queen of all American women, in theory at least.

**Conclusion**

The last three decades of the twentieth century showed a slow but gradual expansion of beauty standards that included more women of color as the Civil Rights
Movement and Women’s Movement fought against race and gender discrimination. The “Black is Beautiful” campaign aided in public awareness of the exclusion of women of color as well and demonstrated the agency of black women to embrace their own beauty versus the standards set by a white patriarchal system. But the beauty contests from the 1930s through the 1960s as represented by the Miss America pageants, the Roller Derby Queen contests, and the AAU Women’s Basketball National Tournament Beauty Queens reflect the deeply entrenched ideals of a white, heterosexual, middle-class image of the American woman. They also indicate that while women’s roles were expanding, a woman’s beauty was still her most important, if not defining, feature in terms of her own femininity and in attracting outside attention to her accomplishments.

Throughout their histories, the Miss America pageant, the Roller Derby, and the AAU attempted to present their women as ladies embodying white middle-class standards of American womanhood, whether or not they actually were doing so. They fought against outside forces that discredited and disparaged their women for displaying lower-class morals, motives, and behaviors. Yet they simultaneously pushed conventions throughout the twentieth century in terms of challenging appropriate female behavior in public, offering a forum for female competition, displaying the feminine physical form, and showcasing women’s talents and athleticism. All three organizations offered women opportunities previously denied to them, while also urging them to adhere to traditional notions of femininity. They worried about maintaining public credibility and legitimacy and allied themselves with sponsoring organizations that would, they hoped, enhance their respectability. So hearkening back to the beginning of this chapter, Miss America Lee Meriwether, Roller Derby Queen Nellie Montague, and AAU Tournament Queen
Mary Alice Jones did not just share pretty faces and the title of beauty queen. They also share an intricate history that reflects the social status and roles of the American woman in the mid-twentieth century, whether she’s vying for a pageant title, a derby victory, or a national basketball championship berth.
CHAPTER 3
PLAYING WITH IDENTITY

“The important meanings of dance, sport, and exercise are not found in the writings of philosophers...Rather, they are found in the lives of the millions of people who find their own involvement in dance, sport, or exercise meaningful.”
Eleanor Metheny in Movement and Meaning, 1968

“I guess the thing I loved about athletics is that it involved everything. It involved your mind, your body, your spirit, your emotions...So with sports, you had to take everything that you had as a person and try to utilize it and integrate it. That to me was the wonderful thing about athletics.”
Patsy Neal, former Wayland Baptist College basketball player

In 1938, the popular women’s magazine Ladies Home Journal published a fictional story entitled “Don’t Beat Your Husband.” The story follows the budding romantic relationship between Winifred, a fit, confident, and accomplished athlete, and Hartley, a successful businessman who loves and respects Winifred for the self-sufficient, competitive athlete she is, at least at the beginning of the tale. After a brief week-long engagement, Hartley and Winifred marry at city hall and jet off to Bermuda for their honeymoon. While enjoying the “cool and crystalline days” of “magical” Bermuda, the couple spends their time riding bicycles, going for swims, and playing tennis, shuffleboard, and golf. Winifred continually challenges Hartley in these sporting activities and begins to affront his masculinity by competently competing alongside him and even beating him in direct competition. Hartley starts to begrudge Winifred for her
"ability [and] resourcefulness." He reflected, "It never used to irritate me. Rather impressed me when she would beat me at something. Now I resent it."

The rising tension culminates in a blow-up fight between the newlyweds that almost dissolves their marriage. Tired of continually coming in second to Winifred, Hartley lashes out, "You ought to have...some idea of the normal relationship of a man and wife, and make an effort to restrain yourself...Do you think a man likes to have his wife constantly trying to show him she’s just as good as he is?" Not only does Hartley feel that his masculinity is at stake, but he also attacks Winifred's femininity: "When a woman acts the way you do it’s because she has some lack. Compensation, that’s what. Afraid you haven’t enough natural, feminine appeal to attract men so you have to assume every male prerogative trying to impress them."

When Hartley and Winifred’s relationship was platonic, he appreciated her competitive nature and athletic ability. It did not threaten him in any real way since he was not romantically tied or legally bound to her. But once they entered the sacred state of matrimony, where clear gender boundaries, rules, and expectations existed, Hartley felt his manhood challenged by his wife. He lashed back at Winifred’s very essence, her femininity. Hartley’s accusations devastated Winifred. All she ever intended was to meet Hartley on his own terms, simply "trying to please him by being proficient doing the things he did."

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643 Norton-Taylor, 54.
644 Norton-Taylor, 56.
645 Norton-Taylor, 56.
646 Norton-Taylor, 56.
Winifred realizes that she must allow Hartley to care for her, protect her, and uphold a traditional masculine position in their marriage if she wants their relationship to work. She solves her marital troubles by letting Hartley rescue her from a runaway horse-drawn carriage. As the carriage careens wildly over a hill leading directly down to the ocean, Winifred screams for Hartley to come save her, which he does. He pulls her to safety from the carriage as she frantically clings to him. He asks, "'Why didn't you grab [the reins]?' 'I don't know,' Win said lamely. 'I don't know what to do with horses. I'm scared to death of them.'" 647 He holds her tightly until she calms down, and then he not-so-modestly declares, "I just happen to know how to handle horses. Used to ride with the national guard when I was in college." 648 Win admiringly responds, "I know but the way you jumped on that bicycle and came after me..." 649 She further boosts his masculine ego by stating, "Oh, but there are so many things only a man can do—think fast in an emergency, not lose his head, like a woman." 650 Her comment underscores her feigned weakness and vulnerability while boosting Hartley's masculinity. "I really love you," he whispered. "Forget all that nonsense. I don't know what I was driving at." 651

The story ends with Winifred and Hartley settling into their new city apartment. Cheerfully listening to music, they unpack their personal belongings as a fire blazes in the hearth. Winifred stops to leaf through a photo album where she runs across an "old picture of herself, a lanky child in a derby, mounted on a long-legged horse and easily

647 Norton-Taylor, 58.
648 Norton-Taylor, 58.
649 Norton-Taylor, 58.
650 Norton-Taylor, 58.
651 Norton-Taylor, 58.
clearing a hurdle."\textsuperscript{652} Winifred quickly removes the photograph from the album and drops it into the burning fireplace. She quickly resumes singing along with her husband as the song and the story come to a close.\textsuperscript{653}

By destroying the only evidence of her equestrian proficiency, Winifred dramatically subsumes herself to Hartley and his needs. She tossed her natural athleticism aside when it threatened her husband’s masculinity and contemporary standards of femininity. The story makes it clear that Winifred was a capable athlete, one who could have easily saved herself from a runaway carriage. Yet, clear gender rules still existed in midcentury that labeled sports a predominately male preserve, despite women’s athletic competence. Women could play and succeed but only up to the point where they challenged or threatened male masculinity and superiority. Otherwise, the male-dominated American media and social critics would question the women’s femininity. Sports, while becoming increasingly accessible to women, were still not considered a fundamental part of their identity. Sport was not a natural component of femininity in the way that it was to masculinity. According to Susan Cahn, social commentators and journalists described women’s athleticism as “by nature temporary” or as “a temporary transgression, rather than a constitutive feature, of true womanhood.”\textsuperscript{654} Women could “play” at being athletes but athleticism could not be internalized in the way that it was to men. Women took on the persona of athlete, but this was never her true self

\textsuperscript{652} Norton-Taylor, 58.
\textsuperscript{653} Norton-Taylor, 58.
\textsuperscript{654} Cahn, 217.
or her identifying feature. The woman as athlete was a fleeting façade that always gave way to a “truer, more rewarding feminine persona.”

Masculinity and sport have long been tied together, mutually reinforcing one another. This connection goes back at least to the days of the early Olympic festivals where each male competitor was “stripped of all excuses,” and standing naked before the gods he was to “demonstrate his ability to perform a well-defined task of his own choosing.”

Sport and manliness or masculinity become further entwined in American society in the post-Civil War industrial era, when social commentators claimed society was becoming effeminate and sedentary. Men could no longer rely on the battlefields or the frontiers as a space in which to prove their courage, grit, and superiority. Therefore, Progressive reformers insisted that athletics provided an avenue in which men, who no longer toiled with their hands but worked with their minds, could assert their masculinity, strength, and toughness.

Even President Theodore Roosevelt, a proponent of strenuous exercise and rugged sport, helped inspire the promotion of athletics in the last decades of the nineteenth century. He believed that many Americans undervalued “the need of the virile, masterful qualities of the heart and mind which have built up and alone can maintain and defend this very civilization.” He stated, “Our object is to get as many of

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655 Cahn, 217.
659 Roosevelt.
our people as possible to take part in manly, healthy, vigorous pastimes, which will benefit the whole nation.\textsuperscript{660}

Throughout the late nineteenth century and early decades of the twentieth century, the sporting world served as an “important social phenomenon of man”\textsuperscript{661} and developed as a space where men could prove their masculinity in the face of an increasingly industrialized society. But according to the highly-esteemed physical educator Eleanor Metheny, sports also allowed an individual to compete under a specified rule set that provides him with “a rare opportunity to concentrate all the energies of his being in one meaningful effort to perform a task of his own choosing, no longer pushed and pulled in a dozen directions by the many imperatives he may recognize in his life.”\textsuperscript{662} In other words, sports allow a man to “experience himself as a fully motivated, fully integrated, fully functioning human being.”\textsuperscript{663} Sports allow performers to “restore their own sense of wholeness,”\textsuperscript{664} and it offers the “individual a chance for self-realization.”\textsuperscript{665} Sports, at

\textsuperscript{660} Roosevelt. Roosevelt’s quote also shows his preference for amateur athletics for the masses over the “limited class of athletes who shall make it the business of their lives to do battle with one another for the popular amusement.” Roosevelt saw sport and manliness, or what is often called the “strenuous life,” as an integral part of American foreign and domestic policy. As sports historian Benjamin G. Rader explained, Roosevelt and other proponents of athleticism saw sport as providing a space in which young men could “replicate the courage and hardness” found in war and then use these “heroic virtues” to strengthen the nation. Rader stated, “[Roosevelt] preached to and bullied opponents both at home and abroad. ‘In life, as in a football game,’ he once advised the nation’s boys, ‘the principle to follow is: Hit the line hard, don’t foul, an don’t shirk, but hit the line hard!’” Rader, 123-125, Quotes on 124-125.

\textsuperscript{661} Neal, 14.

\textsuperscript{662} Metheny, 63. Metheny was an early feminist and important physical educator who produced influential theories on human movement. For more background on Eleanor Metheny, please see Mary Leigh and Ginny Struder’s article “Eleanor Metheny” in the September 1983 issue of the Journal of Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance.

\textsuperscript{663} Metheny, 64.

\textsuperscript{664} Metheny, 64.

least in theory, allow competitors to demonstrate what they “can do and be at their utmost.”

If proving oneself at sports has long demonstrated masculinity and promoted wholeness, the woman athlete has been placed in a no-win situation. Metheny claims that in general sports serve as a “symbolic formulation of ‘woman at her utmost.’” But just as women have been denied full social, political, and economic equality throughout the twentieth century, their ability to experience wholeness through sport has been limited by the parameters imposed by the larger society. Former athlete and sport philosopher Patsy Neal explains that in order to experience self-revelation in sport, one must experience freedom of choice in sports. She states, “Man reconfirms his own identity within the framework of the rules, and finds his own truth by his decisions. The more rules, and the more limited the framework of free choice, the less personal development and creativity one has the chance to achieve.” Women have long played sports that were modified for their sex, which has limited their freedom, personal development and creativity in the realm of sports. And as exemplified in the Hartley and Winifred story, women attempting to compete with their whole being or to achieve wholeness through sport threatened maleness or found their femininity under attack.

Why, then, did women participate in sports such as basketball and Roller Derby throughout the twentieth century, when the total advantages of sport were not fully available to them? How have notions of femininity influenced basketball players and derby skaters? What did playing sports mean to them and their personal identity? How

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666 Metheny, 74.
667 Metheny, 77.
668 Neal, 31.
does these women’s self-identity coincide with or contradict the ideals put forth by outside sources? How did these women athletes negotiate their conflicting identities? And how did their experiences in sport reflect and confront women’s larger positions in society?

Throughout the twentieth century, a major challenge for women athletes has been to reconcile feminine identity with athletic identity. Historically, women have been hesitant to identify themselves as athletes, despite their own remarkable athletic accomplishments. Dr. Donna Lopiano, former world champion softball player, athletic director at the University of Texas, and President of the Women’s Sports Foundation, has found that when women who grew up in the decades prior to the Title IX era are asked if they consider themselves to be athletes, they generally reject the label. She states, “[They] immediately say no even if they’ve run three marathons because they think that being an athlete is being a high-level athlete, professional athlete or scholarship athlete, you know, where every male who ever played intramural—anything calls himself athlete, which is a huge difference.” For men, sports have historically been a prime signifier of masculinity; for women, it has been a marker of ambiguity that raises deeply engrained questions about femininity. This hearkens back to the traditional link between sports and masculinity and the disconnect between femininity and athletics.

Women basketball and Roller Derby athletes provide interesting insight into the complicated negotiation between personal identity and social expectations in the twentieth century, particularly on a macro/national versus micro/local level. Women basketball players reported that despite limited opportunities in sport and specific societal

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669 Lopiano interview.
gender expectations promoted on a national level, on a local level their identity was not necessarily questioned. Women physical educators, sports promoters, and athletes were able to stretch the boundaries of femininity to include certain types of sport in their daily lives, despite an overarching social belief that sports belonged to a masculine preserve. As scholars Susan Cahn, Pamela Grundy, Susan Shackelford, and Robert Ikard have noted, basketball players were able to negotiate between social expectations for women and their desire to play sport. Roller Derby, on the other hand, challenges the very framework laid out by sports historians because Roller Derby was a rough, full-contact, professional male/female sport that was not modified to suit the societal expectations or physical differences of women. In fact, Roller Derby openly confronted these expectations. Women participated alongside men as equal competitors, and the sport itself emerged as one of the most popular spectator activities of the mid-twentieth century. While Roller Derby skaters came much closer to reaching this wholeness through sport with their unrestricted access to the track, they too were restricted in many ways by entrenched gender roles and rules that governed their lives off the track. Women Roller Derby skaters found themselves negotiating their own identities in ways that both mirrored and diverged from the experiences of women basketball players.

**Identity On and Off the Court**

Despite the traditional association between masculinity and sports, in certain areas of the country from the 1930s through the 1960s, basketball was not viewed as an unconventional pastime for women. These local exceptions complicate any coherent narrative for women’s sports throughout the century. Many girls and women found that

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670 Cahn, 227; Grundy and Shackelford, 3-6; Ikard, 16-18, 77.
the sport of basketball easily fit into their feminine identity or at the very least did not challenge it in direct ways. Because of women physical educators’ modification of basketball in the early decades of the century and this modified game’s general reputation as appropriate for girls and women, it flourished in schools and community leagues across the country.

Physical educators considered basketball to be a sport with feminine traits during the early decades of its existence, but it continued to enjoy wide popular support even after it became associated with a “masculine gender attribution.” Basketball was considered every bit as much a women’s sport as it was a male one for the first five decades of the twentieth century. In fact, many social commentators labeled it a women’s game, and male college players continually faced criticism that they “played a ‘sissy’ sport” until the 1930s. From the 1930s through the 1950s, however, basketball grew as a popular sport for both sexes, with women’s teams “drawing larger audiences and basking in greater prestige.” Because of the mid-century popularity of the women’s game, many of the women who played basketball in high school, college, industrial leagues, and on competitive AAU teams from the 1930s through the late 1960s did not necessarily experience the negative stereotyping of the woman athlete and did not

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671 Cahn, 219; Shackelford and Grundy, 122.

672 Shackelford and Grundy, 122.

673 Shackelford and Grundy, 122. Not until the late 1950s and early 1960s did the evolution of the men’s game come to include more speed, strength, and power, and shifted public perception of the sport to a masculine one. As the male game grew at the college level and through professional male leagues, new fans began to “associate the game almost exclusively with men. By the 1960s, for the first time, basketball was largely a man’s game.”
necessarily feel pressure to feminize themselves while playing their sport. It was considered an appropriate activity for women in their local communities.\textsuperscript{674}

Social class and race certainly played a role in the positive endorsement of basketball for women. As Susan Shackelford and Pamela Grundy noted, female physical educators modified the game of basketball for middle-class college women in an attempt to “uphold the cultural conventions of the nation’s middle classes, where womanly ideals were governed by the ladylike refinement epitomized by country clubs, afternoon teas, and charity endeavors.”\textsuperscript{675} But both white and black women who lived in “rural communities, factory towns, and working-class urban neighborhoods” were not always held to these same ideals or expectations.\textsuperscript{676} These working-class communities acknowledged the strength and physical abilities of their women. Their women, after all, strained muscles in domestic work, toiled in the fields, and operated machinery in the factories, all to help support their families.\textsuperscript{677} Indeed, in white and black working-class communities “female fortitude was a given.”\textsuperscript{678} Thus, the competitive game of basketball

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\textsuperscript{674} Shackelford and Grundy, 122.
\textsuperscript{675} Shackelford and Grundy, 38.
\textsuperscript{676} Shackelford and Grundy, 38. Although Anne Moody’s autobiography \textit{Coming of Age in Mississippi} is not about sports per se, it does provide great insight into the acceptance of women’s basketball by the black community. Moody uses basketball (even if a last resort in her opinion) as a means to earn a scholarship to attend college. Moody, 235-236. Missouri Arledge Morris, a black player from Durham, North Carolina, also used basketball as a means to attend college. She stated, “I played because I wanted to go to college and get an education...that was really a motivating factor because I knew my parents would not be able to send me to college.” Morris described basketball as a “lifeline out of the—what they call ‘the ghetto.’” Missouri Arledge Morris, interview with author, 2 February 2012, phone interview, digital audio recording, W.E.B. Du Bois Library, University of Massachusetts-Amherst, Amherst, MA.
\textsuperscript{677} Cahn, 142.
\textsuperscript{678} Shackelford and Grundy, 38.
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appealed to many of them as a healthy and enjoyable activity, if they could spare the time.\textsuperscript{679}

On a macro-national level, women’s basketball did not receive much media coverage, since few colleges offered competitive programs, and no professional leagues existed until the post-Title IX era.\textsuperscript{680} Yet thousands of women played the game with no or limited threat to their feminine identity. Patsy Neal, an AAU All-American at Wayland Baptist College and author of eight sports books, grew up in a small, rural community in Georgia.\textsuperscript{681} There she experienced the limitations of athletic opportunities for girls and young women as basketball was the only sport available to her on a competitive level: “This was back way before Title IX, before anything else where women just did not have opportunities. So, basketball was my only chance to play competitively. There was nothing else.”\textsuperscript{682} Many of the AAU players had played on high school teams or at least city league teams where they could hone their skills. AAU All-star Katherine Washington took advantage of her high school basketball team, which was the only sport offered for her sex: “We didn’t have track or tennis or any of the other things they have now.”\textsuperscript{683} There were limited sports opportunities for women in comparison to men, but the opportunities available for women most often included basketball. And where basketball was offered locally, it was generally viewed as an acceptable pastime.

\textsuperscript{679} Shackelford and Grundy, 38; Cahn, 36-41, 117-118.
\textsuperscript{680} There were, as previously mentioned, several women’s barnstorming professional teams, most notably the All-American Red Heads, but no actual professional leagues.
\textsuperscript{682} Neal.
\textsuperscript{683} Katherine Washington, interview by author, 6 April 2012, phone interview, digital audio recording, W.E.B. Du Bois Library, University of Massachusetts-Amherst, Amherst, MA.
Many women who grew up playing basketball from the late 1920s through the late 1960s did not experience any overwhelming resistance to their participation in the sport, and, therefore, did not suffer serious crises of personal identity in regards to being an athlete. Their identity as a woman did not conflict with their athletic identity. This partly stemmed from the community and parental support they received. Maxine “Jimmy” Vaughn, player for Nashville Business College in the 1940s, stated, “I never knew of any reason why people didn’t support women’s sports, personally. In fact, my parents would drive 137 [miles] and then go back just to see a ball game when I might foul out in the first five minutes.” Eckie Jordan’s parents were similarly supportive and “sports-minded.” Both her parents encouraged her participation in basketball. Her mother allowed her to skip dish-duty on game days, and her father would sit with her in the kitchen after the games to analyze her play; “Daddy would talk about things we were doing wrong and had to improve on.” Similarly, Patsy Neal’s father would cook pre-meal games for her to make sure she was well-fed before she suited up. Neal’s parents did not miss a single game of her high school career.

Even in communities where basketball was a generally acceptable female activity, not all parents were equally supportive. Parents also had to come to grips with preconceived notions and stereotypes about women athletes and their own daughters’ desire to participate in sports. Alline Banks Sprouse’s father “objected” to her playing since she was the only girl in the family. Yet, her father’s lack of support did not deter

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684 Maxine “Jimmie” Vaughn Williams, interview by Susan Cahn, 16 July 1988, interview transcript in author’s possession.
685 Jordan interview.
686 Jordan interview.
687 Neal interview.
her, especially since her mother encouraged her to play. She said, “It didn’t really bother
me. Finally I won him over.” Eunies Futch experienced the same attitude from her
father. Girls’ sports were not as popular in her hometown of Jacksonville, Florida. She
recalled, “My daddy would rather me not have been playing…but after it’s all said and
done, he was fine.” Carla Lowry’s father, who himself had an athletic background as a
baseball player and coach, played softball with his daughter in the yard and encouraged
her to pursue that sport. But he viewed basketball as “too rough for girls.” Sadly, her
father passed away before Lowry entered high school, but she believed that had he lived,
she never would have played. It was her mother who encouraged her to take up
basketball.

Regardless of their familial support or lack thereof, none of the AAU women
pioneers seemed conscious of a real identity conflict with their athletic career and
femininity. In their opinion, playing basketball did not diminish their femininity. In fact,
many former players had trouble conceptualizing any conflict because in their
experiences the sport was never at odds with their identity. At Patsy Neal’s high school
in rural Georgia in the 1950s, basketball was not seen as a masculine endeavor or an
abnormal activity for women. “It was just a sport that we just played,” she insisted. “It’d
be like going out and playing rook or something. You know, a card game or

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688 Alline Banks Sprouse, interview by Susan Cahn, 8 July 1988, interview transcript in
author’s possession.
689 Eunies M. Futch, interview by Susan Cahn, 18 July 1988, interview transcript in
author’s possession.
690 Lowry interview. Softball grew in popularity, particularly among women, during the
Great Depression and World War II, but the “rugged play, connection to bar life, and the
working-class base of softball combined to give the sport a tough, masculine sensibility,”
despite Lowry’s father’s views. Perhaps he viewed softball as the alternate to baseball.
Cahn, 145-146.
691 Lowry interview.
something... We weren’t treated any differently.” Carla Lowry felt that the girls at her high school in Mississippi were admired more because they played basketball and maintained good grades. And for Doris Rogers, basketball was such a common part of her community life that she was unaware that basketball was not universally accepted outside of her rural hometown in Seymour, Tennessee. She said, “I just thought everybody loved basketball because my family and the whole community did... Within my [little county]...we were the cream of the crop.”

Susan Cahn argued that by mid-century “the majority of American women showed little interest in highly competitive sport.” She based her argument on physical education, recreation, and amateur sport publications in which “women leaders regularly commented that their task had changed from one of discouraging the competitive zealot to stimulating interest among the majority of non-athletic girls who didn’t want to sweat, change clothes, mess up their hair, or, worst of all—be accused of being masculine.” What remains unclear though is whether these women really were uninterested in competitive sport itself or rather were afraid that competitive sport would conflict with prevailing ideas about femininity that were more influential in their lives and communities. Players who grew up where basketball was an accepted part of girlhood/womanhood did not outwardly struggle with their identity because they did not perceive a need to feminize or sexualize themselves to combat stereotypes of masculinity and women athletes. For instance, Margaret Sexton Gleaves, an All-American AAU player in the 1940s, claimed she never felt any pressure to prove her femininity or to

692 Neal interview.
693 Rogers interview.
694 Cahn, 202.
695 Cahn, 202.
combat a masculine image of women basketball players: “Well, I never did feel that… I never thought about it like that.”⁶⁹⁶

Femininity concerns did not necessarily influence women who grew up playing basketball because they were athletes but, rather, because they were women. When femininity was an issue, it was because of deeply entrenched ideas of womanhood. According to some of the basketball players, often the emphasis on beauty had to do with social expectations of women rather than sports actually threatening their femininity, again at least on a local level. Doris Rogers did not go out of her way to increase her femininity because of her status as athlete. She recalled, “If I did, it was because I was a girl and not because I was a player… That’s all I knew… I had the boyfriend in high school and wanted to look cute. You know how girls are. But never because I was an athlete. Never.”⁶⁹⁷

Many of the women considered themselves feminine and primped before the games, not to assure the spectators of their femininity because they played basketball but because they were women who lived in a particular era, an era where maintaining a pleasing appearance was integral, regardless of their activities.⁶⁹⁸ Sexton recalled many of her fellow teammates curling their hair and applying their lipstick before games, but none of them ever questioned this type of ritual.⁶⁹⁹ Vaughn stated, “We always wore skirts, and blouses, coats, hose, and heels… Back then you went downtown, you had on a

⁶⁹⁶ Margaret Sexton Gleaves, interview by Susan Cahn, 25 July 1988, interview transcript in author’s possession.
⁶⁹⁷ Rogers interview.
⁶⁹⁸ A telling example of this is the mandated business school course Doris Rogers was required to take for her secretarial degree. She took and then later taught a “charms” course. Rogers interview.
⁶⁹⁹ Sexton Gleaves interview.
hat and gloves.”\textsuperscript{700} Alline Banks Sprouse recalled all the women ballplayers wearing dresses and makeup but not necessarily because they were athletes. This was just the way women were expected to present themselves in society, basketball player or not. Women’s appearance, in many ways, outwardly defined their identity as respectable women. As historian Lois Banner explained, appearance was a “signal of what they consider themselves to be.”\textsuperscript{701}

Patsy Neal recalled that as basketball players in the 1950s and 1960s, “We didn’t do anything different than anybody else. We just played.”\textsuperscript{702} But she also felt that in her small community and high school, there was a much bigger emphasis on morals, sportsmanship, and accomplishments rather than “femininity and sex and all that stuff.”\textsuperscript{703} She explained, “It was just a totally different time than you have nowadays.”\textsuperscript{704}

Neal’s quote hints at the varied rhetoric and attitudes expressed on national levels versus local ones as well as the engrained notions of gender difference in women of her generation. As a young girl and woman, Neal’s participation in basketball did not diminish her femininity. She stated, “I didn’t feel any different than anybody else other than I played basketball and some of the other people didn’t.” But she also recalled her mother dressing her up in frilly dresses for church, and once she entered high school, Neal began wearing lipstick. It was not abnormal for women to play basketball during Neal’s youth, and it was not abnormal for women to wear nice dresses to church on Sunday. Both fit into common expectations for young womanhood, many of which were

\textsuperscript{700} Maxine Vaughn Williams, interview by Susan Cahn, 16 July 1988, interview transcript in author’s possession.

\textsuperscript{701} Banner, 3.

\textsuperscript{702} Neal interview.

\textsuperscript{703} Neal interview.

\textsuperscript{704} Neal interview.
in continual flux throughout the twentieth century. Women were supposed to carry themselves in a certain way and adhere to common expectations of how a lady behaves and dresses in public. “I guess it’s hard to explain because it didn’t seem abnormal,” recalled Neal. “It didn’t seem like it was something that people looked down on you because you were a woman and you had to wear a dress. It was just a normal thing.”

Neal’s college basketball coach Harley Redin had a very clear philosophy for his basketball players: ‘Brains, beauty, and ballhandling.’ Neal interpreted this motto as the expectations for representing her college in an appropriate manner. She stated, “In their mind the basketball was last and the academics was first. And being attractive, you know, we didn’t want to go out there looking like lumberjacks or anything like that, so he wanted us dressed in our travelling uniforms so we looked neat...There were certain expectations and that was pretty common back then.” Despite this emphasis on appearance, Neal insisted this was not about countering images of basketball players. “I mean, it wasn’t like we were the only ones that had to dress neatly and look nice when we were traveling...This was just expected of everybody.” Yet Neal’s comments also hint at her awareness of the masculinization and sexualization of the female athlete that occurred, in her opinion, in later years. Her reference to avoiding looking like “lumberjacks” indicates that it would have been inappropriate for women to maintain an

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705 Cahn, pg. 230-245.
706 Neal interview.
707 Neal interview. Neal’s usage of the word “lumberjacks” is a really gendered word choice on her part, even if unintentional. This word suggests manly women and lesbians.
708 Neal interview.
appearance not meeting specific social expectations of the day or for women to appear more like men than women.\footnote{Many of the women acknowledged their coaches emphasis on representing their school well and keeping up a neat appearance, but there was a very clear distinction on what that appearance entailed for males and females.}

In Missouri Arledge Morris’s black segregated community of Durham, North Carolina, basketball was an acceptable activity for young ladies, but only if they retained their feminine identity. At first, Morris was leery of the type of reputation she might gain as a basketball player. She thought that some female basketball players tried to imitate the male players, a behavior she disliked: “They would walk like the boys, and they were being rough, and I just didn’t want that.”\footnote{Arledge Morris Interview.} She was also aware of stereotypes that labeled women basketball players as rough and tough. She heard talk that if girls played basketball long enough they would turn into boys, “meaning that you’re going to have big muscles, you know, and look masculine, and have a deep voice and that kind of thing.”\footnote{Arledge Morris interview.} Morris’s coach, also familiar with the stereotypes, attempted to prevent his players from such an association. There was a clear delineation between women’s ideal behavior and that of the opposite sex. “Our coach always told us that we were to be dignified and we were to wear dresses and skirts and to always remember that we were ladies”\footnote{Arledge Morris interview.} explained Morris. As ladies, these young women were also expected to serve their community, attend church, and respect authority.\footnote{Arledge Morris interview.}

Not only was Morris worried about getting a masculine reputation, she was also extremely concerned about wearing the super short shorts that were a part of the team
uniform. The only shorts girls wore in public at that time were knee-length Bermuda shorts, so Morris was very uncomfortable with so much skin exposure. “I was always chided, especially by the principal of the school,” she remembered, “that I would not be a good basketball player because all I was doing out there on that court was tryin’ to pull my shorts down.”

Morris found herself torn between the two polarizing images of the woman athlete in the twentieth century: mannish lesbian and sexualized muscle moll. Once she became comfortable with the game and really got into it, she was able to forget she was wearing the shorts. And despite concerns about basketball masculinizing or sexualizing her body, when she personally experienced her community’s support of women’s basketball, she felt no pressure to go out of her way to counter any previous notions she held about the woman athlete. She recalled, “I enjoyed the attention that I got as a result of people knowing me and calling me by name and my picture being in the paper and the neighbors being very proud of me and telling me what a wonderful thing I was doing.” She partly attributed this to the personal compliments she received about her height and good looks: “I was always told ‘How nice and tall you are,’ [and] ‘You should be a model.’” These positive reinforcements of her outward appearance countered any negative stereotypes she previously held about women basketball players. Because of this, Morris reflected, “I never did anything that I can remember to heighten my femininity.”

While players like Neal and Morris claim that societal norms of femininity and sexuality of the female athlete did not influence their own identity, this does not mean

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714 Arledge Morris interview.
715 Arledge Morris interview.
716 Arledge Morris interview.
717 Arledge Morris interview.
that players were completely unaware of stereotypes of masculine or sexually “deviant”
women, as Morris herself indicated. Still, many of these women struggled to find the
appropriate language to articulate these differences. In Margaret Sexton Gleaves’ eyes,
femininity and athletic ability or toughness were not mutually exclusive. Having what
might be called a “mannish” build did not necessarily mean anything. She explained, “I
think you can be just as feminine and be just as tough an athlete as you can… I know
some of ‘em, as feminine as you’ll ever see and tough as nails on the ball floor.” For
instance, the famed player Hazel Walker was known for her good looks but also her
exceptional ball-playing. Sexton described a teammate of hers who was a sturdier,
heavier build, and Walker ploughed right through her and literally knocked out the
tougher looking player to the point where she could not even shoot her free-throws.
Sexton stated, “Hazel would charge down that floor, and she was as feminine as you’d
ever seen anybody, and pretty. But that didn’t keep her from being a tough athlete…I
don’t think that has anything to do with it… It’s just your makeup.”

When asked about the association between masculinity and sports or stereotypes
about lesbian women in sports, many women denied any open conversation or awareness
of such topics. Sexuality was simply not discussed openly for most of the century; it
would have been taboo or at the very least impolite to talk of such matters. “It was just
one of those subjects that you just didn’t discuss,” Neal explained. Yet, the former
basketball players often would follow up with examples of this very association or
stereotype, particularly using the word “rough” or “tough.” For instance, Jimmie Vaughn

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718 Sexton Gleaves interview.
719 Sexton Gleaves interview.
720 Neal interview.
vehemently disagreed with the idea of sports denoting masculinity and claimed to never really have encountered the idea during her years playing basketball. She stated, “It never crossed my mind, to be honest with you. Never did.” But then she followed up with the explanation that if someone said something about a rougher girls’ team, Vaughn took it as the team would be “tough to beat.” She claimed, “That was what we thought. We didn’t think anything of it. My reaction to these [rough] girls was ‘Oh, they’re strong, and they’re going to be tough to beat. That was my reaction.” Yet, these comments indicate that she was aware that some people would label women basketball players as rough-looking based on their appearance.

Sandy Fiete, former player from Iowa Wesleyan College in the late 1950s, reiterated Vaughn’s assertions. Fiete remembered occasionally encountering players that looked rough: “There were some people that I was afraid of—afraid of getting knocked on my rear-end or something.” She nicknamed these women “tough bunnies.” Despite this designation, she claimed that she never thought about the femininity or sexuality of these players. She stated, “I didn’t pay that much attention to people to tell the truth.” And in regards to questions regarding sexuality, Fiete affirmed the culture of silence, “No talk. Don’t really know. Didn’t really think about it.” Vaughn and Fiete may have associated these type of players as tough to beat, but outsiders who

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721 Vaughn interview.
722 Vaughn interview.
723 Vaughn interview.
724 Sandy Fiete, interview by author, 5 June 2012, phone interview, digital audio recording, W.E.B. Du Bois Library, University of Massachusetts-Amherst, Amherst, MA.
725 Fiete interview.
726 Fiete interview.
727 Fiete interview.
labeled these women as rough and tough ultimately accused them of being “unbecoming women: unattractive females who abdicated their womanhood and fell under sexual suspicion.”

In terms of countering the image of the “tough bunnies,” Margaret Sexton Gleaves never felt any personal pressure to feminize her own appearance. But she too was aware that occasionally women players might be labeled “mannish looking” or the “boyish type,” i.e. unbecoming. “To me that doesn’t mean a thing,” she stated. “I guess I just wasn’t raised where those things went on or even thought about.” Yet, she recalled one national AAU tournament where a team from Texas, which had some “outstanding athletes,” earned the reputation of being more masculine or mannish. Something suspicious happened with this team at the tournament, perhaps a confirmation about their players’ homosexuality, that was kept hush-hush. No one discussed the situation openly. Gleaves attempted to explain but simply could not pinpoint the situation with words:

I don’t know what they were or I’m not saying whether or not they were, but I don’t know, I know the team, it was something that happened. And I don’t know what, because we never knew. And the team never came back. They disbanded…but something happened. I don’t know what or why. But I always think it was, it could have been something like that.

Gleaves danced around the issue of lesbianism. Since it was something that was never openly discussed during her younger days, she was still uncomfortable speculating what exactly happened at the tournament to force the team to disband. She recalled, “I didn’t

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728 Cahn, 174.
729 Sexton Gleaves interview.
730 Sexton Gleaves interview.
731 Sexton Gleaves interview.
732 Sexton Gleaves interview.
know what all that was. I mean just that, you know back then [you] hear something about somebody being queer. And now, the whole vocabulary has changed...Used to be that gay was happy, now it’s something—I don’t, we just didn’t have all that back when we were growing up.”733 Gleaves reluctantly acknowledged the existence of homosexuality, but it was something she insisted she had never encountered and was never openly discussed. Doris Rogers, along with every basketball player I interviewed, confirmed this culture of silence: “We just didn’t discuss those things.”734

Coverage about the women’s looks sometimes troubled the players when they were singled out. Alline Banks Sprouse was particularly bothered about a write-up that highlighted her good looks and labeled her “very feminine.”735 “My picture [was] in the paper and they said, ‘She is quite pretty to be the greatest basketball player in the world’... and that just really upset me for them to put that in the paper,” she lamented. “Most of the girls on our team were very nice looking girls and very feminine girls, but it wouldn’t have made any difference if they were not because that’s everybody’s own life.”736 Sprouse was disturbed by what the article suggested about women ball players. “For them to single me out and put that in the paper, that kind of upset me,” she recalled. “What it implied...that all athletes had to be masculine to be successful.”737

Sprouse’s comments hit on two very important points. First, as discussed earlier in this dissertation, Sprouse was an outstanding AAU basketball player. But the article’s focus on her good looks and femininity bothered her because they were irrelevant to the

733 Sexton Gleaves interview.
734 Rogers interview. The women also claimed to not have thought about them either.
735 Banks Sprouse, interview by Cahn; Cahn, 241.
736 Banks Sprouse interview by Cahn.
737 Banks Sprouse interview by Cahn.
game. The level of femininity or masculinity of an athlete did not correlate, according to Sprouse, to their level of success. Secondly, highlighting Sprouse’s femininity also indicated that women basketball players were often seen as being masculine or mannish, which Sprouse counters by expounding on the good looks and femininity of her teammates. At the same time, Sprouse challenges the idea that beauty should be an integral facet to a woman’s identity when she reiterates that her teammates appearance made no difference “because that’s everybody’s own life.”

Not all basketball players were as accepting as Sprouse. Some were, in fact, concerned about “rough” women tarnishing the image of the woman athlete, since stereotypes already existed on a national level that placed female athletes “under a cloud of sexual suspicion.” This idea, dubbed the “lesbian bogeywoman” by Pat Griffin, hurts all women in sports because it forces both straight and gay women to “[protect] themselves from potentially career-threatening discrimination and prejudice.” Hanes Hosiery player Eunies Futch recalled her trepidation at some of the tough-looking women. “I was almost scared of some of those girls...They were all right, except they looked tough. They dressed tough. And you know it wasn’t a good image...for women’s sports. We don’t have that good a name anyway.” Futch believed that playing sports did not have to negate one’s femininity so women who appeared masculine hurt the other’s reputation. She recalled, “This is what hurts a lot of teams, back then. They

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738 Banks Sprouse interview by Cahn.
739 Cahn, 181.
740 Griffin, 92.
741 Futch interview.
didn’t want to come out to a tournament and see rough-neck women play. They wanted to see good athletes, but women.”

This quote takes us back to the heart of the matter. Futch utilized a historic defense mechanism long employed by women athletes, coaches, promoters, and educators. “Rather than questioning the value of societal expectations of compulsory femininity and heterosexuality or acknowledging and valuing the diversity of women in sport,” explained Pat Griffin, “many supporters of women’s sport continue to rely on the same defensive responses that have already proven to be ineffective in deflecting questions about the heterosexuality and femininity of women in sport.” This defensiveness was understandable in that mixed messages about women in sport constantly bombarded the public. These mixed messages were almost guaranteed to make athletes defensive about their identities. For instance, coaches who supported women’s basketball still told their players to “Act like a lady and play like a boy,” indicating that athleticism was not an inherent part of the feminine identity. Playing like a lady was ineffectual and acting like a boy was unbecoming. As Doris Rogers explains it, “You couldn’t play like a girl…because…they didn’t have any role models then.”

But this also goes deeper than just imitating role models. Athleticism and femininity were not fully accepted by the national sports world and the media as congruent elements of an integrated personality even though young girls and women continually combined both. Many women described loving the sport, but they insisted there was more to them than just identifying as an athlete. Similarly, they were aware

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742 Futch interview.
743 Griffin, 66.
744 Rogers interview.
that being an athlete could not be a permanent “identity,” and plans for marriage and children thwarted their athletic goals. Alline Banks Sprouse retired from AAU basketball after marrying her husband, a traveling salesman, because she knew her basketball schedule would prevent her from spending time with him. “He would be coming in and I’d be going out,” she lamented.\footnote{Banks Sprouse, interview with author. Sprouse did come out of retirement a couple times on a limited basis to help Nashville Business College snag a national title.} Although she was unable to have children, Sprouse explained that many of the women she played with quit basketball when they decided to have children.\footnote{Banks Sprouse, interview with author.}

Not only did women’s domestic roles tie them down, but opportunities to pursue basketball at higher levels were limited. They wanted to continue playing, but they usually thought this would be impossible. “I didn’t think I was going to be able to [continue playing] because when I got out of high school I didn’t know of any colleges that had women’s basketball,” explained Patsy Neal.\footnote{Neal interview.} Neal was getting ready to accept an academic scholarship from a school in South Carolina when she read in the newspaper that Wayland Baptist College had won the National AAU championship. She stated, “I didn’t know there was a college that played [women’s] basketball until I saw that.” Her parents drove her the 1300 miles from Georgia to Texas to try out for the team. “I was offered a four-year scholarship—full scholarship—which, of course, I took because I wanted to play basketball so badly and had no idea that I could until I saw that little paragraph in the paper.”\footnote{Neal interview.} But Wayland Baptist College was one of just a handful of women’s colleges that offered scholarships or even an opportunity to play. Thousands of

\footnote{Neal interview.}
women who played basketball in high school did not have the opportunity to pursue their athletic careers. So although wholeness through sport was not completely available to a majority of these women athletes, they negotiated their identities and expectations to participate in a sport they loved for as long as they could.

**Identity On and Off the Track**

Most of the women who later became professional Roller Derby skaters faced the same limited opportunities for organized sports as their basketball-playing sisters. “At the time I was growing up,” recalled skater Mary Lou Palermo, “girls didn’t play too many sports…I don’t think there was anything then.”  

Often the women spent their childhoods playing games and sports with kids in their neighborhoods, in empty lots or in the streets. Yet some of the women skaters still had access to organized sports, if not on a level comparable to their male peers. Gerry Murray grew up in Des Moines, Iowa, in the 1920s and 1930s, and had a very active sports background. She played softball with the kids in her neighborhood, but in junior high and high school, she played a lot of different sports, including volleyball, track and field, and swimming. In her community, sports were very common for young women, and she felt lucky to have so many varied sports opportunities. Although not presented with the variety of opportunities as Murray, Loretta Behrens swam on a school swimming team and bowled in community

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749 Palermo interview.

750 Youpelle Massro interview; Behrens interview; Meyer Roman interview.

751 Murray interview. Usually, small high schools in rural communities offered more sports opportunities than large high schools in big cities because of the women physical educators influence there, particularly in Iowa. Murray’s school appears to be an exception to some extent. McElwain, 5; Cahn, 91.
leagues in the Bronx while Bobbie Mateer played sports through her gym classes and was a cheerleader at her high school in New Jersey.\footnote{Cheerleading emerged as a popular activity for women in the postwar era. Its rise in popularity exemplified the “broader cultural split between male and female activities.” As Grundy and Shackelford noted, “With its emphasis on the female figure, on wholesome good looks and on support of male teams, cheerleading fit perfectly with the womanly ideals paraded across postwar magazine pages and television screens...At many schools, a place on the cheering squad became the ultimate symbol of female success.” Shackelford and Grundy, 121.}

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the one activity most of the Roller Derby skaters participated in during their youth was roller skating, regardless of their geographic location or social class. Roller skating was widely popular across the United States from the 1930s through the 1960s, and along with ice skating, earned a reputation of being a feminine activity, due to its aesthetic association with beauty and grace, although it was popular among both men and women, particularly speed skating.\footnote{Cahn, 218.} Most cities in the country had at least one roller skating rink, but it was also an activity kids could do on the sidewalks and in the streets, provided they had their own roller skates. After World War II when ball bearings were available, the price of skates was not high.\footnote{Also, as Carol Roman Meyer explained, once their clamp-on roller skates wore out, they could be appropriated for other outdoor activities. “We’d have the clamp skates and then when the skates would get old, we’d just take them apart and then put them on coasters and ride them around.” Carol Meyer Roman, interview with author, 13 July 2012, phone interview, digital audio recording, W.E.B. Du Bois Library, University of Massachusetts-Amherst, Amherst, MA.} In fact, as skater Carol Roman Meyer stated, “That was about the cheapest thing you can do.”\footnote{Meyer Roman interview.} Mary Youpelle, who grew up on the south side of Chicago, had access to two roller skating rinks. “But,” she explained, “I didn’t skate in the rinks. I skated on the street...My
brother bought me my first pair of clamp-on skates when I was three years old.” Mary Lou Palermo recalled skating in both the local rinks and on the streets. She had clamp-on skates for street skating and shoe skates for rink skating. Gerry Murray also grew up skating, even with all the organized sports opportunities her school and surrounding community provided. Murray and her girlfriends would often hitchhike out of Des Moines to nearby small towns to roller skate on the smooth sidewalks. And as Carol Meyer Roman recollected about her activities growing up in the projects of San Francisco, “[Roller skating] was our thing.”

But despite shared youths spent roller skating, most of the women never dreamt of becoming professional skaters, much less Roller Derby stars. Bobbie Mateer described skating at her local rink in New Jersey as “a nice social thing” her family and friends did. “There was never any idea of doing skating professionally,” she explained. Many of the women skaters, much like other young girls across the country, grew up idolizing Sonja Henie, the famed ice skating beauty, if for no other reason than she was one of the only female sports heroines in the public eye. Mary Lou Palermo recalled how struck her parents were with Henie’s skating ability after they saw her perform.

756 Mary Youpelle Massro.
757 Murray interview.
758 Meyer Roman interview.
759 Mateer interview.
760 Mateer interview.
761 Sonja Henie won Olympic Gold Medals at the 1928, 1932, and 1936 Winter Games. She dominated the annual World Championships in Figure Skating from 1927 to 1936, placing first at ten straight championships, a record still unbroken. Leaving competitive skating behind in the late 1930s, Henie began a lucrative film career and earned a place amongst the top Hollywood stars for her work in such movies as Thin Ice and Sun Valley Serenade. She further increased the popularity in America for her beloved sport of ice skating by touring with “spectacle ice shows.” “Sonja Henie: Figure skating star,” www.olympic.org, Accessed 18 January 2012.
which encouraged Palermo to skate as much as she could. She skated on the streets but also tried to go to the roller rink three or four times a week. She stated, “I guess that’s what pushed me forward was them being impressed by her talent.”

Henie’s success in ice skating encouraged other youngsters to enjoy various forms of the sport but few entertained any real notions of making a career out of it. Like the women who grew up playing basketball, these young roller skaters never envisioned any future possibilities with their beloved activity.

Although thousands of young girls looked up to Sonja Henie, she was not a particularly relatable, even if adored, sports heroine for many of the self-described “tomboys” who loved competitive sport. According to women athletes who grew up with the label, being a tomboy meant being a “girl who was more boyish than girlish, or a girl who was not feminine.”

Girls who enjoyed sports, loved vigorous outdoor games, and liked playing with boys more so than girls found themselves branded as tomboys. But Henie, the most visible female athlete of their time, was famous for her beauty, grace, and elegance. Not all girls had such qualities or even wanted them. “The only heroine I used to like because I wasn’t very dainty was Sonja Heine,” Loretta Behrens explained. “I used to love to watch ice skating…[but] the feminine sports was not Loretta Behrens. Loretta Behrens had boxing gloves on.”

In many ways, the tomboy identity was a way for young girls to stay relevant in a family of brothers, neighborhood boys, or for self-preservation. Loretta Behrens honed this identity as a way to deflect from her small stature and an unforgiving speech

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762 Palermo interview.
763 Cahn, 229.
764 Behrens interview.
impediment: “I was kind of little and...when I went to school, you know, I had a lisp, and people used to make fun of you, and I became very, very bossy and very ornery and letting people know that they didn’t scare me, and you know, I kind of fought a lot of the kids and I fought a lot with the boys.”

Still, many of the women were able to combine their tomboy identity with their feminine sensibilities. Mary Youpelle loved to play with dolls and doll carriages as a young girl, but found herself picked on by a neighborhood boy. She explained, “When I was about five, my parents gave me a doll carriage with a doll and I took it out for walks on Christmas Day and some little boy pushed me and made me mad... My dad leaned out the window and says, ‘Don’t let him do that,’ so I start fighting back. And from that time on, that was it. I swung back.” This gave her the confidence to do what she wanted and to stand up for herself. It also led her to pursue her athletic interests. “I roller skated, I ice skated, and I played baseball, which was my favorite...” Youpelle recalled.

Furthermore, the term tomboy could be “an insult or a badge worn proudly.”

Factors such as class, race, ethnicity, geographic region, and family expectations influenced the connotation attributed to tomboys. As Babe Didrikson’s biographer Susan Cayleff noted, age was also a determinant in the negative or positive association with the label. Pubescent girls were not held to the rigid social expectations of young women and their adult counterparts. After the age of twelve or thirteen, however, if girls

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765 Behrens interview.
766 Youpelle Massro interview.
767 Youpelle Massro interview.
768 As cited in Cayleff, 43.
769 Cahn discusses the wide variety of connotations behind the term tomboy in her chapter “Women Competing/Gender Contested.” Cahn, 228-231.
did not break with their “boyish behavior” and “transition into adult femininity,” they
became at best a “curiosity” and at worst abnormal, mannish, or unfeminine. 770 Mariah
Burton Nelson, a former college and professional women’s basketball player, recalled
adults constantly asking her at age twelve, “When are you going to outgrow this tomboy
phase and become a lady?” 771

Most physical educators and sports promoters tried to channel young women’s
tomboy pursuits and competitive spirit into appropriate venues and sports for respectable
young women—particularly ones that limited direct contact, playing time, and athletic
space. Yet Leo Seltzer, founder of the Roller Derby, rebuked the very premise of
modified sport for women and instead provided them with a platform (or track rather)
where they could compete as equals with men. Not only did he challenge the existing
model of women’s and men’s sports, he also revealed the conflicting strands of American
sporting interests. On one hand, social commentators decried the masculinity of the
successful woman athlete, yet for decades the public flocked to see the woman Roller
Derby skater hold her own as an equal competitor and teammate, as they sold out such
venues as Madison Square Garden and consistently ranked on television among the
nation’s most popular sports. As journalist Alan Ebert explained, “You have to
remember, they were huge at the time. Absolutely huge.” 772

The structure of the sport of Roller Derby provided the women with a sense of
equality and importance, one they may have not experienced in other aspects of their

770 Cayleff, 43. As Cayleff discovered, Babe Didrickson experienced this conflict since
her tomboyish persona did not wane until her late twenties. Cayleff, 44.
771 Mariah Burton Nelson, “Introduction,” in Nike is a Goddess: The History of Women in
772 Ebert interview.
lives. By the time the game had evolved into a modern contact sport in the late 1930s, Leo Seltzer and upper management viewed the women as important as or even more important than male skaters. Seltzer knew women made great athletes, but there simply was no real outlet for them. This lack of sporting opportunities and entrenched social expectations for young women made it difficult for the Roller Derby to retain women skaters, who often could not keep up with or wanted to dedicate themselves to the rigorous training and traveling schedule required by the Roller Derby. The lifestyle was not necessarily conducive to settling down and raising a family, as was commonly expected of young women. So, if a man wanted to try out for the Roller Derby, oftentimes he was required to bring along a female skater as well. When a boy named Kenny Randall asked Gerry Murray to try out for the Roller Derby with him in Omaha, Nebraska, in 1938, she assumed he just wanted to date her. She later discovered that Derby management would not let a boy on the track without having brought a girl skater along with them, thus Randall’s insistence that Murray join him.

Roller Derby was the only sport where men and women competed together on a team and contributed equally to victory or defeat. Each Roller Derby team consisted of five men and five women, with a couple of alternates on each team. The women would skate a period against the opposing women and then the men would skate a period between the opposing men, but the score was continuously tallied by team and not separated by gender. As Frank Deford observed, “The fact it was both men and women, I think that really is part of the charm of Roller Derby. It’s one of the few sports where

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773 Seltzer interview.
774 Behrens interview.
775 Murray interview.
you have... the men and the women... It’s the total score that counts. So that makes the
derby really unique.”776 And upon occasion, at least in the early decades of the sport, it
was not uncommon for a woman to skate among the men if the men’s lineup was racked
by injury. Mary Lou Palermo insisted that “some of the girls were just as good as the
boys.”777 She recalled, “As a matter of fact, there were a lot of times when the boys
would get hurt..., and they didn’t have an alternate, they’d put a girl in the field.”778

This cross-gender teamwork made the women feel important and valued as equal
contributors to the sport. “It was the only contact sport there was between men and
women. I mean, you both skated by the same rules, skated together—it was unique
because there wasn’t too much for women to do [at the time],” explained Mary Lou
Palermo.779 Not only were women athletes somewhat uncommon on a national level, but
to be treated the same as the men was extraordinary. Yet as Gerry Murray rhetorically
questioned, since they were doing the same job, “How could they be treated any
differently?”780

But women athletes were treated differently in most other sports in America.
Their opportunities on all levels were limited and where the few professional
opportunities presented themselves, women were never paid the same as men. Equal pay
amongst professional male and female athletes did not even become an issue until tennis

776 Deford interview.
777 Palermo interview.
778 Palermo interview. This occurred back when the sport was still the Transcontinental
Roller Derby as well as after contact was added. Mary Youpelle and her partner Joe
Nygra would have to fill in for one another if they sustained injuries during the
transcontinental races: “...If he got hurt I’d have to go in the boys’ field and skate for
him, and if I got hurt, he’d have to go in the girls’ field and skate for me.” Youpelle
Massro interview.
779 Palermo interview.
780 Murray interview.
star Billie Jean King led the fight for equal wages in the early 1970s. Unlike the women basketball players who played college and/or AAU basketball, Roller Derby skaters were professional athletes. And as such, they were paid for their athletic ability.

In Roller Derby, men and women earned the same pay and benefits. Sometimes women skaters even earned more than their male counterparts in order to keep the women with the derby. “I got paid as much as my husband or more,” explained Gerry Murray, who was married to the popular skater Gene Gammon. “Usually the girls got paid more to keep them there.” Although pay was not based on gender, it was not equal across the board either. Rather, pay was prorated based upon rank and talent in what former owner Jerry Seltzer described as a “star system.” The top skaters earned more, and women were always amongst the top skaters. Mary Youpelle explained, “There were different levels. Like, the captains and the coaches would earn more money...A top skater got a little more money than the guy that was just the sword-carrier, you know.”

For instance, in the 1940s and 1950s, there was no bigger rivalry than between Gerry Murray and Toughtie Brasuhn, the two biggest stars of the sport who were rewarded as

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781 Cahn, 250-252.
782 This is not to say, again, that there were not any professional basketball opportunities for women. As mentioned earlier in the dissertation, barnstorming women’s basketball teams existed, although few in number, and offered women players a career in the sport they loved. However, even though these semi-professional or professional barnstorming teams paid their women athletes, they never reached the level of prominence, for better or worse, of the Roller Derby. And more importantly, these barnstorming teams were not playing against other professional women athletes. In general, they traveled around the country playing various men’s teams, often made up of an assortment of community members.
783 Murray interview.
784 Murray interview.
785 Seltzer interview.
786 Youpelle Massro interview.
such. Similarly, in the 1960s and 1970s, of the three biggest stars of the era, two were women. Whether ranked officially by the skaters organization or offered under-the-table benefits by management, the top skaters were compensated for their success.

The women Roller Derby skaters internalized the meaning of their participation in the sport on several different levels. Not only was it something they enjoyed doing, it was their career and their livelihood. Many of the women skaters dropped out of high school to join the Roller Derby or joined shortly after they graduated but before they gained any other work experience. After years spent skating, it was the only job they knew and in which they had any real experience. For some, it was a lucrative career that allowed them to stand on their own two feet for the first time or again later in life. Mary Youpelle joined in 1937 in an effort to help provide for her parents who had lost all their hard-earned money during the Great Depression. Enticed by a Roller Derby trainer who regaled her with offers of meeting interesting people and making lots of money, she thought, “Oh, goody. I can make money and Daddy won’t have to go to work anymore. He can stay home.”

Although Youpelle went on to become a pretty big name in the Roller Derby, she joined the derby in 1937, when it was still struggling to stay afloat itself. She described these early ideas of quick wealth “pretty naïve.” She stated, “I just thought they made a lot of money because they were in the public eye...Actually, we didn’t. I think my mother and Dad would send me five dollars here and there while I was on the road before I ever earned a lot of money.” Gerry Murray had just graduated from high school in

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787 The three biggest stars were Joan Weston, Ann Calvello, and Charlie O’Connell.
788 Youpelle Massro interview.
789 Youpelle Massro interview.
Des Moines and had been interested in nursing but did not have a real idea as to what to do when she tried out for the Derby while visiting her mother in Omaha. Mary Lou Palermo had two young children to support after her marriage failed but Roller Derby allowed her to support herself and her daughters. She recalled, “I made a good living, you know.”

Not only did Roller Derby provide an avenue for these young women to support themselves and their families, it also became something they loved and identified with. As Mary Lou Palermo described the sport that was her career for decades, “…I was passionate about it.” She explained, “Well, it was something I loved to do and it sure gave me a lot of experience…It was just a very, very fulfilling experience, especially when you get to travel so much and go to Europe.” These same opportunities appealed to Loretta Behrens, who valued her independence. She relished the opportunity to “join a profession and go on the road.” She reflected, “It gave me a new life. It gave me a life of growing up and getting out of New York…It gave me an education being that I was such a young age that I found out what the world is about.” Behrens learned more about life through her experiences in Roller Derby than she ever did in school. She stated, “People go to school and come out with reading and writing but when they get out in the world, their reading and writing don’t tell ‘em how to live in the world. Roller

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790 Palermo interview.
791 Palermo interview.
792 Palermo interview.
793 Behrens interview.
794 Behrens interview.
Derby gave us all a lesson that we never would have gotten, you know, out of a school. We had the school of life."

This worldly education and opportunities for travel appealed to these young, middle or working-class women. It provided them with a chance to do something exciting, instead of working in traditional female jobs or taking the traditional route of getting married and having children at a young age. For Mary Youpelle and Mary Lou Palermo, Derby opened up new avenues they would never have known otherwise. Mary Youpelle assumed she would be a telephone operator since she had a cousin who did the same. And as Palermo rhetorically asked, “What else was there for a girl to do if you didn’t want to be a nurse or an airline stewardess?...You work in Woolworth’s or something.” Behrens believed the Roller Derby gave her a chance for “an exciting life.” “It took me away from...thinking like living like every other woman, getting married and having children” Because of her own childhood in a big family, she wanted to have a career first before settling down. “I thought that I wanted to have a career and later on, I would, you know, if I was ready to marry, then I would know the time that I wanted to do it, but Roller Derby gave me a chance to travel around the world and have an exciting life.” At the same time, Behrens viewed marriage and children as a deterrent to her career. She envisioned doing one or the other but not both.

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Behrens interview.

Palermo interview.

Behrens interview.

Behrens interview.  

Although after marrying and having two children, Behrens eventually returned to the derby world, she knew the difficulty of combining marriage and children while maintaining a skating career. “And that’s one of the reasons that until I really had settled in my mind that I was ready to settle down, I wasn’t even interested, because I knew the lifestyle that other people that had children and traveled with them and had to find
The sport also tapped into these women’s innate competitiveness and their drive to succeed. Mary Youpelle was attracted to the sport because it was so different and for the competition it provided. She stated, “...Most of us were athletes at heart. We wanted to be what we were, you know?” These skaters had an athletic drive and enjoyed the competition Roller Derby provided, yet they were restricted by the lack of opportunities for this type of sport. The exciting nature of the Roller Derby and its roughness is what drew in Loretta Behrens. What appealed to her most were the skaters “knocking the shit out of each other.” As a girl who had skated on the flat streets and rinks of the West Bronx, she also liked watching the “fast-paced skating on the banked track” and experiencing “the excitement of listening to the crowd...when you hear somebody yelling and you see the excitement and then trying to understand what derby was about.” These women tapped into their own natural athleticism and were thankful Roller Derby offered them a venue in which to compete. Even in the 1960s and early 1970s, women still did not have many athletic options. For instance, skating superstar Joan Weston had been an outstanding softball player, but there were no scholarships available for her in the pre-Title IX era. As Frank Deford explains, “She didn’t have any options but the Roller [Derby]. If Joanie Weston came along today, she would not be skating roller derby...Joanie would’ve been a softball player or a basketball player or

babysitters for them, you know. They lived a different kind of life...Being married in the derby, you’re on the go all the time. You keep late hours. You like to party, you know, people like to go out because you’re so wound up after you get through with the game that you want to have a little time to yourself. So it was very difficult.” Behrens interview. This topic is addressed more fully in Ch. 5 of this dissertation.

800 Youpelle Massro interview
801 Behrens interview.
802 Behrens interview.
something, but there just simply weren’t that many opportunities then for female athletes.\textsuperscript{803}

Partly because of their unique status, Roller Derby skaters took pride in the difficulty of their sport and their identity as professional athletes.\textsuperscript{804} Behrens explains, “I considered myself an athlete. I’d always considered myself a professional roller skater.”\textsuperscript{805} “Not everybody could do it,” Youpelle remarked. “We would go to towns and invite top speed skaters from local roller rinks to come... on our track. They couldn’t make it around the track. And it was funny to watch, because these were ‘top tens’ in the local towns and are considered really good, and they get on our track and they’re like real beginners.”\textsuperscript{806} Youpelle did not brag about her status as a professional athlete to every person she met, but she said, “If somebody brought it up, I’d be very proud and I would discuss it.”\textsuperscript{807}

Professional athletes in other sports frequently showed their respect for the athleticism of the Roller Derby skaters. Gerry Murray met track icon Jesse Owens in 1937 when the two appeared on a television show featuring a group of famous athletes. After the show ended, Owens sought out Murray and her husband to talk with them about roller skating and Roller Derby. Murray was so star-struck she could not find her voice and relied on her husband to do all the talking. Owens informed Murray, that he enjoyed skating and admiringly stated, “I don’t know how you skate every night and every night

\textsuperscript{803} Deford interview.
\textsuperscript{804} Palermo interview.
\textsuperscript{805} Behrens interview.
\textsuperscript{806} Youpelle Massro interview.
\textsuperscript{807} Palermo interview
and every night without having a rest.”

Many professional football players marveled at the roughness of the Roller Derby and their lack of protective gear. According to longtime skater Bert Wall, the Oakland Raiders and the San Francisco 49ers were among some of the Roller Derby’s biggest fans.

While Leo Seltzer and later Jerry Seltzer valued the women skaters as much as the men, women skaters as professional athletes competing on the same level and even the same team as men threatened the masculine athletic identity the sports world was founded upon. They also challenged the rigid definitions of team sport. And this often led mainstream sports journalists to ignore the Roller Derby altogether or to criticize the sport as illegitimate because of the presence of women. Loretta Behrens believed that the Roller Derby’s inclusion of women threatened the order of mainstream sports as well as deeply entrenched social roles. “Unfortunately, sports writers didn’t accept it as a sport because they wouldn’t accept women being in that kind of a sport,” she explained. “And that was one of our biggest problems because people that used to write about the women skating, they used to call us Amazons...They would not accept that women belonged [in] a professional sport.”

She further elaborated, “You gotta understand something. During the late 40s and the 50s, you were supposed to be home making babies.” Behrens saw herself and her fellow female skaters as “doing things that were a [part of the] men’s world.” She stated, “Men feel that they belong in the sports world and...they resented the fact that women [were] now stepping into their business.”

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808 Murray interview.
809 Wall interview.
810 Behrens interview.
811 Behrens interview.
812 Behrens interview.
This tenuous position of wanting to compete in the male-dominated sports world as legitimate athletes and retaining their “normal” human identity—as opposed to “Amazon” status—forced the women skaters to expand the boundaries of femininity to include their rough, contact sport, but this was more of a stretch than such modified sports as basketball. As Mary Lou Palermo explained, “You just wanted to be a woman in a sport that was competitive with men.”

Despite the grueling training, hard hits, and almost guaranteed injuries, what this meant was that the women skaters still wanted to be seen “just like any other woman.” Even though the women were professional athletes, as Palermo stated, “You just wanted to look good. You just—you were—that was you.”

The skaters may have been tough competitors on the track but these athletic identities did not, in their opinion, influence or contradict their larger identity as a woman. Palermo wanted to show the public that these two identities were not incongruous: “I...could play and then still be a lady.”

Despite the players’ feelings on combining a contact sport and their femininity, the larger society did not necessarily agree, or at least felt that if women were going to partake in such masculine endeavors, they needed to prove their femininity in other ways, i.e. the beauty contests. Unlike the basketball players, many of the skaters were aware of the stereotypes and masculine associations the public tied to them. Palermo believed that in part their larger-than-life image on the track as well as their competing alongside men led people to stereotype the women skaters as masculine. She explained, “It was just that the idea that you were competing in a sport with equal rules with the men that, you know,

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813 Palermo interview.
814 Palermo interview.
815 Palermo interview.
816 Palermo interview.
they would expect—a lot of people expected you to be masculine...and it just wasn’t so.”  

Furthermore, she accounted, “They would be very surprised to see how petite you really were...because when you’re on a track, you’re on a 45-degree angle and you have skates on, you look like you’re about 10 feet tall. But, when you get off and you’re only four or five feet, you know, it makes a difference and you do want to look feminine.”

Some of the veteran skaters worked to instill in the female rookies the importance of maintaining a ladylike image for the fans, media, and larger public. Behrens recalled that her captain on the Panthers team, skater Bobbie Johnstone, made sure that her girls were always “presented ladylike” when they were in the presence of fans. Youpelle believed this was important as well: “We looked like ladies and gentlemen. We weren’t just tough sports people. So, we wanted to be talked about as ladies and gentlemen.” For the women, this usually included washing up after the game, doing their hair, and wearing dresses or dress pants when those became acceptable for women in the 1950s and 1960s. “When you went on the train or you went on a plane, you wore tailored slacks. You didn’t wear dungarees but you wore slacks. You wore sweaters. A lot of us had cashmere sweaters, cashmere skirts. When you came to the building [you were skating in], you were dressed in high heels,” explained Loretta Behrens. “You were dressed like a professional. You weren’t dressed like a bum.” Carol Meyer Roman abhorred wearing high heels and bemoaned, “I couldn’t walk with the heels if my life depended on it, and I had to wear them. And it drove me crazy, because my feet hurt me.

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817 Palermo interview.
818 Palermo interview.
819 Behrens interview.
820 Youpelle Massro interview.
821 Behrens interview.
Bobbie Mateer further explained the expectations for their appearance: "You always looked nice, you know. It was part of being a skater." While some of the skaters worked actively to counter stereotypes about their femininity, what this entailed differed amongst them. "We all pretty much did our own thing," explained Mary Youpelle. "Like I used to wear gloves. I used to wear a scarf all the time. Some of the girls did that. We always wanted to look our best when we went out there." That was because, as she laughingly shared, they didn’t look so great after the game: "But to go out there, we always dressed like women. Like, you know, you’re flirting with everybody." Yet the skaters were limited on how they could present themselves as feminine in appearance on the track since they all had standard uniforms. At one point, Gerry Murray was able to advise the uniform makers on how to tailor them for a more feminine cut.

Whereas some of the women spent time making sure their hair and makeup were always in proper place, others balked at that idea. They insisted they did not go out of their way to heighten their femininity (at least not in such impractical ways) because they were skaters, much like many of the basketball players. Gerry Murray refused to engage in the whole makeup routine, since, in her opinion, it was completely impractical while playing derby. "I never wore makeup. I couldn’t wear [it] because you sweat so much," she exclaimed. "What’s the use of wearing it when you sweat? You’re sitting on the

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822 Meyer Roman interview.
823 Mateer interview.
824 Youpelle Massro interview.
825 Youpelle Massro interview. This comment insinuates that at least part of the women’s persona or appearance was to suggest heterosexual availability.
826 Murray interview. At one point, skater Bert Wall and husband of skater Bobbie Mateer, attempted to design a “better-looking jersey” for the women. “They hated it,” he laughed. Wall interview.
bench after you sweat. You’ve got a whole bunch of sweat down on the floor. You know, you really sweat. So why wear makeup and everything?" Instead, Murray wore a scarf around her neck. It was fashionable and prevented the sweat from dripping. She also sported gloves in order to protect her hands when she fell, which was a trend amongst many of the women. Mary Youpelle wore gloves to protect her long fingernails, for which she had a fondness. She stated, "You never knew what you were going to grab onto—the railing, or kick rail, or something and break something, so I did as much to protect myself...I wore gloves for that purpose."  

And upon occasion, the very accoutrements that the skaters utilized to mark their femininity also became weapons of choice on the track. Mary Lou Palermo’s pigtails and hair ribbons became her signature look. They allowed fans to easily distinguish her from the other skaters on the track, especially when they watched the game on television. But the pigtails had a dual purpose. Palermo admitted that when she skated around the banked track, her long, heavy hair blew behind her “like when you’re in a wind tunnel”: “And when I would block somebody, my hair would whip around and it would hurt them!” Ma Bogash also utilized her hair for strategic purposes but perhaps in a more underhanded way than Palermo. Bogash would occasionally hide a large hatpin in her wavy coiffure, and when stuck in a particularly congested jam on the track and sure the

827 Murray interview.
828 Murray interview. Some of the skater trends caught on with the general public. In the 1940s and 1950s, during the height of Roller Derby popularity, the Burlington Mills company manufactured Roller Derby hair bows that were “worn by the Queens of the Roller Derby.” Selling for only 29 cents, “Gerry Murray” hair bows were a popular accessory among the female sex. http://www.rollerderbyfoundation.org/id2.html; Mabe, 35.
829 Youpelle Massro interview.
830 Palermo interview.

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referee’s attention was drawn elsewhere, she would pull out the hatpin and poke the other skaters to create room for her to maneuver around them.\textsuperscript{831}

Yet despite the women’s intentional or unintentional displays of femininity, the Roller Derby continued to be viewed as a rough, masculine sport. And as in other sports that were labeled masculine, the inevitable link to homosexuality surfaced and lasted throughout the entirety of the sport’s history. Deford outlined the public beliefs about the sexuality of the female skaters when he traveled with the Roller Derby in the late 1960s: “The assumption was, of course, that the women, you know, to be this tough and everything, they had to be dykes, right?”\textsuperscript{832} This stereotype had been around for a solid two decades by the time Deford entered the scene. In Mary Youpelle’s opinion, because the women skaters were participating in “something that was rough and tough,” the lesbian community assumed lesbians played the sport and gravitated to it.\textsuperscript{833}

Yet, sexuality was something that was not openly discussed during the early years of the sport, akin to the silence that plagued the AAU basketball players. Youpelle only knew of one lesbian who played when she started skating with the derby, although more joined throughout the years. She stated, “We just kind of found it out because I think we were all pretty green on the subject at that point….because many, many years ago you never even mentioned a lesbian.”\textsuperscript{834} The reality was that over the five decade span of the sport, lesbians did skate in the Roller Derby, but it does not appear that they ever formed the majority of the female population, and they were indistinguishable among the ranks

\textsuperscript{831} Barbee and Cohen, 13; Deford, \textit{Five Strides}, 82-83.
\textsuperscript{832} Deford interview.
\textsuperscript{833} Youpelle Massro.
\textsuperscript{834} Youpelle Massro.
of the skaters. But the rough nature of the sport linked the skaters to masculine behavior which in turn linked the majority of the women to homosexuality as well, regardless of their actual sexual orientation or appearance.

This association with roughness and homosexuality did not damper the overall popularity of the Roller Derby among its fans and supporters. In the late 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, the Roller Derby enjoyed great fan support, and drew some of its most enthusiastic admirers from the ranks of Hollywood and New York stars. Having famous actors, musicians, comedians, athletes, and radio and TV personalities attend their games also gave the skaters a sense of being important and famous. Skaters made frequent appearances on popular radio and television programs and mingled with the stars off the set and when out on the town. Palermo recalled going out to the hot nightclubs in New York City where other famous people would be. She reminisced, “Then Jack Eigen—he was at the Copacabana. That’s one thing about New York… No matter where—you could go out. I mean, there was the Copa. There were so many places to go. There was the Blue Note. There were so many places.” Palermo was interviewed on the Ed Sullivan show and the Kate Smith show in the early 1950s and recalled a variety of stars attending their games in New York. Incidentally, both Smith and Cab Calloway informed Palermo that she was their mother’s favorite skater. “I was everybody’s

\[835\] Jerry recalled that many of the male skaters during his tenure were gay, but he stated, “We couldn’t get involved in that…I didn’t care.” But perhaps more importantly, both lesbians and gays in the Roller Derby challenged traditional ideas of femininity and masculinity since they were largely indistinguishable among the ranks of the skaters, yet all participating in a full-contact sport.

\[836\] Palermo interview.
mothers’ favorite...I think it’s because of my pigtails. I think they knew how to pick me out,” she laughed.837

Earning the respect of America’s most famous stars and other professional athletes provided the Roller Derby skaters with a sense of their own importance and contribution to American sporting entertainment. But earning the respect and admiration of the rich and famous did not necessarily sustain them when they played in such locations as Louisville, Kentucky, Houston, Texas, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and Omaha, Nebraska. The support of the average, everyday American family is what kept the sport going. These people attended the Roller Derby in person, watched it on television, and followed it through newspaper coverage or by subscribing to the Roller Derby News or RolleRage publications. Palermo described the Roller Derby fans as “great people,” “all-American people,” and “family people.”838 “We got some stars too,” she recalled, but “it was a cross between everything.”839 Mary Youpelle echoed this description: “We drew great crowds wherever we went...People came out from all over the place to see Roller Derby because it was something to do, something different...And inexpensive.”840

In the early years of the sport, the Roller Derby offered cheap entertainment, especially to those families still struggling to pull themselves out of the Great Depression. Youpelle saw these fans as “everyday, normal people. We had from the rich to the poor—didn’t make any difference.”841 And in her opinion, it was the novelty of the sport that drew fans in: “I think [it was] the boys against the girls. And occasionally we would

837 Palermo interview.
838 Palermo interview.
839 Palermo interview.
840 Youpelle Massro interview.
841 Youpelle Massro interview.
have fights and something like that which was exciting to people that didn’t see stuff like
that…It’s women out there doing the same as the men…We opened the doors to a lot of
things.”\textsuperscript{842} The biggest door these women opened was to the possibility of female
equality in the male dominated sports world, and their fans loved them all the more for it.

Roller Derby fans showered the skaters with fan mail, gifts to show their love for
them, and invitations to visit their homes. Youpelle received all sorts of heartwarming
letters and presents from her admirers, although a few bizarre ones as well.\textsuperscript{843} “We used
to get letters from people that couldn’t get out and they’d watch it on TV and how much
they enjoyed it,” she recalled. “And that was kind of rewarding too, that you had gotten
into somebody’s home like, you know, that they couldn’t leave because they were sick or
disabled somewhere.”\textsuperscript{844} The letters would say such things as how much the fans enjoyed
the skating and hoped the skaters would return quickly. “And people used to give us
gifts, wonderful gifts. It was just so wonderful that people were so kind, you know,”
recalled Youpelle, who received such items as homemade candy, cookies, and stuffed
animals.\textsuperscript{845} Skaters also frequently received invitations to join fans for lunch or dinner.
Palermo described receiving all the fan mail and gifts as like having a birthday every day.
Several of the gifts such as personal drawings and a hand-stitched evening bag she’s kept
for decades.

\textsuperscript{842} Youpelle Massro interview.
\textsuperscript{843} Youpelle recalled a really nice maiden woman from Texas, whom she suspected of
possibly being a lesbian, constantly sending her all sorts of homemade culinary gifts but
then also underwear.
\textsuperscript{844} Youpelle Massro interview. Or, apparently, they were so famous they could not attend
the Roller Derby in person. According to Bobbie Mateer, Elvis Presley was a huge fan
but could only watch the sport on TV since his popularity prevented him from going
anywhere public like that. She stated, “He used to rent a rink close to Graceland and he
and his buddies would play Roller Derby.” Mateer interview.
\textsuperscript{845} Youpelle Massro interview.
Revisiting Identity and “Wholeness through Sport”

Women Roller Derby skaters were able to edge more closely to Eleanor Metheny’s “wholeness through sport” concept than were women basketball players. Women skaters were equal and integral members of their co-ed team. Roller Derby was not modified to suit women’s “needs,” and the women skaters were largely responsible for drawing in the fans. Roller Derby became not only the passion of these female athletes but also their career.

Despite these factors, Metheny’s “wholeness through sport” was still not quite within their grasp. The skaters continually had to counter the notion that such a rough sport surely equated to “rough” or masculine women. While many high school, college, and AAU basketball players vacillated on the existence of stereotypes of rough women playing basketball, many Roller Derbyists were blatantly aware such stereotypes existed about them. A majority of the skaters actively worked to diminish such notions and thus engaged more openly in apologetic behavior than the AAU basketball players. The basketballers largely claimed that any actions they took to appear more feminine, they did so because of their identity as women and not due to their identity as women athletes. Roller Derby skaters had a clearer mission to prove their identity as women because of their identity as athletes. This seems to be the case, at least in part, because women’s basketball was accepted on the local level but not on a national level. Roller Derby, on the other hand, was popular on a national level as a national sport and thus had to directly confront national media sources and social critics that attempted to degrade their femininity and ultimately their sport. This was in some ways incredibly ironic. Roller Derby skaters enjoyed more functional equality than basketball players. They enjoyed
wider boundaries within their sport and existed on equal terms with men. Still, they found themselves sweating their identity when women basketballers were not.
CHAPTER 4

THE MOTHERHOOD DILEMMA

“I remember thinking, ‘Whew! The baby didn’t take away my jump shot.’”
Molly Bolin, WBL All-star, 1981

“I nursed for 4 ½ months. And when I got hit in the chest it was just THE worst thing I ever felt in my life, especially if I had not expressed before the game.”
Taj McWilliams Franklin, WNBA Player

All athletes rely on their physical prowess, natural ability, and honed skills. Whether they are professionals, school competitors or amateurs playing for fun in recreational leagues or pick-up games at the gym, athletes especially depend on their bodies as the key to their success on the court, field, track, or rink. Yet women athletes must also rely on their bodies to bear children. And when they do, they must deal with an American culture that claims to be part of the “post-feminist” world of gender equality.

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848 The term post-feminism emerged in the early 1980s and has since been used to describe women in their teens and twenties who, according to sociologist Pamela Aronson, “are thought to benefit from the women’s movement through expanded access to employment and education and new family arrangements but at the same time do not push for further political change.” (Aronson, 904) In the 1980s, the term symbolized the “backlash against the woman-centered second-wave feminism.” (Romack, 242). In the 1990s and early 2000s, some researchers, academics, and media pundits have used the term “post-feminism,” as a way to mark the decline and death of feminism as a movement and to tout gender equality in society. The term took on a more positive nature when scholars such as Christina Sommer embraced it in an attempt to identify themselves as third-wave feminists.” Romack, quoting Karen Boyle’s assessment of post-feminism, explains that “post-feminism both in the academy and in the popular media constitutes a bourgeois and white ‘backlash against feminism...divorced from any understanding of oppression as actively constructed not only in terms of gender but also, for example, along the lines of race, ethnicity, class and sexuality.” (Romack, 242-243) Aronson and other feminist scholars challenge the basis and framework of post-feminism.

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but continually tells them that children are primarily a woman’s responsibility. Even if a woman works, her kids should come first, and she is still deemed the primary caretaker for her children. This entrenched gender ideology first developed at the beginning of the industrial era as men and women left the home for outside employment, but it is still prevalent even in the twenty-first century.\footnote{Arlie Hochchild, The Second Shift: Working Families and the Revolution at Home, with Ann Machung, revised ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 2012), 1; Jeanne Boydston, "The Pastoralization of Housework,” in Women’s America: Refocusing the Past, 6th edition, ed. Linda K. Kerber and Jane Sherron De Hart, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 153-164.}

WNBA superstar Candace Parker dealt with this contradiction personally. In March 2009, several months prior to giving birth to her first child, Parker was asked by \textit{ESPN The Magazine} what she and her NBA husband would do after the birth of their child. She stated, “The baby will be along for the ride, with me on trips, at the court...[sighs] You don’t hear about male players doing that, do you? Women, we just
have to balance more things. It’s harder for us. That’s just the way it is.” But if we’re really in a “post-feminist” world, as the national media still likes to claim, why is Parker’s situation “just the way it is”? Why is Parker responsible for toting along their little one to away games when her husband has the exact same job as Parker? Why do the social expectations still fall on Parker’s shoulders to be the primary caretaker of their child?

Parker’s dilemma is in many ways merely a continuation of a battle that has been fought in American homes and in the media for the past seventy years, yet clearly has not been resolved. Feminists have fought for an equal partnership in marriage and child

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851 Arlie Hochschild’s book with Anne Machung, The Second Shift: Working Families and the Revolution at Home, details the realistic struggle working mothers and fathers have faced in dealing with their children, marriages, and home life in light of the American cultural ideals of the “supermom” and “new man” figures. These images essentially serve as a “cultural cover-up” to the reality of both women and men’s lives and particularly the crisis over the “second shift.” This second shift entails what has traditionally been described as women’s work in the home that has long been socially devalued. This devaluation began as early as the antebellum era according to historian Jeanne Boydston (Boydston, 155), but became a central feature of the women’s movement in the 1970s with such works as Pat Mainardi’s essay entitled, “The Politics of Housework.” Mainardi confronts male resistance to participating in the “trivial” nature of housework and provides the cultural context for their resistance. Similarly, in her 1981 article “The Family as the Locus of Gender, Class, and Political Struggle: The Example of Housework,” Heidi Hartmann employs a Marxist-feminist framework to explore how housework affects “gender relations within family units,” since production both “within and outside the family is shaped by patriarchy and capitalism.” (Hartman, 368) She explains the gendered division of labor as follows: “In our society, which is organized by patriarchy as well as by capitalism, the sexual division of labor by gender makes men primarily responsible for wage labor and women primarily responsible for household production.” (Hartman, 373). As Hochschild discovered in the late 1980s, many families were continuing to operate within a “stalled revolution,” one that relied on an “old-fashioned view of fatherhood,” saw “no family-friendly policies at work,” and placed “too little value on the importance of the small acts of paying attention that constitute care or appreciation for others.” (Hochschild, 263). Recent research and statistics suggest, according to studies cited by Hochschild in her revised edition, that
rearing for decades. Gains have most certainly been made, as exemplified by the fact that Parker plays professional basketball at all. But if one simply turns on the TV, she will wonder why only women seem to be using Swiffer wet-jets or are buying their children’s favorite flavor of Pedialyte to keep their kids healthy and happy. Women are largely portrayed in the media as the ones cooking dinner, getting the kids ready for school in the morning, and cleaning up the mess when the bumbling father and kids attempt to make dinner. If we’ve reached a post-feminist state, why are women still doing most of the work?

Feminists such as Pat Mainardi and Alix Kate Shulman brought this inequality to light in a radical manner in 1970.\textsuperscript{852} Describing her own marital struggle after she and her husband had children and her work as a writer was put on hold, Shulman wrote,

\begin{quote}

some improvements have been made. In her study, Hochschild found that working mothers put in an extra four weeks of twenty-four hours of work a year whereas recent studies found that working mothers put in an extra two weeks: “So twenty-five years didn’t rid women of an extra shift. But it did cut the length in half.”\textsuperscript{(Hochschild, 266)} While Hochschild sees improvement over the past quarter-century in terms of female empowerment—“the idea that women should express their talents, be all they can be, and stand equal to men”—the revolution is still stalled because our society has “sidetracked care.”\textsuperscript{Hochschild explains that “in the absence of a countermovement, care has often become a hand-me-down job. Men hand it to women. High-income women hand it to low-income women. Migrant workers who care for American children and elderly, hand the care of their own children and elderly to paid caregivers as well as grandmothers and aunts back in the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Mexico, and other countries of the global South. And those Filipina, Sri Lankan, or Mexican paid caregivers at the end of this care chain pass child-care duties to oldest daughters.” Hochschild believes American men and women must face the challenge to “value and share the duties of caring for our loved ones...[to] finally celebrate a world beyond this stalled revolution.”\textsuperscript{(Hochschild, 269). Boydston; Hochschild; Pat Mainardi, “The Politics of Housework,” in\textit{ Sisterhood is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women’s Liberation Movement}, ed. Robin Morgan, (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 447-454; Heidi I. Hartmann, “The Family as the Locus of Gender, Class, and Political Struggle: The Example of Housework,”\textit{ Signs}, Vol. 6, No. 3 (Spring 1981), 366-394.\textsuperscript{852} See previous Footnote for a more thorough discussion of Mainardi’s views on the politically-charged yet continually trivialized issue of “the dull stupid boring jobs” encompassed in the term housework. Mainardi, 448.
\end{quote}
“Now I was restricted to the company of two demanding preschoolers and to the four walls of an apartment. It seemed unfair that while my husband’s life had changed little when the children were born, domestic life had become the only life I had…I had no time to myself; the children were always there.”

Shulman and her husband decided to fix the problem themselves by drawing up a marriage agreement, later reprinted in magazines including Life and Redbook. Other sample marriage agreements would be published in Time, U.S. News & World Report, and even Glamour. The media coverage and popularity of these equality agreements prompted sociologist Marvin Sussman to predict that within ten years, the marriage agreement would serve as “the form of marriage law.”

History shows that this prediction did not come true.

Shulman and her husband, however, were exponentially happier after their agreement, which included a complete breakdown of their child rearing duties such as waking their two kids in the mornings, making their lunches, calling for babysitters, filling prescriptions, and taking off work when the kids were sick. Shulman was able to publish three children’s books, a novel, and a biography in the following two years, while her husband reveled in his greater contact with the children. Four months after the couple established their agreement, Shulman’s daughter said to her father: “You know, Daddy, I used to love Mommy more than you, but now I love you both the same.” In 1970, many believed that relationships like this were the wave of the future. However, Parker’s more recent example serves as a reminder that such radical transformations of parenting

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854 Douglas and Michaels, 43.
855 As cited in Douglas and Michaels, 43.
roles remain the exception. Mom might be able to go to work, but she continues to be responsible for taking care of the children and cleaning the house.

The other complicating factor with women-athlete-mothers, as exemplified in Parker’s case, is that the pregnancy physically disrupts a woman’s career in ways that it does not a father’s. Since women are the physical bearers of children, their bodies change to accommodate the pregnancy and to ensure the health and well-being of the mother and child. These changes, while necessary and beneficial to both mother and child, wreak havoc on women who rely on their bodies for their athletic career or for athletic pursuits. Depending on the time of pregnancy and child birth, the woman athlete may deal with uncomfortable physical changes prior to stopping her athletic activity and then may miss part or all of a season after it is deemed unsafe for her and her baby’s health to continue to participate in her sport. She faces a physical recovery after childbirth to get back to her previous self and then back to a competitive level. She might also breast-feed her child, which may delay her return to sport even further. And to top it off, media representations of motherhood, social commentators’ advice and suggestions on parenting, and the lack of paternity leave for men ensure that it remains her job to continue the primary care of the baby and later the toddler.856

In a historical sense, then, has there been any substantial change in the social and cultural construction of athlete mothers? And how have women athletes thought about motherhood throughout the twentieth century? Have women ever succeeded in reconciling participation in sports and motherhood, and how has the media responded to those struggles? These key questions strike at the heart of the social tensions between sport and motherhood.

An exploration of motherhood, first through women’s experiences in AAU basketball in the 1940s through the 1960s and then through two in-depth case studies from the 1970s and 1980s, helps shed light on these integral questions. In particular, these case studies of women basketball players focus on local and national issues regarding women’s equality, reproductive rights, and women’s roles, while exploring the unique problems women-athlete-mothers faced. Both involve young women from small Iowa towns whose successful basketball careers were disrupted by marriage, motherhood, and gender and sexual politics. These case studies illuminate state and national legislation that directly discriminated against women based on their status as mothers and athletes as well as the public tensions surrounding women’s sexuality.

The AAU, Marriage, and Motherhood

In the early 1950s, the Hanes Hosiery women’s basketball team from Winston-Salem, North Carolina, won three national AAU championships in a row. Despite his stellar record, Coach Virgil Yow had to scramble to refill his roster every season. After winning the national title in 1951, Yow was forced to replace eight of his players. “Why
the turnover in Hanes’ girls?” asked one journalist rhetorically: “Marriage.” Yow’s players abandoned their sport to get married or if they already were married, to settle down and start families. These outstanding athletes may have been pressured by their spouses to settle down into more traditional roles or they may have chosen marriage and family over sport. Regardless of the true reason for their “retirement,” these women found themselves unable to combine their athletic career with marriage or motherhood despite being in top physical shape.

Although the Hanes Hosiery team reported a high number of married players, AAU basketball largely remained a single-women’s game. AAU basketball was not particularly conducive to married life or motherhood. No official ban existed against married women playing basketball in the AAU, but many women were simply not interested in continuing to play after marriage. Several reasons hindered the compatibility of matrimony and basketball. First, two kinds of teams existed in the AAU: industrial or corporate-backed teams and college teams. Both types of teams were considered amateur and thus could not pay their players. The players who belonged to industrial or corporate teams usually worked for the company that sponsored them in some way or another. This meant though that they usually held down jobs but could remain on the team for as many years as they wanted—there was no limit to how long they could play. Women who played on the college teams usually did not have outside jobs but they were full-time students. These women were already working hard to juggle their basketball career with work or classes. Marriage and motherhood added another

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layer of responsibility that made it very difficult for women to continue playing without compensation.

Former players recalled that there was a social expectation that they would eventually marry. "I think most girls who played ball thought we would marry," explained Jimmie Vaughn Williams. 858 Even many former players who did not end up marrying assumed they would. Hanes Hosiery players Eckie Jordan and Eunice Futch both believed that they would find a spouse shortly after they began playing although neither ultimately did. Jordan recalled, "I always thought I’d get married…and I just never found the right one." 859 Her best friend Futch shared similar feelings. “A couple years out of high school nearly everybody got married. I thought I’d come up here [to Winston-Salem] and fall madly in love," 860 Although Futch never found that true love, she stated, “If I had my life to live again, I’d do the same thing." 861

Despite these assumptions, not all coaches or teams were on board with their players marrying while they were competing in the AAU. Some teams such as the Tulsa Stenoes banned married women from playing on their teams. Because of this restriction, the Stenoes star player Hazel Walker married her husband Gene Crutcher in secret. 862 Harley Redin, the beloved, highly-esteem, and long-time girls’ basketball coach at Wayland Baptist College, established a rule that banned married women from playing on his team. This was his personal rule as opposed to one instituted by college officials. Redin recalled, “I never really thought about having any married women…I think I just

858 Vaughn Williams interview.
859 Jordan interview.
860 Futch interview.
861 Futch interview. Jordan quipped after this remark, “Hopefully without hurting her knee again.”
862 Ikard, 28.
had two that got married and this was just my rule."  

Carla Lowry, an All-American player for Redin at WBC in the late 1950s and early 1960s, recalled that one of her teammates was forced to leave: “Her name was Belva Ramsey, and she was just a fine player, and unfortunately she decided to get married, and so she had to quit playing basketball.”

Redin was most likely influenced by larger social expectations concerning appropriate roles for women in the 1940s and 1950s, particularly because he coached at a strict Baptist college. WBC and Redin pushed the boundaries of women’s roles at the time by encouraging single women to play basketball. But once married, these women had an obligation to fulfill their roles as wives, mothers, and homemakers. Still, Redin was not immune to the changing social tides. He relented on his rule in the 1960s and eventually dropped it altogether. “In fact, one [player] came back after I decided it was okay,” Redin stated, “and the other one was a senior anyway.” Redin explained his reasoning for the no-marriage rule: “Then it just didn’t seem like [combining marriage and basketball] was the thing to do. Now it sounds like it would be okay.” Redin did not view himself as discriminating against women. During the 1940s through the early 1960s, rather, it was uncommon for middle-class women, such as those attending WBC, to combine multiple roles. Redin approved of women playing basketball. He stated, “They were exceptional students, and good-looking girls, dressed nice, and won a lot of

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863 Redin interview.
864 Lowry interview.
865 Although women were allowed to play basketball, all students were required to sign a pledge vowing not to smoke, drink, or dance. They were penalized with demerits if they broke any rules. Lowry interview.
866 Redin interview.
867 Redin interview.
ballgames. Of course, they were just really good persons to represent the community besides the college." But if his players chose to become a wife or mother, they needed to give themselves over to these roles. As wives and mothers, women would have important obligations to their families and thus would not be able to fully commit themselves to their basketball team. Wives and mothers were lifelong commitments. Basketball was not.

Despite a handful of blatant bans on married women, some women players were able to combine their roles as wife and athlete, at least until they had children. Sprouse, who played for such AAU teams as Nashville Business College, Vultee Bomberettes, Cook’s Goldblumes, and Atlanta Blues, recalled many of her married teammates leaving only when they were ready to have children. Similarly, All-American NBC player Marie Rogers played one year after she got married but then settled down to start a family with her husband and retired from the sport in the mid-1960s. As her sister Doris, also an All-American at NBC, explained Marie’s choices, “She didn’t want to leave her husband and go off two weeks at a time to play and stuff like that.”

Even fewer mothers continued to stick with the sport. Margaret Sexton Gleave married in 1948 and continued to play basketball for her Cook’s Goldblumes team through the 1949 season. At that point, she decided to quit and then gave birth to her first son. However, the team asked her to come back and play for the 1950 national tournament. She packed her son up and traveled by train to the tournament. But after

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868 Redin interview.
869 Rogers interview.
870 Rogers interview.
losing in the finals to NBC, she decided to officially retire. She stated, “I thought it was about time I quit playing. I quit playing and started raising my family.”

Sally Smith, on the other hand, got pregnant right out of high school but wanted to attend school and continue to play basketball. She left her child in her hometown of Waverly, Tennessee, to be raised by her grandmother. Smith moved to Nashville to play on the Nashville Business College team for the 1969 season. Smith earned All-American honors after her team handily won the national tournament and was voted Rookie of the Year. Unfortunately for Smith, the NBC team disbanded after the 1969 season, so she was forced to look for basketball opportunities elsewhere. Later, after her own basketball career ended, she got married and had another child.

A majority of AAU women who wanted to get married and have children waited until they were done playing competitive basketball. They understood the rigors and challenges of attempting to combine both roles. Sandy Fiete, a three-time All-American at Iowa Wesleyan College from 1957-1959, explained the thought-process: “The ones who went to college went to college because they wanted to teach or something like that and wanted to be a nurse, and that’s what they wanted to do, so they did it, and then they got married.” In terms of playing basketball, she explained, “The ones who didn’t want to play anymore are the ones who got married right out of high school.” Carla Lowry is a good example of this career-driven orientation. She stated, “[Marriage and

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871 Sexton Gleave interview.
872 Sally Smith was the only black player to have played at NBC under H.O. Balls, who openly stated he would not allow black people on his team. According to Ikard, he reconsidered his racial hostility after seeing Smith play. Ikard, 186-187.
873 Rogers interview; Ikard, 134.
874 Fiete interview.
875 Fiete interview.
children] didn’t influence my career because I knew what I wanted to do when I got out of school…I got out of Wayland, and I knew I wanted to get a master’s degree.”  

Doris Rogers, a player for NBC for most of the 1960s, shared a similar observation to Fiete’s. Rogers explained that many women played for a year or two and then left to get married or have children. But the “core group”—All-stars like Nera White, Joan Crawford, and herself—stayed with the team. “None that stayed any length of time married and had children,” she recalled. “It’s because they weren’t interested in that [at the time.] They chose to stay and play.”  

Ultimately, these women understood that if you wanted to be a serious competitor on a championship team, you did not get tied down. Rogers compared these dedicated but still amateur athletes to the equivalent of professional athletes today: “The ones that stayed there, if it had been today, they probably would be playing WNBA basketball, you know?”  

She acknowledged that some of these women later married and had children, but not while they were at the peak of their game and wanted to remain devoted to the sport. Their conflicting roles would not allow it.

**Time Out on the Court**

The sport of basketball took a long time to address its conflict with motherhood, and is still dealing with this social tension today. As stated in the first chapter, by the mid-twentieth century, women’s basketball hotbeds had emerged in Texas, Arkansas, Georgia, North Carolina, Tennessee, Oklahoma, Kansas, and Iowa, which had its own unique yet highly popular version of the sport.  

The Iowa version, similar to the one

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876 Lowry interview.  
877 Rogers interview.  
878 Rogers interview.  
879 Ikard, 180-181. For more scholarly works on the various versions of women’s basketball played around the United States and the rule changes throughout the course of

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promoted by the AAU, involved six players from each team divided in a two-court game.\(^880\) The Iowa rules allowed guards two dribbles to move the ball around, and defensive players could only attempt to tie up the ball when in the free throw lane or when forwards were shooting. If players fell to the ground while holding the ball they were permitted to stand back up with the ball without being penalized for traveling.\(^881\) 

Women’s basketball in Iowa became incredibly popular and vital to small town community life and entertainment. By the 1950s, “70 percent of Iowa high school girls played basketball, the highest participation level for any schoolgirl sport in America.”\(^882\) AAU and collegiate basketball proved popular in the state, and Iowa girls demonstrated their exceptional abilities at this level as well.\(^883\) Between 1949-1960, over 20 percent of the AAU All-American selections were native Iowa women, and in 1953, the first U.S.

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\(^880\) This meant that a team’s three offensive players were restricted to one half of the court where they attempted to score while the team’s three defensive players were restricted to the opposite end of the court where they attempted to prevent the opposing team’s offensive players from scoring. Shelley Lucas, an academic and former 6-on-6 player described the game as resembling two games of 3-on-3. Shelley Lucas, “Courting Controversy: Gender and Power in Iowa Girls’ Basketball,” *Journal of Sport History*, Vol. 30, No. 3, (Fall 2003): 299.


\(^882\) McElwain, 5.

\(^883\) Ikard, 181-182.
World Championship team was composed solely of players from Iowa and Tennessee.  

The sport’s popularity lasted through the final decades of the twentieth century. 

Despite the sport’s popularity and as demonstrated by examples from the AAU players, combining marriage and/or motherhood with basketball was generally uncommon at all levels. In fact, it could even be illegal. On November 1, 1971, high school basketball player Jane Rubel received a letter from the superintendent of her small Iowa high school informing her of the following: 

In accordance with Article 2, Sections 11, 12 and 15 of the By Laws of the Iowa Girls’ High School Athletic Union [IGHSAU] you are not eligible to represent the Ruthven Consolidated School in girls’ basketball. I have asked the girls basketball coach, Mr. Richard Barber to deliver this letter to you personally so there will be no misunderstanding of your position.

Prior to the summer of 1970, Jane Rubel went by her maiden name Jane Christoffer. Christoffer was an outstanding basketball player for the Ruthven varsity team; in fact, some even called her a “prodigy.” Standing six-feet tall and well-coordinated for a freshman, which does not always come with young age and height, Christoffer averaged almost 35 points per game on a team which made it to the 1969 Sweet Sixteen Iowa state tournament. During her sophomore year, despite constant double-teaming, she averaged close to 47 points per game, making her the fifth highest scorer in the entire state of Iowa. She also still managed to hit 60 percent of her shots. This outstanding scoring

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884 McElwain, 6; Ikard, 182.
885 Letter from William H. Logan to Mrs. Jane Rubel, 1 November 1971, Jane Christoffer Rubel Papers, Iowa Women’s Archives, University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City. (From here on referred to as Rubel Papers, IWA.)
887 Stephen M. Johnson, “Judge Puts Mom Back on Team,” Des Moines Register, 1971, Rubel Papers, IWA.
ability earned her all-state honors and a “Commendation” award by Look magazine for the 1970 season. One journalist described Christoffer as “certainly the most talented forward in her school’s history and had a shot at rewriting record books on both the local and state levels.”

Christoffer’s chance to shatter records seemingly passed in the spring of 1970 when she found out she was pregnant. In July 1970, she married her high-school sweetheart Ken Rubel, whom she had known since grade school. Their daughter Jennifer was born on December 5 of the same year. After giving birth “like others in similar circumstances in that era, [Jane] Rubel believed she would never play basketball again and made no effort to do so in what remained of the 1970-71 season.” However, Rubel knew she wanted and needed to return to the basketball court for her senior year because her only chance to go to college depended upon her receiving a basketball scholarship. The colleges Rubel had been in contact with told her they would only be able to offer her an athletic scholarship if she actually played on her varsity team for the 1971-72 season.

Contemporary newspaper coverage indicates that Rubel’s basketball coach Richard Barber and school superintendent William Logan “refused to let her try out for

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888 Stephen M. Johnson, “Town Backs Mom’s Bid to Play Ball,” Des Moines Register, 1971, Rubel Papers, IWA.
889 Broadie. For pictures of Rubel, see Figures 1 and 2 in the appendix.
890 Jane Christoffer Rubel, interview by author, 26 April 2011, phone interview, digital audio recording, W.E.B. Du Bois Library, University of Massachusetts-Amherst, Amherst, MA; Broadie, and Johnson, “Town Backs Mom’s Bid to Play Ball.”
891 Broadie.
892 Rubel interview.
893 United States District Court for the Southern District of Iowa Central Division, Civil Action Complaint and Petition for Injunctive Relief, (2 Nov. 1971), 11; Rubel Papers, IWA.
the team," since she violated the IGSAU regulations that stated, "A student is ineligible for any Girls’ Union sponsored activities after being associated with a marital status...A student associated with motherhood forfeits all eligibility privileges for Girls’ Union sponsored activities...[and] to be eligible, athletes shall live at home with their parents or duly appointed guardians in fact." While officially Barber and Logan did tell Rubel she was ineligible to play basketball, this was not the entire story. The real story began almost ten months prior to Rubel’s senior basketball season and was more calculated and collaborative than initial reports indicate.

In late January 1971, Rubel met with her basketball coach and school superintendent to discuss the possibility of her returning to the basketball team or participating in track or softball in the upcoming spring sports season. It was at this point that Barber and Logan informed Rubel of both the IGSAU and the Ruthven Consolidated School District rules that rendered her ineligible to play any high school sports based upon her status as wife and mother. However, as the newspapers reported correctly, neither Logan nor Barber really wanted to keep Rubel away from athletics, particularly since her coach felt she could be “the best basketball player in the state.” But even if Ruthven changed its rules, Logan and Barber feared that the IGSAU would disqualify the entire Ruthven team if Rubel played; IGSAU regulations stated that “any team using an ineligible player, such ineligibility being created by a state of marriage...[or] by motherhood, will recognize its obligation for automatically forfeiting

894 Johnson, “Judge Puts Mom Back on Team.”
895 United States District Court for the Southern District of Iowa Central Division, 9.
896 Rubel interview; United States District Court for the Southern District of Iowa Central Division, 9.
897 Johnson, “Town Backs Mom’s Bid to Play Ball.”

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all regularly scheduled games in which the player participated." If Rubel was allowed
to play on the basketball team, it seemed clear that the entire Ruthven school would lose
its membership in the girls athletic union.  

So Rubel, Barber, and Logan made a “joint decision” to fight the IGHSAU and
immediately began writing letters detailing the discrimination against Rubel to the civil
liberties union to expedite the process. They also planned to petition the Ruthven
Board of Education to repeal the school’s discriminatory policy in hopes that the
IGHSAU would also change its rule. At the beginning of her senior year, Rubel
“renewed her request to participate in girls varsity basketball for the current 1971-1972
season” which the Board granted by rescinding its policy on September 13, 1971.  

Officially, Superintendent Logan again denied Rubel the chance to play unless he had the
protection of a court order, since otherwise the IGHSAU would automatically disqualify
Ruthven’s girls varsity basketball team. Publicly, he explained his side to a Des Moines
newspaper:

[Rubel] wanted to play, of course, but naturally I had to forbid it… I can
sympathize with her—she was a good student and a good athlete. I think
it’s rather absurd for the IGHSAU to continue fighting for this rule. It’s a
17-year-old rule and it’s out of date. I wanted her to play, but I didn’t
want to jeopardize our standing with the other schools in the [Corn Belt] conference.  

And jeopardize the team it would have as E. Wayne Cooley, the executive secretary of
the IGHSAU since 1954, stated, “I continue to believe that we have a very good rule, and

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898 United States District Court for the Southern District of Iowa Central Division, 8.
899 Rubel interview; United States District Court for the Southern District of Iowa Central
Division, 7.
900 Rubel interview; Richard E. Burnett, Kansas City, to Mrs. Jane Christoffer Rubel,
Ruthven, 9 March 1971, Rubel Papers, IWA.
901 United States District Court for the Southern District of Iowa Central Division, 9.
902 Johnson, “Judge Puts Mom Back on Team.”
the reasons are the same now as they were heretofore. We are prepared to defend this
total...There is a strong health and safety factor here. A married woman shouldn't
be playing basketball; what would happen if she were pregnant and were injured while
playing? Who would be liable? Cooley seemingly missed the point that any post-
pubescent girl could get pregnant regardless of her marital status.

The IGHSAN under the leadership of Cooley, who had been dubbed ‘the
patriarch of Iowa girls’ basketball,' was a highly successful and powerful organization
and thus a difficult business to challenge. Founded in 1926, the athletic union was the
first and only girls’ high school athletic association in the United States. It was also
dominated by men who controlled Iowa girls’ high school sports until long after the
passage of Title IX. The male-dominated athletic union effectively rebuffed the
attempts of women physical educators to limit competitive sports for young women,
ensuring the long history of Iowa girls’ high school basketball which thrived in their
small rural communities. This equal opportunity in basketball did not carry over into
coaching and officiating positions for women, thus giving men even more control over
the power structure. The IGHSAN refused to hire women officials until the 1960s, and
women consisted of only 1.5% of all basketball coaches until after the early 1970s. Iowa
State Senator Minnette Doderer criticized Cooley and the IGHSAN for not being a

903 As cited in Johnson, “Judge Puts Mom Back on Team.”
905 Janice A. Beran, 191.
906 McElwain, 5; Cook; Beran, 189.
907 McElwain, 5-6, 12-13. According to McElwain, the IGHSAN is still largely
dominated by male leadership.
908 McElwain, 5-6. Competitive women’s basketball did not flourish in Iowa’s bigger
cities and larger schools due to the national debate and control of the women educators
there until after the passage of Title IX.
gender equitable organization. While the girls’ game flourished, it did so at the hands of the men in control, and, despite a seemingly progressive stance on women’s basketball, these men held very conservative and traditional notions about marriage and motherhood.

Perhaps surprisingly, the small town of Ruthven, Iowa, and other surrounding communities generally backed Rubel’s wish to rejoin her basketball team. Rubel recalled general “small town talk” and “rumors” surrounding her teenage pregnancy, but she found the majority of the community supportive of her attempts to rejoin the team. This suggests that the tight-knit local community scoffed at outside regulation of their internal affairs and resented outside moral judgment of Rubel. Many felt her status as a mother had nothing to do with her role as a ballplayer. The General Manager of the eastern Iowa radio station KCRG broadcast an editorial comment from the station about Rubel’s situation declaring, “There seems to be no justification for the rule except that married students may ‘taint’ the other young athletes. The rule appears to be an attempt to legislate alleged morality by a group that we feel has no business trying to do that. We hope Mrs. Jane Rubel wins her case.”

Apparently, the IGHSAU felt their rule should be used to discipline girls for what they viewed as inappropriate behavior and to “discourage athletes from engaging in ‘adult’ activities.” Yet, amid the charged social climate of the early 1970s when feminism and civil rights activism were gaining strength, much of the local community, both young and old, did not feel it was the place of the IGHSAU to butt into the personal

909 McElwain, 134.
910 Rubel interview.
911 “KCRG Editorial Comment by Ed Lasko,” 12 November 1971,” Rubel Papers, IWA.
912 Broadie.
life of Jane Rubel. One townsman stated, “Both Jane and Kenny come from good families and they take real good care of that baby. Jennifer is healthy and well-fed and gets a lot of love. She’s a good mother.” Mrs. Emma Ruthven, an elderly woman whose grandfather founded the town, believed they should let Rubel play if that was what she wanted to do. The coach’s daughter, who was on the team with Rubel, said all the youngsters from surrounding towns were discussing the matter, but she had not heard a single negative comment against Rubel rejoining the team. A local man in his twenties even flipped a reporter’s question by asking, “Why shouldn’t [Rubel] play? Is it anyone’s business but her own? Isn’t this what equality means?”

Sexual equality was at the heart of the matter. This was part of a larger fight for gender equality. Rubel and her coach were both aware that young men who were married and had children were allowed to play sports in Iowa. Her coach stated, “She’s wanted to play for some time, but the rules wouldn’t allow it. I feel they’re a little outdated. The boys are allowed to play if they’re married, and it’s certainly not fair to discriminate against the girls.” A case identical to Rubel’s had occurred the very year she sat out except that this time it was a male student who wanted to play sports his senior year, even though he was a married father. This male student, whose wife and mother of his child had already graduated, was able to play sports his final year with absolutely no discussion about him corrupting the other male players based on his status as husband and father. Rubel ruminated, “It was just not fair. It wasn’t. There was no equality to the rules.”

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913 Broadie.
914 Johnson, “Town Backs Mom’s Bid To Play Ball.”
915 Johnson, “Town Backs Mom’s Bid To Play Ball.”
916 Johnson, “Judge Puts Mom Back on Team.”
917 Rubel interview.
While men’s sports were not governed by the IGHSAU, Cooley believed that his organization allowed “the Iowa girl [to walk] down the street just as tall as the boy.”\(^918\) The IGHSAU did not “have to compete with boys’ sports in an umbrella organization.”\(^919\) Originally established to provide competitive basketball for women when the Iowa High School Athletic Association (IHSAA) decided to quit sponsoring girls’ state tournaments back in 1925, the IGHSAU held a monopoly over Iowa’s high school girls granted to them through the Iowa Department of Public Instruction.\(^920\) Cooley strove to make the IGHSAU as strong as or better than the boy’s governing association, but not necessarily for the benefit of women’s rights.\(^921\) In fact, in 1954, the year he became executive secretary of the IGHSAU, Cooley declared he had “no special interest in women’s rights.”\(^922\) Despite repeated efforts to link Cooley to the feminist cause as a promoter of women’s sports, he “alternately dismissed, appropriated, and negotiated his way around the rhetoric of feminism as it suited him and the occasion.”\(^923\)

Although still promoting women’s right to competition in the early 1970s, Cooley and the IGHSAU engaged in “apologetic behavior” when they promoted their ideology, “Be Ladies!...But Play Like Boys!”\(^924\) What that ultimately meant for young women

\(^918\) Cook.
\(^919\) Beran, 189.
\(^920\) McElwain, 4. Beran, 189; United States District Court for the Southern District of Iowa Central Division, 3-5. The IHSAA wanted boys’ basketball to remain the top sport in Iowa and essentially sided with the national position of women physical educators “who insisted on intramural instead of interscholastic competition for girls and that paid admission to watch girls’ games was inappropriate.” McElwain, 5.
\(^921\) Lucas, 294-295.
\(^922\) As cited in Lucas, 294.
\(^923\) Lucas, 294.
\(^924\) Bill Norris, “Be Ladies!...But Play Like Boys!” *Iowa Girls Basketball Yearbook*, Janice Beran Collection, IWA; McElwain, 11; Festle, xxi-xxiv. For a more in-depth discussion of “apologetic behavior,” see Ch. 2.
including Rubel was if they chose to become a wife or mother, it was their ladylike duty to focus solely on the traditional responsibilities associated with those roles, including quitting sports. Cooley explicitly confirmed this when he stated that “husbands and homes were the first obligation of the wives.”\textsuperscript{925} He further explained his beliefs on marriage and motherhood in a 1977 \textit{womenSports} article about why the percentage of female coaches in Iowa would always remain low. He said,

Not because the women aren’t capable, but because historically and traditionally, a woman will be a professional person for three or four years, then she gets married, has a family, and abandons professional life as a coach. I hope that’ll never change. We’ve got to have some housewives and some mothers or something’s going to happen to this society.\textsuperscript{926}

Men’s roles in society, on the other hand, have historically been tied to the masculine pursuit of sport; therefore, a married father continuing to play sports was not jeopardizing his role in the family or society. It behooved the IGHSAU to include the wife and motherhood clause in their bylaws and policies if they intended to uphold the traditional societal structure and limit girls and women’s sports to single women.

In early November 1971, Rubel and two American Civil Liberties Union lawyers filed a $125,000 damage suit against the IGHSAU, charging the organization with violating her civil rights, particularly the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution as well as parts of the Iowa Constitution. Their suit explained that Rubel had been excluded from playing varsity sports because of her status as wife and mother yet was still required to participate in physical education classes and was even allowed to participate in intramural athletics and extra-curricular activities. The

\textsuperscript{925} As cited in Lucas, 295.
\textsuperscript{926} As cited in Lucas, 295.
school had not discriminated against her for those activities nor removed her from the general student body; “Thus the school authorities have demonstrated that there is no need to segregate her from other students due to her married status or to her status of motherhood.”⁹²⁷ Only the IGHSAU bylaws were holding her back. As Rubel’s lawyers pointed out, “while plaintiff Jane Rubel has been so excluded, male students have not. There is no such exclusion of male students who have the status of husband or who are fathers. In fact, even unmarried fathers are not excluded.”⁹²⁸ This meant that the IGHSAU policies were explicitly discriminating against Rubel based on her sex, because males who were married or fathers were not treated in the same manner.

Rubel’s story became a national issue. Press about her situation expanded beyond local town newspapers and even beyond the Iowa press, reaching major newspapers coast to coast. Certainly people from all over the country had opinions on the case, but several went so far as to write Rubel and offer their support. Leo C. Rupp, former resident of Ruthven, Iowa, from 1906 to 1913, felt compelled to write Rubel from his current home in Thousand Oaks, California, after seeing the November 5, 1971, article in the Los Angeles Times entitled “Girl Sues School for Losing Eligibility over Motherhood.” He offered his support of Rubel in her difficult situation: “Keep fighting. I hope you win. You did an honorable thing by having your baby. Good Luck.”⁹²⁹

His words of advice and support, however, are multi-layered. They hint not only at the morality and sexual equality issues previously mentioned, but also at women’s reproductive rights. Rupp simultaneously promotes women’s equality but not

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⁹²⁷ United States District Court for the Southern District of Iowa Central Division, 10.
⁹²⁸ United States District Court for the Southern District of Iowa Central Division, 10.
⁹²⁹ Leo C. Rupp, Thousand Oaks, to Jane Christoffer Rubel, Ruthven, 5 November 1971, Rubel Papers, IWA.
reproductive rights. Rupp, whose exact age is unknown but at the very youngest was a 65-year-old man, whole-heartedly supported Rubel in her quest to play varsity basketball after marrying and giving birth to her daughter. In this way, Rupp supported a feminist stance based on equality. He did not feel that Rubel should be discriminated against based on her sex and status as a mother. He supported her choice to fight to play basketball. But the last part of his comments to Rubel explicitly suggests that he feels she made the morally correct decision by choosing to keep her baby. Rupp may simply be commenting that he understands the difficulty of raising a child at a young age. More likely though, Rupp’s comment about Rubel making the “honorable” choice to have her baby should be read in the context of contemporary debates over women’s reproductive rights. His statement may have been in response to a quote by Rubel’s attorney in the *Los Angeles Times* in which he explains how the IGHSAU doesn’t punish unmarried and pregnant women who get an abortion.

In this way, Rubel’s case reflects the tumultuous battle raging in the United States in the early 1970s not only over women’s equality but also over women’s reproductive rights, leading up to the 1973 Supreme Court decision in Roe v. Wade.\textsuperscript{930} Even those in support of Rubel rejoining the Ruthven team, including her attorney, did so in comparison to women who have gained control over their reproductive capabilities. Rubel’s civil action suit explicitly says, “[The rule] violates basic public policy and common decency by not imposing such treatment on others with an even greater degree of sexual sophistication or experience. It is not visited upon those who are unmarried and promiscuous, but use contraceptive devices. Nor is it visited upon those who are

unmarried and pregnant, but who secure an abortion.” This type of language is used to show the sex discrimination against Rubel, but also to demonstrate, as Rupp notes in his letter, that Rubel made the “honorable” choice in keeping her baby and should not be punished for making the “right” decision.

American women since the mid-twentieth century became increasingly intolerant of their lack of access to contraceptives and safe abortions, yet birth control politics remained a controversial topic and ultimately an “arena for conflict between liberal and conservative ideas about family, personal freedom, state intervention, religion in politics, sexual morality, and social welfare.” As stated earlier in this chapter, the federal government approved the birth control pill in 1960, but, even after that date, many doctors and the Planned Parenthood organization only provided contraceptives to married women. In fact, several states still banned contraception altogether. The political activism of feminists, civil libertarian physicians and lawyers, ministers, social activists, and college students forced positive changes in the 1960s and 1970s in regards to women’s reproductive rights. Because of these outdated laws, women’s campaigns on both state and national levels applied political pressure to legalize and provide access to abortion and contraception. According to historian Linda Gordon, “neither the women’s

931 United States District Court for the Southern District of Iowa Central Division, 10.
932 Gordon, 296.
933 Gordon, 299; Ruth Rosen, The World Split Open: How the Modern Women’s Movement Changed America, (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 52-55; Beth Bailey, Sex in the Heartland, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999). 1. Bailey shows how the sexual revolution was not simply instigated “by a set of radicals on the fringe of American society and then imposed on the rest of the nation.” In fact, it also sprung from the depths of the American heartland and was “shaped not only by committed revolutionaries but by people who had absolutely no intention of abetting a revolution in sex.” Bailey demonstrates that by shifting our focus on the sexual revolution from the radical fringes to the heartland, the meaning of the sexual revolution shifts as well; “This revolution was thoroughly of America.” Bailey, 3.
liberation movement nor the legalization of abortion caused the more positive attitudes
toward and greater use of abortion and contraception; instead they merely recognized and
confirmed these changes." The discussion of Rubel's reproductive rights falls within
this larger context of the national moral, political, and legal debates.

Soon after Rubel and her lawyers filed suit against the IGHSAU and the Ruthven
Consolidated School District, Judge William C. Hanson, a Federal District Court judge,
issued a temporary restraining order that allowed Rubel to "practice and seek to qualify
for a position on the Ruthven High School girls' varsity basketball team." Judge
Hanson allowed Rubel to practice with the team until the hearing for her case, which was
to take place on November 22, 1971. Rubel's coach was very pleased with the Judge's
decision. The IGHSAU was not.

The next issue facing Rubel was whether she, as a married mother, would succeed
in getting back in shape to be useful to the team. Rubel had not played much organized
basketball since her pregnancy and subsequent birth of her daughter, other than with her
sister and in physical education classes. Yet, she felt she would be able to make the team
and was ready to practice a mere three hours after the judge's order was given. Rubel
was aware that she would have to get back into shape and "relearn" certain basketball
skills, but she denounced the notion that married women and mothers could not be good
athletes. Rubel did not believe that young mothers were incapable of physically
competing but because of their parenting responsibilities, "they actually just never

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934 Gordon, 299.
935 Johnson, "Judge Puts Mom Back on Team."
936 Johnson, "Judge Puts Mom Back on Team."
937 Johnson, "Town Backs Mom's Bid to Play Ball."
tried."\textsuperscript{938} She felt that many young women were not encouraged or even told they could do certain things such as sports because of the social expectations surrounding athletics and motherhood.\textsuperscript{939} She referenced the most recent Olympics to prove her point: "A Russian girl who is married and the mother of three took gold medals at the last Olympics—that proves something," she told a staff writer for the \textit{Des Moines Register} in 1971.\textsuperscript{940}

By her second practice, both Rubel's coaches and teammates felt "she looked pretty good playing one-on-one...[and] was driving well against Julie [Brown], who won honorable mention for all-stater..."\textsuperscript{941} Within a week, Rubel scored 25 points in a coaches' clinic game, which "clearly demonstrated that she was going to be a major force on a very good team, not an out-of-shape bench warmer whose skills were badly eroded by motherhood."\textsuperscript{942}

A few days after Rubel's success in her first game, Cooley "complain[ed] that 'a lengthy court battle would destroy the union,'"\textsuperscript{943} so therefore he and the union's executive board decided to "repeal the rule prohibiting married mothers from interscholastic competition."\textsuperscript{944} Unwilling to completely give in on a moral level, he followed by claiming that "the rule was a landmark...[and] has served a useful purpose."\textsuperscript{945} Rubel's successful fight against sexual and moral discrimination led other married and unmarried mothers to challenge local rules discriminating against them.

\textsuperscript{938} Rubel interview.  
\textsuperscript{939} Rubel interview.  
\textsuperscript{940} Johnson, "Town Backs Mom's Bid to Play Ball."  
\textsuperscript{941} Johnson, "Town Backs Mom's Bid to Play Ball."  
\textsuperscript{942} Broadie.  
\textsuperscript{943} Broadie.  
\textsuperscript{944} Broadie.  
\textsuperscript{945} Broadie.
based on sex and motherhood, which forced many “school boards to eliminate all restrictions that applied only to women.”

Rubel had a solid senior year and averaged over 30 points per game, but her team missed making the state tournament by one game after their elimination by their “fierce rivals” the Everly High School Cattlefeederettes. Apparently, Ruthven started the game off strong and jumped to a considerable lead over the Everly girls, but “fell behind just as quickly when an amazing number of fouls were called on Ruthven in short order.” Rubel remembered, “All of a sudden the refs started calling fouls and just whatever they could to even up the game.” With virtually the entire Ruthven team in foul trouble, Everly went on to win by a substantial margin. After the game, Rubel was convinced that the referees rigged the game:

There was no doubt in my mind that it was handled that way. Some of the referees that refereed that game, moved, left the state shortly thereafter...One of the players from Everly, her brother was over talking one day, and he said that they had come to the school and told them not to worry. [The Everly players] didn’t have to worry about it...There was no way I was going to be in Des Moines.

Over thirty years after Rubel’s last Ruthven basketball game, many local fans including Rubel still “believe...that victory was denied to Ruthven because the thought of

946 Broadie.
948 Broadie.
949 Rubel interview.
950 Broadie.
951 Rubel interview. Rubel understands that the claims the young man from Everly made that the refs or IGHSAU officials came to the school to tell the Everly players they would win the game could potentially be nothing more than small town gossip. But she does believe the refs threw the game based on what she witnessed transpire on the court.

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a mother playing in the state tournament was too great a burden for her critics to bear."⁹⁵² They insist it was Cooley’s last ditch attempt to prevent Rubel from appearing at the state tournament in Des Moines, the pinnacle representation of everything Iowa girls’ basketball stood for and which he had personally molded over the decades.⁹⁵³ Rubel believed if she had played in the state tournament, Cooley would have been forced to address and defend all the issues he had been fighting against in their lawsuit in a more public setting. It was in his interest to avoid politicizing the girls’ game and the state tournament in any way, but he failed to understand that Iowa girls basketball was not “just a game” and these issues were not “‘just’ politics” but rather had “both material and ideological effects that affected people’s lives.”⁹⁵⁴ Rubel was not offered any scholarships and did not attend college.⁹⁵⁵

Whether the referees actually rigged Rubel’s final game or whether her critics influenced the outcome in any way may never be determined. But the fact Ruthven’s citizens believe it was unfair illustrates their awareness of outside hostility to Rubel’s situation and their sensitivity to the issue. In a 1993 follow-up article, Rubel explained that she did not have a deep commitment to the feminist agenda at the young age of 17, but rather “[she] just wanted to play.”⁹⁵⁶ Yet, she admits to being pleased about influencing the Iowa women’s struggle and her own struggle for equal rights.⁹⁵⁷ The supportive community of Ruthven and the 17-year-old Jane Rubel did not readily acknowledge that they were influenced by larger feminist ideologies. But by articulating

⁹⁵² Broadie; Rubel interview.
⁹⁵³ Rubel interview; Cook.
⁹⁵⁴ Lucas, 296.
⁹⁵⁵ Rubel interview.
⁹⁵⁶ Broadie.
⁹⁵⁷ Broadie; Rubel interview.
the sex discrimination against Rubel based upon her status as wife and mother, they
echoed national feminist rhetoric that called for sexual equality, particularly in sports. As
the young man from Ruthven asked in the local newspaper, “Isn’t this what equality
means?”

With the passage of Title IX in 1972, the fight for women’s equality in education
and sports became a hot-button national issue. Gender equality in sports was technically
enforced by the federal government, although compliance with the law was difficult to
ascertain. Nevertheless, it is clear that Title IX provided the impetus for growth in
women’s sports over the next three decades and offered girls and women an exponential
amount of sporting opportunities previously closed to them. It is also clear that big
national victories, legal or otherwise, did not always translate quickly to local action.
Deeply entrenched notions concerning what constituted appropriate displays of
femininity and women’s traditional roles in society, particularly as mothers, were not
easily changed.

“Molly is Back—With Family”

Molly Bolin Kazmer’s long career with basketball in both Iowa and California
illuminates many of these problematic issues that arose in the 1970s and early 1980s.
Her career was both interrupted by marriage and childbirth as well as perhaps advanced
by it. Her struggles balancing family life and the difficulties of being a professional
athlete in a time where women did not have many basketball opportunities demonstrate
how far women athletes have come from the 1930s through the 1980s and yet how little

958 Johnson.

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substantial change in the social and cultural construction of women and athlete mothers has occurred. It also reveals that the struggles these women faced are struggles that women continue to face in the present day. Women, both then and now, have had to deal with working the “second shift,” obtaining childcare while they work or compete, and countering stereotypes of women athletes as abnormal women.

Monna Lea (Molly) van Benthuysen was born in Dryden, Ontario, Canada, in November 1957 when her father was working over the Canadian border laying gas pipelines, which gave her a dual American-Canadian citizenship. The van Benthuysen family, originally from Iowa, maintained a home in Phoenix, Arizona, but moved back to their home state the summer after Molly completed second grade. They moved from New Sharon, Iowa, to the small town of Moravia, population of about 700, two years later.\(^{960}\) Molly grew up playing the same six-on-six girls’ basketball unique to Iowa high schools that Jane Rubel played. In fact like Rubel, van Benthuysen excelled at the game, rising to local fame as she shattered scoring records and took the game to new levels as an all-state player in the mid-1970s although her team was never able to capture the coveted state championship. Van Benthuysen averaged 50 points per game as a junior and 55 per game as a senior while her career high was 83 points in one game. Throughout her high school career, she managed to score 70 or more points in 5 games, clearly marking herself as an offensive threat.\(^{961}\) Van Benthuysen graduated in 1975 at

\(^{960}\) “Molly: She’s been a pinup, construction worker, basketball legend,” *The Orange County Register Community Issue*, Molly Bolin Papers, IWA; Molly Bolin Kazmer, interview by author, 31 January 2011, e-mail correspondence.

\(^{961}\) “Molly: She’s been a....”
age seventeen and shortly thereafter made it to the final try-outs for the women’s Olympic basketball team, although she did not make the team.  

Her high school success led Grand View College, a private school in Des Moines, Iowa, to recruit van Benthuysen and offer her a full-ride scholarship in an era when women basketball players had few opportunities for college scholarships. At the college level in the 1970s, Iowa teams played the 5-on-5 game, which Bolin transitioned into with minimal problems. She stated, “I was...aggressive enough and determined enough that that wasn’t going to get in the way.” In her freshman year at Grand View, her team made it to the regional tournament with a 29-8 record, but then head coach Rod Lein left to take a coaching position at Simpson College, which led many of Grand View’s star players to transfer to other schools or leave the team altogether. Van Benthuysen herself temporarily left the basketball team, but not to play basketball elsewhere. Instead, she became Mrs. Dennie Bolin, shortly followed by “Mother.” Molly van Benthuysen and Dennie Bolin, high school sweethearts, married in Albia, Iowa, at the Trinity United Methodist Church on August 28, 1976. Molly was eighteen years old and heading into her sophomore year in college at the time, while Dennie, now 21, worked as a bricklayer after attending Area IX Tech School. They resided in Valley Park Trailer Court in Colfax, Iowa. Their son Damien was born on January 4, 1977.

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962 Molly Bolin Kazmer, interview by author, 13 May 2011, e-mail correspondence.
963 “Molly: She’s been a....”
964 Molly Bolin Kazmer, interview by author, 13-14 June 2011, Palm Desert, Califórnia, digital audio recording, W.E.B. Du Bois Library, University of Massachusetts-Amherst, Amherst, MA.
965 “Moravia couple marries in Albia,” Bolin Papers, IWA.
966 Bolin Kazmer, 13 June 2011.
Van Benthuysen, now referred to by her married name Bolin, took a year off from basketball, but returned for the 1977-1978 season at Grand View. The *Des Moines Tribune* described Bolin as having the staples of an All-American way of life: “You’ve all heard about motherhood, baseball, apple pie and Chevrolet being key ingredients in the American way of life,” the journalist told his readers. “With Grand View’s Molly Bolin, it’s motherhood, basketball, apple pie and Chevrolet.”967 After her son was born, Bolin continued to take college classes and played in a local church basketball league.

She worked hard to get caught up with her school work by taking a heavy class load. She commuted to school daily, and sometimes twice a day, and as the author notes, “in a Chevrolet, of course.”968 While Bolin was at school and basketball practice and games, Dennie took care of Damien, and if Dennie was busy working, Bolin left Damien with a babysitter. In the winter months, the bricklaying business was minimal, prompting Bolin to state in the February article, “Right now things are slow so [Dennie] gets to stay home and play housewife. When he works, I do all the housework.”969 Dennie took issue with that comment by claiming he helped out then too. Regardless, much of the Bolins’ life during Molly’s second season playing basketball at Grand View revolved around her schedule as she averaged 21.8 points per game, making her Grand View’s leading scorer.

Dennie and occasionally Damien attended her practices and games.

In many ways, Bolin was lucky to be able to continue playing basketball after marriage and giving birth to her son in the late 1970s. Rubel’s case paved the way for Bolin not only in regards to providing more athletic opportunities for young mothers, but

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968 Grett.
969 Grett.
also from mere public awareness of sexual discrimination. Already in college, Bolin luckilly did not have to fight similar battles as Rubel—at least not yet. Grand View’s new coach Jerry Slater was very thankful Molly returned to help out the team and did not mind having a husband and baby hanging around the gym. He told the Des Moines Tribune, “[Damien] doesn’t bother anybody…I’m just glad Molly came back to play.”

Not everyone was quite as supportive as Bolin’s college coach. When Bolin first learned of her pregnancy, like Rubel, she just assumed her sporting career was over: “I was done. Everybody tried to act like I was done, because they didn’t want me out running around when I had a baby, either. My husband’s family had a lot of influence on me…, because they were a lot more involved than my parents were…It was…accepted that that was pretty much it.” Bolin was upset at first, but since many of her teammates had left and no other basketball opportunities appeared on the horizon, she realized she had no other options. So, she got married and debated on whether to continue with her schooling. Bolin recalled, “I slid into that role of what you’re supposed to do and act like I was all grown up and everything like that…I was having a hard time deciding if I was gonna go back to college at that point.”

Even though she was not playing on the team her sophomore year, the majority of her college scholarship was still intact, so Bolin decided to keep taking classes. It worked out in her favor that her son was born during the extended winter break, since she was able to resume classes as normal when they started back up again in early 1977.

About the same time, Molly received a spur-of-the-moment invitation to help out a team

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970 Grett.
971 Bolin Kazmer, 13 June 2011.
972 Bolin Kazmer, 13 June 2011.
playing a basketball game at a local church league. She hadn’t worked out during her pregnancy and hadn’t played basketball for almost a year, but she couldn’t resist the opportunity. That game became a deciding point in her basketball career. Despite having a terrible game, she remembered thinking, “Oh, my God, I love this! I got to play again!...I kind of thought I was an old lady and all washed-up, and here I’m 19 years old, you know?”

She realized she was not ready to give up the sport she loved and that she could still play.

Bolin’s husband Dennie held pretty traditional opinions on men’s and women’s roles after marriage and parenthood. Bolin recalled, “...I think my husband wanted [my basketball career] to be over. He was very old-fashioned in that sense of ‘your job was to stay home and be the mom, clean the house, and you know, that kind of stuff.”

But Bolin and Dennie were able to work out their issues so she could continue playing college basketball. Dennie’s family proved helpful during this time as well, often watching Damien on the weekends. Bolin and Dennie’s traditional responsibilities did not change very much even though she juggled her roles as a student, athlete, wife, and mother. Bolin believed she was simply able to “cram it all in college where it didn’t seem so drastic.”

This tenuous agreement would be further strained when Bolin became the first woman to sign on with the newly formed Women’s Professional Basketball League (WBL) in 1978 as a member of the Iowa Cornets. Bill Byrne, a self-described

973 Bolin Kazmer, 13 June 2011.
974 Bolin Kazmer, 13 June 2011.
975 Bolin Kazmer, 13 June 2011.
976 Jeff Davidson, “Former Moravia star first to sign with women’s cage team,” Centerville Iowegian, 29 June 1978, Bolin Papers, IWA.
salesman, promoter, and entrepreneur, founded the first professional women’s basketball league after seeing a rapid increase in women’s basketball at both the high school and college levels in the mid-1970s following the passage of Title IX. The WBL was incorporated as a non-profit organization in Ohio in October 1977, but required eight investors to commit to eight franchises to begin play. By June 1978, six franchises were established and two more signed on shortly thereafter. The inaugural season began on December 9, 1978, with a tip-off between the Milwaukee Does and Chicago Hustle at the historic Mecca Arena in Milwaukee. The other six teams included the Iowa Cornets, Dayton Rockettes, Minnesota Fillies, Houston Angels, New Jersey Gems, and New York Stars.977

Women’s professional basketball had begun, and Molly Bolin was an integral part of it. Bolin was ecstatic over the new opportunity for herself and other women basketball players, but her husband and his family were not thrilled despite the fact that the Bolins’ needed a steady income since Dennie was laid off almost every winter when it was too cold to work as a bricklayer. Dennie and his family might have humored her playing basketball while still in college, but they opposed Bolin pursuing a basketball career in the pros. She clearly recalled Dennie’s family expressing their opposition: “When I later went on to play pro, got recruited for pro, there was a big hassle, like [Dennie’s family] would go, ‘This just isn’t going to work. I don’t think you should go do this…We’re against it.’”978 Bolin pushed ahead regardless and signed with the Iowa Cornets.979 In a 1979 article, Bolin described Dennie and both families’ hostility:

978 Bolin Kazmer, 13 June 2011.
At first, Denny [sic] didn’t like the idea of my playing basketball and it rubbed off on our folks. They thought it (basketball) would split us up. My mom is the stay-at-home type, really domestic, and she felt I should be at home taking care of my husband and child. But Denny gradually came over and so did the folks after they saw we were happy.\footnote{Bolin Kazmer, 13 June 2011.}

The Bolins’ and van Benthuysens’ concern over their kids’ marriage eventually proved valid. The couple tried to make Bolin’s career in the pros work along with their marriage. By 1982, both had failed.

The first year of the WBL provided many new opportunities for Bolin. She stated, “It kind of opened up a whole new door of opportunities because, not only, you know, was I now playing for a living, making an income on it, which my family certainly needed, but right from the get-go, they wanted to use me for all the marketing.”\footnote{Bob Dyer, “A handful of roles for Cornets’ Bolin,” \textit{Des Moines Register} 29 March 1979, Bolin Papers, IWA.} The WBL was very image-conscious, and the image they promoted was that of the white, heterosexual, traditionally feminine woman. Karen Logan, who not only played for the WBL but also served as an assistant coach and league spokesperson, bluntly stated, “We will not hire one girl on our team who looks masculine. The only way society will accept our team or league, in general, is for us to show that it’s a normal thing to do. It must be family entertainment.”\footnote{Bolin Kazmer, 13 June 2011.} Molly Bolin, a beautiful, blonde, white All-American wife and mother, fit this image very well and was willing to participate in various promotional events and publicity stunts, ranging from public appearances at malls to pin-up posters.\footnote{As cited in Porter, 88.}

\footnote{Bolin Kazmer, 13 June 2011; Shelley Lucas, “Carnography: Selling Women’s Professional Basketball in a Girls’ Basketball State,” \textit{The Annals of Iowa} (Fall 2005), 347-349. Lucas argues that the Cornets’ use of Bolin as a marketing strategy “is an exception in the generally uniquely approach the Iowa Cornets took to marketing during
Bolin loved the publicity and marketing aspect of the sport, but that also meant more time away from Dennie and Damien, which further strained her marriage. According to Bolin, “Dennie had problems, kind of, with that from the beginning...He’s like, ‘You’re playing. Why do you have to go do this too?’” Bolin, on the other hand, viewed her promotional work as a career investment. If she helped bring the league publicity and thus new fans, the WBL had a greater chance of surviving.

The first season the Cornets seventeen home games were held in eight different cities across the state in an attempt to “make sure that as many people around the state as possible get to see ‘their’ Iowa Cornets.” The Bolins relocated to the city of Des Moines, which hosted eight “home” games, but Bolin still traveled around the state for the other nine home games as well as across the United States for away games. She admittedly struggled with some feelings of guilt for being away from home and her family. She explained to the Des Moines Register, “Sometimes...you feel guilty about not giving them enough time.” She also relied on both her and Dennie’s parents to help with childcare when she traveled, which she appreciated.

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the team’s first season.” (349) Due to the popularity of high school girls basketball in Iowa, Lucas explains, the Cornets mostly focused on selling “Iowa pride” that “rested on two key areas of recognition: girls’ basketball and Iowa’s reputation as an idyllic heartland and breadbasket for the country.” (353-354). While the strategy used by the Cornets and Bolin might have been the exception in terms of Iowa marketing, it was more representative of the league’s larger marketing campaign and similar to the marketing ploys established by the other individual franchises. (344-345)

984 Bolin Kazmer, 13 June 2011.
985 Bolin Kazmer, 13 June 2011. Bolin’s promotional and publicity work for the WBL will be more fully discussed in Ch. 6.
986 “The WBL’s First Franchise,” Bolin Papers, IWA.
987 Bolin Kazmer, 13 June 2011.
988 Dyer.
989 Bolin Kazmer, 13 June 2011.
Dennie found himself having to pick up more household and childcare duties during Bolin’s first season with the Cornets, which began with practice in October 1978 and lasted through April 1979. He had to cook more since “there was nobody else to do it” and quickly learned it was “a lot of work to take care of a 2 year-old.” He relied heavily on his parents to help with childcare for their son. Previously, Molly had always been there when he came home from work, but he stated, “It took some getting used to all right…All of a sudden I’d come home and there was nothing.” He also lost some of his own identity; he became known more as “Molly’s Husband” than Dennie Bolin by reporters, his wife’s teammates, and fans. In fact, some of Molly’s teammates got him a Cornets shirt for Christmas with the nickname written across the back as a joke, which, as Molly recalled, did not go over particularly well. In a June 1979 article entitled, “The men behind Iowa’s successful women,” Dennie claimed he “used to get a little tired of being referred to as ‘Molly’s husband’” but merely laughed about it now. The article sought to highlight Dennie’s attempts at domesticity and support of his wife in the second half of the season after he became more comfortable with the team and their new schedule. Yet underlying tension peeked through, in particular with Dennie’s last quote in the article describing an outing in Lineville, Missouri: “There we were, 100

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990 Patricia Cooney, “The men behind Iowa’s successful women,” Des Moines Register, 17 June 1979, Bolin Papers, IWA.
991 Bolin Kazmer, 13 June 2011.
992 Cooney.
993 Porter, 223.
994 Bolin Kazmer, 13 June 2011.
995 Cooney.
miles from home at a fireworks stand, and I’ll be damned if this guy didn’t come up to me ask, ‘Are you Molly’s husband?’”

For someone who believed that it was the man’s job to support the family while the woman stayed home with their children, it surely must have been difficult to be continually laid off and shouldering many of the domestic responsibilities. Bolin acknowledged that there was “a little bit more role reversal” between her and her husband when she first joined the Cornets, and in her opinion, “it kept going downhill from there.” The couple clearly had different career visions and marriage expectations as time passed. Bolin recalled, “…It was getting all screwed up…what he thought he was gonna do and my expectations and stuff…they were just totally different. Because when I started to see there was gonna be more to [my basketball career], I wanted it, and

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996 Cooney.
997 Bolin Kazmer, 13 June 2011.
998 This discrepancy between career visions and marriage expectations experienced by the Bolins was similar to the problems faced by many of the couples Arlie Hochschild interviewed in her book *The Second Shift*. A person’s gender strategy (defined as “a plan of action through which a person tries to solve problems at hand, given the cultural notions of gender at play”) forces him or her to reflect on their personal beliefs about manhood and womanhood, many of which were formed as children and are also tied to their emotions. A man, for instance, “makes a connection between how he thinks about his manhood, what he feels about it, and what he does.” A woman employs the same strategy. Hochschild explains, “Each person’s gender ideology defines what sphere a person wants to identify with (home or work) and how much power in the marriage one wants to have (less, more, or the same amount).” Hochschild identified three types of marital role ideologies: traditional, transitional, and egalitarian. In the traditional ideology, a man identifies with his role in the workforce and holds more power than his wife, whereas the wife primarily identifies with the home and “wants less power” than her husband. Residing on the opposite end of the spectrum, egalitarians want to be jointly associated with their home or their work or both. And transitionals combine the other two ideologies in various ways. For instance, “a typical transitional man is all for his wife working, but expects her to do the lion’s share at home too.” (All quotes from Hochschild, 15) It appears that the Bolins ascribed to different marital role ideologies. Dennie identified with a traditional model while Molly edged toward a more egalitarian one. Conflicts emerged when their ideologies did not properly align with the reality of their lives, as discussed above.
nothing was going to stop me." Bolin understood that as a part of a newly formed professional basketball team and league, she was both a pioneer and “always teetering on the brink of failure.” She was willing to do anything to make the league and her career succeed, and in her own words, “that tunnel vision no doubt contributed to relationship problems.”

Bolin played a second year with the Iowa Cornets, but by the end of the season, financial and management problems threatened to fold the team. Bolin, unsure of the future of the Cornet organization, had been offered a chance to play with a new team called the Southern California Breeze in a new professional league, the Ladies Professional Basketball Association (LPBA). The new league flew Bolin out to California three times and offered her a $30,000/year player salary, a position as an assistant coach, and a job in public relations during the off season. Since his bricklaying job was irregular in Iowa, Dennie originally supported their move to California, hoping that the milder weather would offer work year-round.

Unfortunately for the Bolins, the league never really got off the ground. Many of the teams never formed, and those that did played a handful of games against each other before the LPBA collapsed in December 1980. Bolin was left without a team, but not for long. The Iowa Cornets had since folded, but the WBL was still in business, and the San Francisco Pioneers heavily recruited Bolin to play for them and even offered to help Dennie find employment. The Bolins again relocated, this time to northern California.

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999 Bolin Kazmer, 13 June 2011.
1000 Porter, 223.
1001 As cited in Porter, 223.
They lived in the San Francisco suburb of Novato, California, in a condo near other teammates, so she could carpool to and from practice. Once the Bolins moved, Dennie became frustrated with the situation because he realized the franchise could not help him obtain a bricklaying job but instead offered him a position with the league, which he did not want. Bolin recalled his frustration: "They had been promising him work. But they really couldn't go out and give him a bricklaying job, you know?" According to Bolin, the Pioneers "tried to explain to him that they had no control over union jobs hiring bricklayers, but he was always upset that they didn't deliver the job he wanted." Bolin's career move to San Francisco was particularly hard for Dennie, not only because he could not find bricklaying work. The Pioneers were a West Coast team with significantly more travel than when Bolin was with the Cornets. The team would sometimes stay on the road for weeks at a time because it proved cheaper than flying back and forth to and from San Francisco. Dennie was still unemployed, began to drink more, and did not have family around to help care for Damien who was now four years old. Bolin knew her husband did not like the fact she was gone for so long and understood that it created a difficult situation, but at the same time, she was determined to be successful at her career and support her family. She stated,

It takes a lot of patience from the other end. My husband had to give up his jobs and let me be the breadwinner...It hasn't been easy. I can't say I've done the greatest job in the world [with my family]. I'm not easy to live with, because I'm not the type of person who can stand to be mediocre...During the season, basketball becomes a very involved

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2004 Molly Bolin Kazmer, interview by author, 26 October 2011, email correspondence.
2005 Bolin Kazmer, 26 October 2011.
thing...You can’t just throw your shoes in the closet between games and forget about it.  

Part of Bolin’s career goals included becoming a known personality in ways that helped publicize the WBL. She had already been a part of a pin-up poster promotion with the WBL during her second year with the Cornets, which turned out to be the most successful promotion in their short history. Bolin’s black and white pin-up posters were modeled after the successful poster craze that featured such celebrities as Farrah Fawcett, Loni Anderson, and Suzanne Somers, and they sold out in little time.  

This emphasis on Bolin’s good looks as opposed to her basketball skills caused the posters to also be the most controversial promotion in the WBL. Many accused her of “selling out her gender” or believed that Bolin was exploited by the WBL. Bolin maintained both then and now that neither was true. She thought it was important to do the publicity shots to simply get people’s attention, and as she recalled, “They got attention!” Because women’s professional basketball was so new and many Americans were skeptical of the type of women that would play, Bolin and the WBL felt they needed to engage in a reverse marketing ploy: “We kind of had to do it in reverse. It wasn’t like they came to see the game, and then now they want to know more about me, like they do now. It was the complete opposite. You had to let them hear about who you were, and then they’d be curious to see if you could really play.”

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3008 Porter, 94.
3009 Bolin Kazmer, 13 June 2011.
3010 Bolin Kazmer, interview by author, 14 June 2011.
Bolin acknowledged that many people did not believe she “could look like that
and play basketball,” so the idea was to grab people’s attention and then show them you
had real basketball skills. And Bolin had skills. League-mate Donna Geils
complimented Bolin on being “one example of an overall package” with her combination
of good looks and talent. She stated, “She could hit from anywhere. She really was
amazing.” Bolin knew her situation would be much different if she could not back up
her skills: “If I couldn’t play a lick and they had me on the team to pose in swimsuits,
that’s a whole different story. If I couldn’t get off the bench, and I’m there trying to be a
glamour girl…but that’s not the case!...I’m a starter. I play. I’m on the all-star team.”
Bolin enjoyed doing publicity for the league and “felt like it was in good taste.” The
media understood this type of promotion and latched onto her marketing appeal. One
reporter for the Orange County, California, daily newspaper described her in the
following manner:

She has the jump shot, one of the most accurate this side of Jerry West.
And she has the personality, almost as talkative as Magic Johnson. And
she has something that no NBA player will ever have. At 23, she looks
like she belongs on the cover of Vogue magazine instead of on the
basketball court. That takes nothing away from her basketball skills. It
just makes them a little more marketable.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Bolin’s husband was not thrilled with his wife appearing
in a variety of promotional pin-up posters and gracing the cover of newspapers scantily
clad. He was particularly upset with one San Francisco Chronicle article featuring Bolin

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3011 Bolin Kazmer, 14 June 2011.
3012 As cited in Porter, 94.
3013 Bolin Kazmer, 14 June 2011.
3014 Bolin Kazmer, 14 June 2011.
3015 Vince Grippi, “What’s a pro basketball player like this doing in a place like here?”
The Register, 19 December 1980, Bolin Papers, IWA.
on the beach in a one-piece swimsuit which unbeknownst to the couple appeared on the front page of the sports section. When Bolin first relocated to Southern California she participated in a photo shoot for the LPBA to shed her Iowa image and show she was a true Southern California girl now. The photo shoot took place on the beach, keeping in theme with the Southern California idea, and a variety of pictures were taken in different outfits. Bolin suggested the idea to do one in her swimsuit, since she was, in fact, on the beach. After the LPBA folded, she passed the pictures along to her new team for brochures and flyers for autographs, etc. However, the swimsuit picture made its way to the Chronicle without Bolin’s permission, thus shocking both her and Dennie when it appeared in print. Bolin admittedly did not ask Dennie for permission about matters related to her career, instead doing what she felt like she needed to do to be successful. But in doing so, Dennie received a few surprises along the way. She stated, “That was probably part of it...I don’t think he would have been as upset if we would have known that swimsuit one was coming.”

By the end of Bolin’s first year with the San Francisco Pioneers, tension in her marriage was at an all-time high as she juggled her roles of wife, mother, and basketball star. Many different reasons led to their relationship’s downfall, but in Bolin’s opinion, problems came to a head due to their role reversal with her becoming the family’s breadwinner and the time she spent away from home either playing basketball or promoting the league. She recalled, “The more I was gone, the more clingy he got, the more I wanted [for him] to not be clingy.” She also revealed that Dennie had a long-standing drinking problem that was exacerbated when he was out of work, which he was

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Bolin Kazmer, 14 June 2011.  
Bolin Kazmer, 13 June 2011.
during their entire time living in San Francisco. Dennie was also more of a hometown Iowa boy and apparently did not like being so far from his family.1018

Dennie and Damien returned back to Iowa shortly before the close of the Pioneers’ season, at which point Bolin planned to join them.1019 By the time she reached Iowa, it was clear their marriage was on the brink of collapse. The couple sat down to talk. As Bolin remembered the conversation, she said, “This isn’t going to work. I’m not going to stay in Iowa. You want to stay here. I’m gonna move on.”1020 They parted as amicable friends with Bolin even offering money for Dennie to travel to California with his buddies to retrieve whatever he wanted out of their storage unit. Dennie took her up on the offer and traveled down the coast with his friends sporting an “I’m getting a divorce” t-shirt. Bolin recalled, “Everybody thought that was really funny that we were getting along so well and I gave him money to go on this trip and take his buddies.”1021

But the real problems occurred when Dennie returned from his California trip, and the Bolins and their families clashed over the custody of little Damien. These problems would ultimately lead to several drawn out and nasty custody battles in which Bolin’s career as a professional basketball player was used against her in an attempt to label her an unfit mother. As WBL historian Karra Porter notes, “This was the first reported case of a female professional athlete having her career used against her in a custody battle.”1022 But this battle ultimately reveals much more about the status and

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1018 Bolin Kazmer, 13 June 2011.
1019 Porter, 223; Bolin Kazmer, 13 June 2011.
1020 Bolin Kazmer, 13 June 2011.
1021 Bolin Kazmer, 13 June 2011.
1022 Porter, 226-227.
opportunities of the female professional athlete, the mother-athlete, women’s sexuality, and women’s roles in society.

Dennie’s parents worried that if the couple divorced, Dennie would lose custody of his son. Bolin believed her father-in-law instigated many of the problems at the outset of their separation when he saw that Bolin had no intentions of staying in Iowa: “I was going to California. I was probably taking Damien with me, and he was gonna put a stop to it,” Bolin declared. “So it went totally downhill from there. And where Dennie and I would have separated as friends, it got all out of proportion because now it came down to control over Damien, and they weren’t about to let him go.”

Still, Bolin and Dennie were able to work out their immediate issues when they filed for a dissolution petition, i.e. a divorce, in June 1981. The following month they added a stipulation to the petition which provided joint custody of their son. What became readily apparent in the subsequent months was the confusion over the definition of joint custody in terms of the physical care of Damien, since the parents lived in different states. This lack of clarification was not uncommon since over thirty percent of all Iowa divorces included joint custody arrangements of a similar nature to the Bolins. The original divorce proceeding had been pushed through in a matter of months, however, because after their separation Dennie quickly became engaged to a new woman who was pregnant with his child. The divorce papers had not specifically designated which parent Damien would live with a majority of the time.

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1023 Bolin Kazmer, 13 June 2011.
1024 “In Re Marriage of Bolin,” 336 N.W.2d 441 (Iowa 1983), 444.
1025 Porter, 223; Paul Leavitt, “Court cautions Iowans in Bolin custody ruling,” Des Moines Register, 21 July 1983.
Bolin did not believe Dennie was spearheading the custody battle which followed their divorce but rather that his parents had grown so attached to Damien while Bolin played for the Cornets and “didn’t want to see him go across the country.” Many small town Iowans also feared the geographic unknown in some respects. Leaving rural Iowa was the equivalent in some close-knit small communities to falling off the face of the earth. Bolin recalled her own mother’s initial fears of her relocation to California when she would say things like, “So-and-so’s daughter went to California, and they never heard from her again. They don’t know if she’s dead or alive!” In the small town mentality of Moravia, California seemed more like “the land of the kooks and crazies” because many residents had not traveled there, and “they didn’t know except what they’d hear and see and sometimes that’s not always the best impression.” As a hotbed of activity regarding women’s rights, the sexual revolution, the gay rights revolution, and anti-war protests of the 1960s and 1970s, California struck conservative small town Iowans likely as a foreign place differing greatly from their more traditionally conservative values and morals.

During the late spring and summer months while Bolin dealt with the demise of her marriage, the WBL faced its own problems. Like the Bolins’ marriage, it too collapsed after the 1981 season. After adding the joint custody provision to their divorce proceedings, Bolin hightailed back to California in search of new work and a suitable home in which to raise Damien, who would be joining her in California after Labor Day. Since professional basketball was no longer an option for her, she took up her friend and

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3026 Bolin Kazmer, 14 June 2011.
3027 Bolin Kazmer, 14 June 2011.
3028 Bolin Kazmer, 14 June 2011.
former Cornets teammate Joan Uhl’s offer to help her find a job back in the Southern California area, where Uhl’s family was from.\textsuperscript{1029} With Uhl’s help, Bolin obtained work in construction, but much like her experiences in basketball, her fellow employers did not believe she could do the manual labor because of her looks. Bolin showed up for her first day of work in short shorts, a tube top, and ribbons in her hair. She recalled, “They took one look at me and started laughing.”\textsuperscript{1030} This just increased Bolin’s determination, and she toughed it out, even though her employers continually gave her impossibly difficult jobs in an attempt to make her quit. After the completion of all her grunt work, the company figured she had proven herself, so they began to teach her skills, including painting.\textsuperscript{1031}

Bolin returned to Iowa in September at the agreed upon time to pick up Damien, but as the Iowa Supreme Court later noted, “Dennie misled her into believing he had an order allowing her to take Damien for only two weeks.”\textsuperscript{1032} Bolin, in what she thought was keeping with the law, returned her son to Dennie then. She returned to Iowa to pick up Damien in January 1982, but Dennie convinced her not to take Damien back to California until after his upcoming wedding took place. Dennie claimed to be waiting on their divorce papers to go through the system, which he said would happen later in January. Bolin agreed, but Dennie did not even file the papers until February and then

\textsuperscript{1029} Porter, 228; Bolin Kazmer, 13 June 2011.
\textsuperscript{1030} Bolin Kazmer, 13 June 2011.
\textsuperscript{1031} Bolin Kazmer, 13 June 2011; Lou Schuler, “Molly Bolin Brushes Up For a New Season,” Bolin Papers, IWA.
\textsuperscript{1032} “In Re Marriage of Bolin,” 444.
did not get married until later that month. After giving her the runaround, Dennie finally allowed Bolin to take their son to California in March 1982.\textsuperscript{1033}

In the meantime, Bolin had procured flexible but full-time employment with a remodeling and decorating company and resided with Uhl in a condo in Brea, California. When she brought Damien back to live with her after months under Dennie and his parents care, she discovered that Damien had some serious dental and vision problems that had been severely neglected. Bolin immediately set up appointments to take care of his needs, which included, among other procedures, surgery for an abscessed tooth.\textsuperscript{1034} She enrolled him in a summer camp and preschool and “kept Dennie and his parents informed of Damien’s progress” as well as allowed them “to call him whenever they wished.”\textsuperscript{1035} Concerned over potential future neglect, Bolin hoped to keep Damien under her care the majority of the time, although she did not want to prevent Damien from maintaining a stable relationship with his father. She sought the counsel of an attorney, but Dennie “did not respond to efforts to discuss the issue.”\textsuperscript{1036} Despite this, Bolin agreed to allow Dennie to have Damien for two weeks in August prior to the beginning of his school year in California.

Days before Dennie’s scheduled arrival in Brea to pick up Damien, Bolin received a disturbing call from a Centerville, Iowa, police officer in the middle of the night warning her that Dennie was currently on his way to California to “kidnap” Damien

\textsuperscript{1033}“In Re Marriage of Bolin,” 444.
\textsuperscript{1034} Bolin Kazmer, 13 June 2011; “In Re Marriage of Bolin,” 444-445.
\textsuperscript{1035} “In Re Marriage of Bolin,” 444-445.
\textsuperscript{1036} “In Re Marriage of Bolin,” 445.
from pre-school. The officer then sent the following teletyped message to the
California State Police:

We have word that a subject from our city is en route to California, city
unknown at this time, to abduct his 4 year old son from his divorced wife.
Supposedly, our information shows the abduction is to take place at a day
care center today, 07-29-82.

Bolin decided to keep Damien at home with her but called the school to keep them
 abreast of the situation. Later that day, the school notified Bolin with the news that
Dennie had in fact stopped there looking for Damien. According to Bolin, Dennie and
his new pregnant wife “then had the gall” to show up at her house asking where Damien
was. She responded with, “Where do you think he is? He lives here. What are YOU
doing here?”

Although furious and appalled at Dennie’s behavior, she also knew
Damien wanted to spend time with his father, which led her to make an agreement with
her ex-husband. She would allow him and his wife to take Damien back to Iowa for the
remainder of the summer, so long as he signed an agreement “promising to return him by
September 15, 1982.”

Dennie signed the agreement with no problems.

After this point, the custody battle spiraled quickly out of control and into the
courts. Despite his signed agreement, Dennie registered and enrolled Damien for school
in their hometown of Moravia, Iowa, all the while assuring Bolin he fully intended to
return Damien in September. As the pickup date neared, Dennie’s family instructed
Bolin to retrieve Damien from school when she arrived back in town, but when Bolin
attempted to do so, Damien was not at school. She quickly learned that Dennie and his

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1038 As cited in Porter, 224.
1039 Bolin Kazmer, 13 June 2011.
parents were hiding Damien from her. She was then served modified custody papers and a restraining order preventing her from taking Damien back to California. Bolin was understandably distraught. She stated, “They took [Damien] and left the state, while they told me to fly back to get him. And I’m like, ‘Why’d you guys do that? I mean, why wouldn’t you just be straight up with me?’ So I was really upset about the way they did it and the fact that it was just flat-out lying and deception.”

Bolin immediately hired a lawyer and filed a motion to remove the restraining order preventing her from taking Damien. An emergency hearing took place with the judge deciding to let the order stand. However, the judge then shocked everyone in the courtroom by announcing that he was in fact related to Dennie’s original divorce lawyer and should therefore not formally rule in the case. He scheduled another trial to officially determine their custody status to be held the following month and to be presided over by a different judge. Bolin desperately wanted to see her son, but Dennie would only allow her a couple hours’ time with Damien, the visitation supervised in his parents’ basement. Bolin thought that would hurt Damien more than help. She stated, “He’s going to be worse off if I see him for a couple of hours under those circumstances than if I don’t see him at all. That’s just going to mess him up.” As people filed out of the courtroom, Bolin fell apart.

By the time the new trial began in October 1982 under the new judge, the Honorable Richard J. Vogel, tempers flared and tensions remained high. A fist fight had already occurred between Bolin’s and Dennie’s families, and the community of Moravia

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3041 Bolin Kazmer, 13 June 2011.
3042 As cited in Porter, 224.
3043 Porter, 225.
split into opposing sides. The van Benthuysens felt like outcasts in their own town.
Bolin’s mother even quit attending her local church due to unpleasant run-ins with
supporters of Dennie and his family. In the meantime, after already paying thousands of
dollars in legal fees, Bolin struggled to raise money to pay lawyer fees for the appeal.
She wanted to hire Ione G. Shadduck, a Des Moines feminist lawyer known for her work
on civil rights but did not have the means to pay her. Shadduck, wanting to take the case,
lowered her starting costs from $2,000 all the way down to $500, which Bolin’s father
immediately paid on her behalf.\footnote{Bolin Kazmer, 13 June 2011; Porter 224-225.}

The trial should have taken an afternoon, but instead dragged out excessively and
was postponed three times in what Bolin believes was an attempt to outlast her and drain
her finances. She was still working and living in California and had to continually fly
back and forth to Iowa for the hearings: “They did everything to make me run out of
money so I would give up.”\footnote{Bolin Kazmer, 13 June 2011.} Not only was she losing money by missing work, she also
lost out on potentially lucrative basketball opportunities due to the custody battle. Bolin
received offers to play professional women’s basketball in Europe, but if she left, she
would lose any chance of gaining custody of Damien. Bolin truly believed that she
would provide Damien with the most stable home to grow up in. She recalled, “I was at
the point where I wouldn’t even have fought it if I thought he had a better home back
there.”\footnote{Bolin Kazmer, 13 June 2011.} Bolin was leery of Dennie’s new wife in terms of being a good stepmother to
her child. and apparently for good reason—later on the stepmother physically assaulted

\footnote{Bolin Kazmer, 13 June 2011; Porter 224-225.}
\footnote{Bolin Kazmer, 13 June 2011.}
\footnote{Bolin Kazmer, 13 June 2011.}
Damien. Despite receiving money offers to play in various Italian leagues, Bolin could not “just walk away” from her responsibilities as a mother.\(^{3047}\)

Dennie, his family, and his lawyers did everything they could to smear Bolin’s character and attack her as an unfit mother because of her basketball career. The mud-slinging began by questioning the promotional posters and publicity pictures of Bolin used to market the WBL and her teams. Bolin viewed the attacks as attempts to prove she had “sleazy intentions” with the so-called “cheesecake” photos. Dennie’s lawyer even accosted Bolin’s mother, Wanda van Benthuysen, about the photos, asking if her daughter had ever “done cheesecake?”\(^{3048}\) Van Benthuysen explained that her daughter posed for publicity pictures that both the Bolins and the Van Benthuysens were proud of when they saw them. The lawyer pushed harder, cynically asking, “Hasn’t your daughter ever told you about suggestive sexual poses?” Van Benthuysen responded, “Well, she’s never taught me about sex.”\(^{3049}\) The lawyer also questioned Bolin about the posters, asking if she was ashamed of them. She was not. She replied, “In my position as a basketball player, a good part of my value to my team was my marketing value, which did include a lot of publicity pictures. It was all done in promotion. The team had to survive on that type of thing…I don’t feel like I did anything that was detrimental either to my image or to my family or embarrassing to Dennie.”\(^{3050}\)

Another tactic Dennie’s lawyers used was to attempt to show that Bolin neglected her duties as a wife and mother to pursue her professional basketball career. Bolin stated, “In those days they could use a career against you because if you had a career, obviously

\(^{3047}\) Bolin Kazmer, 13 June 2011.  
\(^{3048}\) Porter, 222.  
\(^{3049}\) As cited in Porter, 222.  
\(^{3050}\) As cited in Porter, 225.
you weren’t a full-time mom, and what kind of mom were you to be out traveling with a basketball team?" ¹⁰⁵¹ They focused on the amount of time she spent traveling with her job, which as Bolin explained, really wasn’t that much time in the span of an entire year. During the four and a half month season, about half that time was spent traveling.¹⁰⁵² Bolin recalled, “[The lawyer] brought up every away game and every time I was gone and all that kind of stuff [and tried] to make it sound like I was absentee where in actuality, I was probably home a lot more than if I’d had a full-time job.”¹⁰⁵³ The lawyer seemingly ignored the fact that if Bolin had remained home, the family would have lost their main source of income since Dennie was still unemployed.

Bolin understood the hypocrisy behind Dennie’s lawyers’ arguments in terms of the larger feminist and women’s rights movement. She recalled, “From high school, and being in Moravia and stuff, I was very used to…having equal rights…and being treated equally. And when I saw that wasn’t the case, you know, I was ready to fight it.”¹⁰⁵⁴ Much like Rubel, Bolin had the opportunity to play competitive women’s basketball as a girl and young woman, but once basketball appeared to affect her traditional roles as wife and mother, this equality was revoked. In arguments reminiscent of those promoted by IGHSAU’s E. Wayne Cooley, Dennie’s lawyers attempted to show Bolin was not holding up her end of the marriage deal in terms of traditional male and female roles. They insisted that she neglected her family in an attempt to pursue a career and that she failed

¹⁰⁵¹ As cited in Porter, 226.
¹⁰⁵² Porter, 225-226.
¹⁰⁵³ Bolin Kazmer, 13 June 2011.
¹⁰⁵⁴ Bolin Kazmer, 13 June 2011.
to uphold the couple’s marriage agreement that supposedly mandated she stay home to take care of Dennie and Damien.\footnote{Bolin Kazmer, 13 June 2011. This confirms Dennie’s insistence on a traditional marriage ideology and the conflict he felt when Bolin failed to uphold it.}

The point Dennie’s legal team continually emphasized was that Bolin, as a married woman and mother, put her career before her family, which was untraditional and ultimately not as valuable in society’s eyes. When Bolin’s lawyer asked Dennie’s mother what her reaction would have been if Dennie was a professional basketball star, she awkwardly replied, “I think a man, in a father and mother, have a different role in a—I mean, this would have been his profession.”\footnote{As cited in Porter, 227.} In other words, Bolin’s natural role was as a wife and mother, not a professional basketball player, and Dennie’s traditional role was to provide for the family. But because Bolin had chosen to pursue her career, she and Dennie maintained a “role-reversed” marriage. Although Dennie’s mother acknowledged that she and her husband watched Damien a lot while Bolin played for the Cornets, when Bolin played in California, Dennie served as the primary caregiver. Due to the role-reversal, Dennie’s lawyers argued that he should be awarded primary custody. Shadduck skillfully reminded the district court that the Iowa Supreme Court had recently ruled that “mothers should no longer be given preference in child custody just because they happened to be the primary caregiver.”\footnote{Porter, 227.} So if Dennie was claiming himself the primary care-giver in their marriage, he, like a mother, should not be given automatic custody based on that principle alone.\footnote{Porter, 227.} Dennie’s lawyers’ arguments appeared
contradictory; they condemned the Bolins’ role-reversal yet simultaneously used it to support Dennie’s claim for sole custody of Damien.

Another troubling issue was the lawyers repeated insinuations about Bolin’s relationship with her friend, roommate, and former teammate Joan Uhl and the perception of women basketball players as lesbian. Bolin described Uhl as an incredibly supportive friend who was like a sister to her. When she was down and out, it was Uhl who helped her find a job and offered her a place to live. But since Uhl was lesbian, Bolin found herself having to defend her job, her friendship, and ultimately her own sexuality. The lawyer asked questions regarding Bolin and Uhl’s “close association,” their living situation, Uhl’s “femininity or masculinity,” and Uhl’s status as a “parent” figure to Damien.1059 He also hinted that Bolin’s Laguna Beach remodeling job was located in a gay community in the following exchange:

‘Laguna Beach is kind of an art community; isn’t it?’ he asked.
‘I would say so,’ Molly had agreed.
‘It’s sort of a gay community, too, isn’t it?’
‘I really have no idea.’
‘I see. You don’t know whether San Francisco has a gay community either, do you?’ the attorney said sarcastically.1060

Bolin saw the lawyer’s attacks as “the same old stereotype that is always put on women athletes.”1061 Bolin’s quote refers to popular stereotypes that labeled women athletes as lesbians and then associated lesbianism with masculinity, which prompted the “assumption that lesbians are not ‘real’ women.”1062 Bolin explained, “In high school, everybody thinks it’s great that the girls play basketball. And then I was wife and mother

1059 Porter, 228.
1060 Porter, 228.
1061 Porter, 228.
1062 Griffin, 62.
and also played basketball. That was fine. But once I was on my own, I was a jock.”

In light of the trial, Bolin’s usage of the word “jock” can be translated to mean lesbian and—as the lawyers tried to prove—an unfit and abnormal woman.\(^\text{1063}\)

Whether it was all the mud-slinging, simply a “foregone conclusion” due to an unfair bias, or a severely misguided interpretation of the law, the Honorable Richard J. Vogel ruled in favor of Dennie and awarded him sole custody of Damien.\(^\text{1064}\) In his written ruling, he explained that although both parents were fit, Bolin had spent considerable amount of time away from home and repeatedly relocated her family to pursue her career. And since Damien had spent a majority of time with Dennie since the couples’ separation and was already enrolled in school in Moravia, which was more his “hometown,” Dennie should receive full custody.\(^\text{1065}\) Both Bolin and her lawyer believed Vogel allowed his own bias to cloud the interpretation of the law.\(^\text{1066}\) Shadduck explained, “We were very shocked. Well, you had to know Judge Vogel. Then you weren’t so shocked.”\(^\text{1068}\)

\(^\text{1063}\) As cited in Porter, 228.


\(^\text{1065}\) Bolin Kazmer, 13 June 2011; Porter, 227; “In Re Marriage of Bolin,” 442.

\(^\text{1066}\) Porter, 227.

\(^\text{1067}\) Bolin Kazmer, 13 June 2011; Porter, 227.

\(^\text{1068}\) As cited in Porter, 227.
Bolin and her lawyer found the ruling completely unacceptable and immediately decided to appeal to the Iowa Supreme Court, which reviewed their case the following summer. Shadduck maintained that Judge Vogel penalized Bolin for simply providing for her family through employment that required a little travel. She argued, “Even if she were still a professional athlete, she should not be deprived of custody of her child. Such a ruling would set a precedent for spouses of all professional athletes and other workers who must spend time away from home to claim custody of the children because the other parent must work for several days at a time in other places than the hometown.” 1069

But the case ultimately came down to two factors for the Iowa Supreme Court. One was the need to clear up the legal confusion over joint custody and physical care, which had just recently been redefined. Previously, joint custody was defined as parents sharing rights and physical care of their child, which is what the Bolins included in their divorce.1070 However, in 1982, the court added an amendment that redefined joint custody to mean that parents shared “rights and responsibilities toward the child and under which neither parent has rights superior to those of the other parent.”1071 Physical care meant “the right and responsibility to maintain the principal home of the minor child and provide for the routine care of the child.”1072 Under the new amendment, joint custody and physical care were not synonymous.1073 The Iowa Supreme Court explained that the court has the right to “award physical care to one parent only... Joint legal

1069 As cited in Porter, 229.
1070 Leavitt.
1071 “In Re Marriage of Bolin,” 443.
1072 “In Re Marriage of Bolin,” 443.
1073 Leavitt.
custody does not require joint physical care.”

By explaining the new definitions of joint custody and physical care and acknowledging that parents can still have joint custody while only one parent retains physical care, the Iowa Supreme Court set a precedent for ruling in custody cases that has been cited across the United States and Guam in over two dozen other cases since 1983.

For the Bolin case, the Supreme Court of Iowa concluded that Judge Vogel should have determined whether a “preponderance of evidence” existed to prove that “conditions since [the divorce] occurred have so materially changed that the children’s best interests make it expedient to award their custody to” one parent. The court determined that “(1) father failed to meet his burden of proving that joint custody should be terminated, and (2) mother established preponderance of evidence that son’s best interests would be served if she had his physical care during the school year.” The Iowa Supreme Court “reversed and remanded” Judge Vogel’s previous ruling. They determined the couple would continue joint custody but rewarded Molly Bolin with physical custody of Damien.

The explanation of their decision highlighted the bias and unfairness of the earlier ruling:

The record shows Molly has gone ‘the extra mile’ to support Dennie’s relationship with Damien. Unfortunately Dennie, with some help from his family, has tried to achieve a de facto victory in the dispute over physical care by alienating Damien from his mother. Molly’s right as joint custodian, however, should not be defeated on this basis. Dennie’s conduct reflects adversely on his custodial ability, but we are hopeful he

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1074 “In Re Marriage of Bolin,” 443.
1075 Porter, 229.
1076 “In Re Marriage of Bolin,” 441.
1077 “In Re Marriage of Bolin,” 441.
1078 “In Re Marriage of Bolin,” 441.
1079 “In Re Marriage of Bolin,” 447.
will recognize Damien’s best interests require positive support of the
child’s relationship with Molly. 1080

Furthermore, the Supreme Court exonerated Molly’s character, parenting skills,
and living arrangements. The justices acknowledged that she had established a “loving,”
“wholesome,” and “pleasant home in a nice community” where she provided her son with
“personal attentions and necessary dental and medical care.” 1081 Her job was flexible
enough to allow her to spend extra time with Damien, and most importantly, “she has
demonstrated an ability to put her personal feelings aside to permit Damien to continue
his relationship with Dennie and Dennie’s family.” 1082 Bolin received “vindication” from
the Supreme Court’s ruling since they “reprimanded [Judge Vogel], and made him
rewrite…and reverse his order, and said that he should not have ruled that way when they
reviewed the transcript.” 1083 Bolin and Shadduck believed that they had not lost their
original case but rather had been unfairly “ruled against” and the Supreme Court’s
decision clearly reflected this. 1084

Bolin happily took Damien with her back to Brea, California, where they resided
for the next six years before relocating to the Palm Desert area to find more affordable
housing. She continued to pursue her professional basketball career as opportunities
emerged, but she also continued in the sports marketing business and the painting and
construction fields as well. Bolin married former college and professional basketball
player John Kazmer in 1989. Kazmer supported Bolin’s basketball career and was her

1080 In Re Marriage of Bolin, 445.
1081 In Re Marriage of Bolin, 447.
1082 In Re Marriage of Bolin, 447.
1083 Bolin Kazmer, 13 June 2011.
1084 Bolin Kazmer, 13 June 2011.
“number one fan.’’

Damien, eleven years old when his mother remarried, continued living with Bolin and Kazmer during the school year, while visiting his father during the summers and alternating holidays between Iowa and California. Damien even inherited some of his mother’s athletic skills. According to a proud Bolin, “Damien turned out to be this big, tall basketball player… He had a… pretty good high school basketball career. And he was a great high-jumper. He jumped like…6’8”, 6’9”. The kid could jump!’’

Molly’s husband John coached Damien in high school. The couple had a son and daughter together in 1992 and 1996, respectively.

**Progress, Backlash, and Continued Inequality**

The Bolin and Rubel cases exemplify changes ushered in by the Second Wave feminist movement but also stress the limits to those changes. The cases clearly show that doors were opening for American women including women athletes. No longer was it legally acceptable for blatant sexual discrimination. In Rubel’s case, her lawyers demonstrated the violation of her civil rights based on her status as wife and mother when male students were not discriminated against as husbands and fathers. Bolin’s case showed that even if women combined marriage, motherhood, and a career, they must be treated in the same manner as men who combine marriage, fatherhood, and a career.

Yet both cases proved to be messy, heated, divisive, and complex. Despite seemingly clear legal victories, both Rubel and Bolin had to fight to pursue their basketball careers and prove themselves fit mothers in the face of deeply entrenched and unaltered social values surrounding traditional roles for women, appropriate expressions

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1085 Bolin Kazmer, 13 June 2011.
1086 Bolin Kazmer, 13 June 2011.
1087 Bolin Kazmer, 13 June 2011.
1088 Bolin Kazmer, 13 June 2011.
of female sexuality, and reproductive rights. Their cases occurred at a particular moment in time when the women’s movement had recently provided new opportunities for women, yet a social backlash was occurring in response to these changes. As scholar Susan Faludi explained, “The antifeminist backlash [was] set off not by women’s achievement of full equality but by the increased possibility that they might win it.”

This backlash attempted to “push women back into their ‘acceptable’ roles—whether as Daddy’s girl or fluttery romantic” or as these cases show, the traditional homemaker focused solely on childrearing and caring for her husband.

The female athlete, in particular, experienced the critical advances and acute backlash of the larger women’s movement during the years surrounding the Rubel and Bolin cases. With the passage of the Title IX educational amendment in 1972 that prohibited discrimination on the “basis of sex” in any “education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance,” the fight for women’s equality in education and sports became a national issue. Title IX passed just as Rubel graduated high school...

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3090 Faludi, xxii.

and a few years before Bolin graduated, but the real effects of such monumental legislation occurred years later and too late to influence Rubel’s and Bolin’s careers in any major way. Though Title IX provided the women’s movement with a legislative victory, a backlash to women’s advances was already in motion. The experiences of Rubel and Bolin suggest that this backlash was in partial response to the fear that women’s traditional roles as wives and mothers were at stake. In both cases, men encouraged the young women to participate and excel at basketball until their sporting careers were perceived as interfering with their duties as wives and mothers. As Rubel and Bolin attempted to juggle and balance their roles as athlete, wife, and mother, male figures—particularly the officials of the IGHSAU, Dennie Bolin, Dennie’s lawyers, and Judge Vogel respectively—prevented them from completely overstepping conventional gender boundaries even as these boundaries were expanding. These cases highlight an emerging societal fear of women upsetting and subverting traditional ideals of masculinity and femininity, sexuality, and gender roles as women gained more opportunities in society.

Decades later, this fear has not completely disappeared. WNBA star Candace Parker’s 2009 frustrations over her responsibilities as a mother and athlete reveal deeper inequalities in sports and society than just women balancing their various roles. Parker’s basketball career provides a solid example of the legal successes of the women’s movement. Title IX provided her with the opportunity to play and excel at a nationally

renowned women’s college program and paved the way for her to continue on to a successful career in the WNBA. However, the advances of Title IX and the women’s movement are not as widespread as Parker’s case suggests. Given current statistics that show women still trail behind men in wages per hour and remain underrepresented in CEO positions as well as in the U.S. government, it is unsurprising that statistics also show women do not have equality in the sporting world despite many advances. For instance, although women make up to 50% of the student body at Division I colleges, they only receive 32% of recruiting dollars and only 37% of the total money spent on athletics. Similarly, at NCAA institutions, male student athletes get $136 million more in scholarship money than female student athletes.

These statistics reveal that obvious inequality still exists in women’s sports despite advances that influenced Parker’s opportunities. Yet reminiscent of Rubel’s and Bolin’s experiences, Parker also serves as a clear example of the continued social expectations governing the perceived conflict between athlete and mother. Women now have more sporting opportunities yet are still responsible for the primary care of their children. Unlike Rubel and Bolin, Parker was not necessarily expected to quit playing basketball just because she became a mother. Over the past couple decades the working mother has evolved into a common facet of the “new, modern mother.”

3092 Parker attended the University of Tennessee and played for the Lady Vols under the legendary coach Pat Summitt. During her time at Tennessee, the Lady Vols won two national championships. On April 9, 2008, the Los Angeles Sparks drafted Parker, making her the number one overall draft pick in the WNBA. Greg Auman, “Candace Parker is top pick in WNBA draft,” St. Petersburg Times, 10 April 2008; “Bio,” www.candaceparker.com.
3094 Douglas and Michaels, 11.
the fact both Parker and her husband play professional basketball, the daily responsibility of childcare still falls heavily on her shoulders. Parker’s comments indicate that in many ways “American women have a way to go before they enter the promised land of equality.” Parker, like Rubel, Bolin, and the millions of determined women before her, will keep pushing until she gets there. As she explained to the ESPN journalist, women have it harder than men because “that’s just the way it is.” But then she smiled wearily and added, “For now.”

3095 Faludi, xxiii.
3096 Glock, “The Selling of Candace Parker.”
CHAPTER 5
MOTHERS ON TRACK

"I went to have [my son] Ricky, and it was like, okay, now we delivered, let’s go home. So, I think the skating made me a stronger person.”
Mary Youpelle Massro, Roller Derby skater\textsuperscript{1097}

"We didn’t want to take [our daughter] on the road because she was an infant. That’s too hard. So we didn’t take her—we didn’t actually take her until she was a little bit older and potty-trained.”
Carol Meyer Roman, Roller Derby skater\textsuperscript{1098}

The sport of Roller Derby provided an alternative sporting model for the athlete-mother, challenging dominant social norms that restricted women in their attempts to combine their roles as wife, mother, and athlete. Unlike basketball, Roller Derby not only accepted and supported athlete-mothers, but it also embraced families as a whole. A caption from a large photograph in the 1952 Roller Derby yearbook illustrated this acceptance: “Three generations of Bogashes smile happily as Ma Bogash is awarded a cup symbolic of her election to the Roller Derby Hall of Fame. That’s son Billy on the far left and Bill Bogash, Jr., standing in between mother and son.”\textsuperscript{1099} Whereas those governing the sport of basketball attempted to force mothers out, Roller Derby management and publications highlighted the mothers in their ranks as a way to soften the image of the stereotypical rough-neck woman derbyist. The same 1952 yearbook published an article and picture featuring the “children of the wheelers.” “On the far left, taking a seat is young Buddy Atkinson,” proclaimed the author, “and sitting on his lap is the very cute Pamela Reynolds who looks like she will be as good looking as her mother

\textsuperscript{1097} Youpelle Massro interview.
\textsuperscript{1098} Meyer Roman, interview.
\textsuperscript{1099} National Roller Derby yearbook, 1952, RD Hall of Fame.

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Mary Gardner.” While certainly not perfect and undoubtedly still influenced by the larger society, overtime the Roller Derby managed to create a sport that embraced, valued, and promoted mother-athletes.

**A Family Affair**

Roller Derby has been a family affair from the outset. Various members of the Seltzer clan were involved in Roller Derby management positions and officiating capacities as well as employed by the Roller Derby Skate Company. Created by Leo Seltzer and run by his brother Oscar, the skate company sold rink skates and outdoor skates and advertised their products in all the Roller Derby publications. Leo’s daughter Gloria headed the Roller Derby front offices by the late 1940s while her husband Ken Gurian worked for his father-in-law as a referee and in other management capacities. In the mid-1950s, Leo’s son Jerry worked as a salesman for the skate company before he took a management position within the Roller Derby. When Leo decided to retire in 1959 after decades of weathering the ups and downs of the sport he created and loved, his son decided to take over the fledgling enterprise.

The family aspect of Roller Derby went far beyond the Seltzer clan. As discussed in Chapter 1, Roller Derby’s first real superstar and gate attraction was also a family affair. A mother/son skating duo was largely responsible for attracting women’s interest in the sport, particularly housewives and middle-aged to elderly women. These women were drawn to the sport through the efforts of the forty-something diabetic housewife determined to excel at Roller Derby. Josephine “Ma” Bogash became a huge hit with the

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1101 Coppage, 21; RolleRage, August 1945; National Roller Derby Official Program, 1951; Roller Derby News, June 1956; Roller Derby News, January 1958.
1102 Coppage, 19.
audience and a mother hen to the younger female skaters. As Mary Youpelle recalled, “She kind of looked out for the girls.” Overall, women made up at least fifty percent of the fan base throughout the history of the sport and this was due to the pioneering efforts of such unique, driven, and competitive women as Ma Bogash, who demonstrated that women, even aging mothers, could succeed at sport.

Many siblings joined the roller derby together or later followed in the footsteps of a sibling who skated. Many brothers skated such as the talented Buddy, Sr., and Tommy Atkinson, Johnny and Paul Milane, Ken and Doug Monte, and Bob and Don Lewis, to name a few. The Roller Derby was not bereft of sister duos with such as skaters as Annis “Big Red” and Sheila Jensen. Some families had more than two siblings skating and of both genders. For instance, Monta Jean, Georgeanna, and Buddy Kemp all skated in the Roller Derby while the Gardner family had four sibling skaters: Lewis aka “Punky,” Billy, Helen, and Mary Gardner.

Due to the unique nature of the co-ed sport, two sorts of relationships generally developed between male and female skaters who were not biologically related. Because so much time was spent together in close quarters and traveling long distances, oftentimes skaters viewed each other as devoted family members. One might take on the responsibilities of the protective big brother or the spunky little sister, at least off the track. Mary Lou Palermo recalled the protectiveness of the men she skated with: “The boys that we skated with, they were like big brothers.” Russ “Rosie” Baker explained how the men looked after the female skaters as if they were their sisters. He said, “A girl

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1103 Youpelle Massro interview.
1104 Coppage, 7-8; Mabe, 27-31.
1105 Palermo interview.
couldn’t take a breath without our asking, ‘Where are you going?’” 1106 In fact, sometimes the men took it upon themselves to act as protectors of the women if they thought their husbands were not treating them well. During her first year skating, Gerry Murray observed this protective behavior when one male skater physically abused his wife, who was also a skater. “He used to beat her up all the time, and then the guys would take him and beat him up to try to keep him away from his wife.” 1107

Most skaters depicted the Roller Derby as one big family, for better or worse. Russ “Rosie” Baker explained, “We lived together, slept together, ate together, skated together, fought together.” 1108 Loretta Behrens described the men and women as helpmates and siblings: “The guys were always there to help the girls, you know. We always called each other brothers and sisters. We were family.” 1109 Mary Youpelle corroborated this experience. “It was just like a brother and sister routine,” she stated. “Everybody knew everybody and were friendly and it was just, when you put that uniform on, you were on another team and you were out there to do your best and to have your team win.” 1110

Yet with the men and women skaters spending so much time together, it was only natural that romantic feelings would often surface. Bobbie Johnstone equated two years of dating someone outside the Roller Derby the same as dating someone for just a few months inside the derby. She explained, “In those days in Roller Derby, you got to know someone…You saw each other at breakfast, trained with each other all day, you

1106 As cited in Deford, *Five Strides*, 81.
1107 Murray interview.
1108 As cited in Deford, *Five Strides*, 82-83.
1109 Behrens interview.
1110 Youpelle Massro interview.
know.”  

During the early years of the sport, Leo Seltzer attempted to discourage skaters from becoming romantically involved with each other. It was made very clear to the skaters that dating amongst their own ranks was forbidden—absolutely no “hanky-panky.”  “When I first started,” Gerry Murray recalled, “a boy and a girl weren’t even allowed to talk because they did not want, they called it fraternization then, and they didn’t want anybody to get serious and then get married, and the woman would have a baby and they’d lose a woman...They kept a good eye on you too.”  If skaters were caught, as Murray further explained, “Why, they would just not stand for that. Anything at all, there was no second chance—you went home right away.”

Gene Vizena and Joe Nygra were prevented by Roller Derby management from cohabitating together for the first ten days of their marriage because of Seltzer’s strict rules. While it seems ridiculous that married couples were not allowed to sleep together, from Seltzer’s standpoint, it was a rational business decision. As Vizena and Nygra showed, when you let married couple’s cohabit, it was highly likely the woman would end up pregnant and then the derby would lose an athlete, at least temporarily. Vizena laughingly recalled, “It’s a good thing we were separated for the first ten days because...we didn’t get started until the next month. We were married...ten months and

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1111 Bobbie Johnstone Atkinson in A Very Simple Game, 43.
1112 Youpelle Massro interview.
1113 Murray interview; Coppage, 6; Deford, Five Strides, 81.
1114 Murray interview.
1115 As cited in Deford, Five Strides, 81.
three days and I had my first child.”

Some skaters went so far as to marry on the sly, and only told others about it later in an attempt to hide their relationship from the management for the fear that they would be separated and sent to different teams, which occasionally happened. Once management got wind that Rosie Baker and Annis Jensen developed romantic feelings for each other, they intentionally transferred them to different skating units to keep them apart. According to Frank Deford, “Once, moving from unit to unit, Annis had to skate ninety straight days” to prevent her from coming in contact with Baker.

Leo Seltzer also discouraged skater relationships and marriage with non-skaters in the early years of the sport. He struggled to retain talented skaters because of the difficulty of the derby way of life, and he could not risk civilians attempting to convince his skaters to settle down into a more stable and regular routine. Because as Bobbie Mateer explained, “You travel a lot…and you know it’s pretty hard to have a boyfriend in New York and you’re all over the country.” Yet by discouraging skaters to date non-skaters, this left them with no other choice but to date internally or uphold a celibate lifestyle. Young men and women traveling together across the country partaking in exciting new adventures were unlikely to maintain such a priestly existence. Seltzer ultimately realized intra-derby relationships were the lesser of two evils, later admitting “he actually encouraged Derby marriages as a way of discouraging ‘civilian’ dating and

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1117 Murray interview.
1118 Deford, Five Strides, 81.
1119 Mateer interview.
marriage."1120 A clip of Roller Derby footage dated in the late 1940s or early 1950s encouraging women to join the sport also underscores Selzter’s change of heart when the announcer proclaimed, “If there’s a wedding ring on your mind, there’s a men’s team. With the Roller Derby, a girl has a good chance of meeting the right guy.”1121

Relationships between skaters—heterosexual ones at least—were a unique feature of the co-ed sport. Once intra-derby relationships were more openly accepted, it became quite common among skaters to date other members of their team or members on opposing teams. These relationships raised all sorts of questions and many potential problems. For instance, what if a man and a woman on different teams began dating and wanted to be transferred to the same team? What if they then broke up? What if jealousy occurred between skaters vying for the attention of another skater? What if one skater cheated on another skater with yet a different skater or referee? Would these relationships affect the outcome of a game? Would they affect skater placements on teams? How would management handle skater requests based on their love lives? Most professional sports organizations never had to deal with these types of issues. As Jerry Selzter lamented, “How many other general managers in athletics have to worry about breaking up families when you trade someone?”1122

In the nearly forty-year history of the Roller Derby, about every relationship dynamic and scenario undoubtedly played out, some more complicated than others. Ultimately though, all the inter-dating and inter-marriage between skaters tied them together in even more intimate ways than just teammates. For one, the skaters could

1120 Coppage, 17.
1122 As cited in Deford, Five Strides, 137.
understand each other and what they were going through. They understood being dog-tired and sore after a rough game. They understood the physical rigors of skating for hours on end to get better during daily training sessions. And they understood the lure of an arena full of fans cheering them on, which spurred them to travel to yet another city under the cover of night. Famous skater Ann Calvello explained, “If two people are going together in Derby, marriage would be very good. It would be, because they know what the job is, how it is with traveling. They understand what they have to do and everything.”

Bobbie Mateer concurred: “Somebody’s in your corner. You travel a lot and you know, have the same interests, the same hours.”

Although having both male and female teammates provided a ready pool for those seeking a boyfriend or girlfriend, derby politics and logistics could get complicated surrounding their relationships. One of the longest-lasting couples in Roller Derby, Bert Wall and Bobbie Mateer who have been married for sixty years, had to request transfers to be together. Mateer met Wall when her team, the New York Chiefs, travelled to Chicago to play Wall’s team, the Chicago Westerners, in early April 1950. The two developed an interest in each other right away but they did not begin dating until the Westerners travelled to New York City in June that same year for the play-off series. The couple went to a matinee movie and according to Mateer, “We went out and that was it.” But after the play-offs drew to a close, the couple faced the difficulties of

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1123 Ann Calvello, in *A Very Simple Game*, 69.
1124 *Mateer* interview.
1125 Mateer could not remember the exact date they played in Chicago in 1950 but believed it was either late March or the first week of April. *Mateer* interview.
1126 *Mateer* interview. The story of their first date is a sweet and entertaining one. Mateer had been looking forward to Wall’s arrival in New York City and she “even went out and bought a new outfit.” She admitted, “I had my eye, design on him I guess.” However,
maintaining a long-distance relationship. “Upon occasion, we’d skate opposite one another and we’d see each other and we’d write letters and phone calls and so forth,” explained Mateer. She finally requested a transfer to the Westerners. To be transferred, however, spots on the team had to be open. Wall’s team was skating out in California at the time while Mateer was skating in Asbury Park, New Jersey, when she got word of the transfer. A couple of girls on the Westerners got injured, so Mateer and another skater, Loretta Behrens, were transferred to the Westerners.  

Many skaters married amongst their ranks and settled down into a monogamous relationship, but this lifestyle proved exceptionally difficult in the 1930s and 1940s. New skaters who were married could not live together for purely logistical reasons; all the skaters lived at the venue where they skated and co-ed quarters were simply nonexistent.  

Gerry Murray recalled sharing a room with her married teammate Montajean Kemp, while their husbands Gene Gammon and Carl Payne respectively, were another skater Mateer had gone to the movies with a couple of times, asked her to go see a movie. She had said yes, but recalled, “I probably didn’t want to go, because I was looking forward to seeing [Bert]…” So when Wall ran into Mateer and asked her on a date, she had to turn him down. “I wanted, you know, to go out with him but I had this date with Bob…” As fate would have it, Mateer lingered in her dressing room that evening, and Bob showed up before their scheduled date time. He sheepishly told her, “Gee. I don’t know how to tell you this, but a girl that I had been taking out on my team, uh, it’s her birthday and her mother’s planned a party.” He stated that he felt obligated to go, which made Mateer ecstatic. She then raced up to the kitchen “lickety-split,” hoping to find Wall there. She recalled, “I walked in and he was standing there, and I said to one of the girl skaters, I said, ‘Ask me what I’m doing tonight.’ And she looked at me, but she did. And I said, ‘Oh, nothing!’ My plans have changed. I don’t have anything to do!…And Bert said, ‘Oh, you don’t have anything—do you want to go to the show?’” Within two years the couple married and have been together ever since.

 Mateer interview.
 Mateer interview.
 Seltzer interview.
required to stay in the boys’ quarters.\textsuperscript{1130} Once the Roller Derby began staying in hotels rather than in the arenas and venues in which they played, cohabitation became an easier feat.

While logistical issues could be problematic for married couples, sometimes personal problems caused tensions during a game. Carol Meyer recalled her husband Tony sometimes getting on her when other skaters were pushing her around on the track. She recalled, “Well, sometimes we’d get into little tiffs about certain things. You know, he’d say, ‘Don’t let her do that to you.’”\textsuperscript{1131} While her husband often encouraged her to stand up for herself on the track, occasionally he could not help himself getting involved.

A week before their wedding in 1965, Meyer got into a fight with another skater during a game and received twenty stitches as an engagement present. Roman was unhappy with how the referee handled his fiancée’s situation. Meyer recalled, “Tony had the biggest fight with the referee…He didn’t like the way he talked to me.”\textsuperscript{1132} And as Meyer emphatically stated, “One thing you don’t do is get a short little Italian man mad.”\textsuperscript{1133} While Meyer ended up with stitches, Roman ended up with a black eye, but the referee ended up catching the brunt of it all: “He apologized for it, but I don’t think anybody saw the little madman and what he did to [the referee.]”\textsuperscript{1134} Both men later apologized for their hotheaded tempers, but the tussle showed that personal feelings often spilled out onto the track.

\textsuperscript{1130} Murray interview.
\textsuperscript{1131} Meyer Roman interview.
\textsuperscript{1132} Meyer Roman interview.
\textsuperscript{1133} Meyer Roman interview.
\textsuperscript{1134} Meyer Roman interview.
Reflecting post-World War II marital trends many skaters married young but then diverging from the common assumptions about the era, they also divorced and remarried amongst their derby peers.¹¹³⁵ But less restrictive working-class mores, the carefree life of young skaters out from the watchful eye of their parents, and the rise of the sexual revolution of the 1960s also influenced skaters’ personal lives.¹¹³⁶ Many Roller Derby skaters have been described as maintaining a “very sexual life.”¹¹³⁷ Roller Derby News journalist and Roller Derby publicity director Alan Ebert explained, “I mean, there was a lot of bed-hopping. I’m sure the younger people [today] would be very surprised to learn there was sex in the fifties and sixties. And a lot of it!”¹¹³⁸ It became a sort of joke amongst the Roller Derby crowd that when a new young male skater joined, an “older woman would grab him.”¹¹³⁹ Ken Monte, who joined the Roller Derby at age eighteen, admitted to having an affair with the star skater Midge ‘Toughie’ Brasuhn, who was already in her mid-20s and married to referee Bill Golba.¹¹⁴⁰ Monte recalled, “Actually, I broke up her marriage. I was the third party.”¹¹⁴¹ After Brasuhn and her first husband

¹¹³⁶ Rosen, 18-19, 51-53; Bailey, 6-12.
¹¹³⁷ Ebert interview.
¹¹³⁸ Ebert interview.
¹¹³⁹ Seltzer interview. This is reminiscent of the modern day “cougar” mentality where older single women try to date younger men.
¹¹⁴⁰ Midge’s first husband Bill Golba was a referee when Ken Monte joined the derby but Golba had previously been a skater and skated under the name Bill Roskoff. Ken Monte, in A Very Simple Game, 52.
¹¹⁴¹ Monte, 52.
divorced, Monte and Brasuhn then married, and Monte helped raise her son from Bill Golba, who was only about a year old at the time of their union.  

It was not uncommon for a vast age differential between some derby couples, with often the female being the older of the couple. For instance, Mary Youpelle was ten years older than her second husband Russ Massro, Toughie Brasuhn was five years older than Ken Monte, Bert Wall was ten years older than Bobbie Mateer, and Ann Calvello was fifteen years older than her on-and-off again boyfriend, skater Eddie Krebs.  

When Bert first met Bobbie, she was a seventeen year old girl still wearing her “high school pleated skirt and angora sweater and saddle shoes.” He was immediately interested in Bobbie, but because of their age difference, he gave Bobbie a nickel and told her that when she was “old enough to date boys to give him a call.” According to Bobbie, his wife of the past six decades, “He never got his nickel back.”  

After the acceptance of intra-Roller Derby marriages in the 1950s, Roller Derby management made a concerted effort not to separate spouses. Jerry Seltzer stated, “Now one thing we never did, is put a husband and wife on a different team. It was just kind of a rule they had to be on the same team.” But on the other end of the spectrum, sometimes couples had such bad breakups, management had to accommodate skater requests for transfers to keep the peace and avoid conflicts. This was a risk couples took when dating amongst themselves. If a couple broke up, it was very difficult to escape an

1142 Monte, 53.  
1143 Deford, Five Strides, 55.  
1144 Mateer interview.  
1145 Mateer interview.  
1146 Mateer interview.  
1147 Seltzer interview.
Top stars Charlie O'Connell and Ann Calvello had a “stormy romance” and an even stormier breakup that resulted in “some bitter memories.” Seltzer recalled, “Charlie and Ann were very uncomfortable with each other after—afterwards, you know...They rarely skated on the same team afterwards because of that. And so that’s something we had to pay attention to, the personality clash.”

Pregnancy disrupted the athletic career of the mother in ways that it did not the father. Some skaters simply did not dwell on how pregnancy might influence their career. “I don’t know if I even thought about whether I wanted to come back skating,” Bobbie Mateer explained. “It wasn’t an issue at the time. I didn’t give it a whole lot of thought.” But Loretta Behrens was fully aware of the disruption children would cause to her skating career. She stated, “Well, being in the exposure of other skaters and couples that were married and watching them raise their children on the road, that was not something I was looking forward to doing.” Skaters who were parents “lived a different kind of life.” Behrens was not ready to embark on the lifestyle that included skating late at night, traveling from city to city while worrying about the comfort of your children, hunting down babysitters while you skated, and forgoing personal time. “That’s one of the reasons that until I really had settled in my mind that I was ready to settle down, I wasn’t even interested.” After she married, Behrens insisted that the only

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1148 Deford, Five Strides, 138.
1149 Deford, Five Strides, 55.
1150 Seltzer interview.
1151 Mateer interview.
1152 Behrens interview.
1153 Behrens interview.
1154 Behrens interview.
thing that would tie her down was to become pregnant.\textsuperscript{1155} A mere four months later, she found out she was pregnant and only six weeks after giving birth to her first child, she became pregnant again. It would be a full two years before Behrens was able to return to the skating world.\textsuperscript{1156}

Behrens’ understanding that pregnancy and motherhood would alter her skating career exemplifies the fact that “childbirth is more than a biological event in women’s lives.”\textsuperscript{1157} As historian Judith Walzer Leavitt explained, “It is a vital component in the social definition of womanhood.”\textsuperscript{1158} Childbirth and pregnancy have not remained static, and as historian Rickie Solinger pointed out, “pregnancy has carried different meanings depending on the age of a girl or woman and also depending on her race and on whether she is rich or poor or in the middle.”\textsuperscript{1159} “The meaning of a pregnancy,” wrote Solinger, “can also be determined by the historical moment in which it occurs.”\textsuperscript{1160}

The historical moment AAU basketball players and Roller Derby skaters lived in was one in which birth control was not a readily accessible option. “Birth control was not in those days!” Bobbie Mateer explained.\textsuperscript{1161} To Gerry Murray, however, it seemed like most couples had kids at times when they were not skating or waited to have children until they were older since “you wouldn’t keep skating if you were pregnant.”\textsuperscript{1162} But realizing that there were also many married couples that were active skaters, she

\textsuperscript{1155} Behrens interview.
\textsuperscript{1156} Behrens interview.
\textsuperscript{1158} Leavitt, 3.
\textsuperscript{1160} Solinger, 1.
\textsuperscript{1161} Mateer interview.
\textsuperscript{1162} Murray interview.
explained, “For all I know, maybe they used some kind of protection.”1163 This was a possibility since the federal government overturned the Comstock Laws in 1936, but the possibility was slim. Over half of the states continued to ban the advertisement of contraception along with contraception itself. The birth control pill was legalized on a federal level in 1960 but even then access was limited to married couples.1164

If the access to birth control was severely limited, abortions were illegal. If a married woman skater became pregnant, she could at least rely on her husband for moral and financial support. This was a luxury single women did not have. Apparently, no single women who skated with the Roller Derby ever had a child out of wedlock, yet many engaged in sexual relationships, which leads to the conclusion that some sort of birth control was utilized. Or as historical tradition suggests, these skaters “relied on the strengths and help of other women to face their problems.”1165 According to Alan Ebert, a skater protocol was established to help the single woman who accidentally got pregnant. He claimed, “If a girl got pregnant and wanted to have an abortion, which was illegal then, the other girls would conspire to do a pile-up.”1166 A pile-up is when all the women skaters on the track crashed into one another and ended up piled on top of one another, which “looks extremely dangerous.”1167 Ebert explained, “It was the only way they could fool management when a girl had to take some time off to get an abortion. They would say that she hurt her leg or she did this in the pile-up or her spleen was hurt—wasn’t the

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1163 Murray interview.
1164 Cite Bailey, Chesler, Solinger, Gordon, 218, 288; Rosen, 55.
1165 Leavitt, 4.
1166 Ebert interview.
1167 Ebert interview.
case at all! She was flying off to Puerto Rico or wherever they went, and to have the abortion."\textsuperscript{1168}

Most skaters continued skating until about their third month of pregnancy before taking a leave of absence or quitting the sport altogether. Pregnant women skaters were in such good physical shape that “they could skate a lot longer than other people might have thought they could.”\textsuperscript{1169} Mary Youpelle did not have her first child until she was in her late thirties but had very easy pregnancies which she attributed to her skating career. “I skated—I was three and a half months pregnant with both boys and I felt absolutely wonderful…,” she recalled. She had slight trouble delivering her firstborn but her delivery with her second child went very smoothly: “When it came time for delivery, I went to the hospital and—Rusty was a little—he was my oldest. He was a little difficult because by now I’m 37 years old…but when it came time for Ricky…It was like, okay, now we delivered, let’s go home. So, I think the skating made me a stronger person. Physically.”\textsuperscript{1170} Youpelle stated that most of the skaters had very healthy pregnancies and relatively easy deliveries, which was a source of pride amongst the Roller Derby personnel.\textsuperscript{1171} She recalled, “I don’t know of any of our girls that had any problems with their pregnancies. I think they were all healthy right up until they delivered their

\textsuperscript{1168} Ebert interview. While other skaters acknowledged the lack of birth control and described the dating scene in the Roller Derby, no skaters discussed abortion as an option in their interviews. In response to the pile-up abortion statement, Gerry Murray claimed, “I never heard of anything like that!” Murray interview.
\textsuperscript{1169} Seltzer interview.
\textsuperscript{1170} Youpelle Massro interview.
\textsuperscript{1171} Youpelle Massro interview; Deford, \textit{Five Strides}, 132-133.
children.”

Ann Calvello bragged that she was in the delivery room at 7:45 and was out by 8:00.

Many of the women insist that skating and the sport of Roller Derby eased the labor process but childbirth also provided “a corollary advantage” to skaters. Throughout their skating careers, many female skaters damaged their coccyx, also known as the tailbone, through repeated falls on their backsides. The continual falls essentially would push the coccyx inwards, which caused much pain. According to skater interviews conducted by Frank Deford, “This is where the childbirth comes in. The story is that when a Roller Derby skater has a baby, the process of delivering somehow straightens the coccyx back out again.”

While no scientific studies have been conducted to prove that Roller Derby aided in easier pregnancies or labor, it surely aided in the physical shape and overall health of the women, which perhaps led to healthier pregnancies.

**Raising Kids Around the Derby**

Because inter-marriage was a common facet of derby life, procreation was a common feature as well. “Everybody had children once they got married,” explained Mary Youpelle. “That was kind of expected.” Even so, after giving birth to their children, female skaters only had three realistic options for raising their kids. The first was to essentially raise their children around the Roller Derby and take them with them on the road when they traveled. The second was to quit their career, at least the traveling

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1172 Youpelle Massro interview.
1173 Deford, *Five Strides*, 132.
1174 Deford, *Five Strides*, 132.
1175 Deford, *Five Strides*, 132.
1176 Youpelle interview.
portion of it, after having children to settle down in one place. With this option, skaters could occasionally skate on home teams that did not travel or could skate when the Roller Derby played in their city. And the third was to leave their children to be raised by close relatives or at least leave them with family while traveling on the road months at a time. Some skaters combined these options or utilized them at different points in their careers.

Gerry Murray and Bobbie Mateer opted to take their children with them on the road, as did other skaters such as Bobbie Johnstone, Montajean Payne, Toughe Brashun, and Mary Youpelle. Murray and her first husband Paul Milane had their son Michael in early November 1942 in a hospital in Milwaukee. At the time of Mike’s birth, neither Milane nor Murray was skating with the Roller Derby after a falling out with management occurred. The couple’s marriage ended shortly thereafter, and Murray decided to return to the Roller Derby, taking her 13 month old son with her. By the time Mike was three years old, Murray had remarried, again to a Roller Derby skater. Her new husband Gene Gammon had previously been married to another derby skater, Tillie Mudri, and that couple had a young child as well. Gammon and Murray married in 1945, and Gammon helped raise Mike, who eventually adopted his step-father’s last name, becoming Mike Gammon. As a young boy, Mike was always with Murray, usually even while she was practicing. She recalled, “I took care of him all the time. He was never out of my sight!”

The large, banked masonite oval track served as a playground for Mike, who had his own uniform, sewn by his mother, and a pair of customized skates when he was just a year old. “Jack Wilson made him some skates...I

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1177 Palermo interview; Mateer interview; Murray interview.
1179 Murray interview.
1180 Murray interview.
got pictures with him on trying to stand up and everything. Jack Wilson is kind of holdin’ him and then we got pictures of him by himself. He’s 13 months old when we put the skates on him!"  

For skaters like Murray, the Roller Derby provided some benefits of a built-in network for childcare when the skaters had to skate a game. Often skaters-in-training would get paid to watch the children of veteran skaters. Murray recalled, “The only time somebody took care of him was when we had new kids training…and they would take care of the kids, like Montajean [Kemp’s] son, mine, and they would take care of them. At nine o’clock, they’d put them in bed.” As a new skater herself, Bobbie Mateer remembered babysitting for Helen Gardner and Billy Bogash’s oldest daughter Pam. A few years later after she and husband Bert Wall had their daughter Deborah, Mateer utilized the same skater-babysitting arrangements. Sometimes though if new skaters were not available or on the road with the team, Roller Derby advance men would arrange for a local agency to hire babysitters for derby parents when they were in a new town. “A babysitter would be all set up when we got into town and so forth,” Mateer explained.

Mateer and Wall decided they would continue skating until their daughter entered school, so she went on the road with them as a baby and toddler. This was not always an easy arrangement, even with babysitters available. The Roller Derby used to travel from city to city by bus, but Mateer recalled that “the bus could get pretty rowdy sometimes,”

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1181 Murray interview.
1182 Murray interview.
1183 Mateer interview.
1184 Mateer interview.
so they would upon occasion rent a car. “We tried to make it as normal a life as could be traveling on the road,” explained Mateer. “She always had a room of her own. That was part of the deal that the derby paid for because skaters shared rooms, but we’d come in at night and you don’t want to wake up a little one.” There was also a lot more stuff to travel with when taking children on the road. Mateer’s husband Bert was responsible for making sure their hotel room was always equipped with a stroller and crib.

Mary Lou Palermo left the Roller Derby in 1953 when she married a non-skater. The couple then had two daughters, a mere sixteen months apart. But Palermo’s marriage did not last. She had earned a good living with the Roller Derby and knew she could support her girls as a single mother if she returned to skating. She took her daughters with her on the road from the months of June through September and then would return to Chicago, their permanent residence, once the school year began again. Further exemplifying the Roller Derby family atmosphere, it was Loretta Behrens who encouraged Palermo to travel out to California to skate and opened her home to Palermo and her daughters. Palermo fondly recalled, “It was Loretta that got me to come out there… the first time… She had two little ones. And I had my two. So, we’d stay there and we’d skate, and we’d take care of the kids. And she called me her husband’s ‘summer wife.’” Another time, Loretta was asked to skate in Hawaii when Palermo and her girls were already staying with them in California for the summer. Palermo encouraged her to go ahead and take the opportunity and offered to help Loretta’s

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1185 Mateer interview.
1186 Mateer interview.
1187 Mateer interview.
1188 Palermo interview.
husband Phil babysit her son and daughter. She told her, “Well, go ahead. I’ll watch the kids; Phil and I will watch the kids. [But] Phil got a little antsy so he took his son and he went to Hawaii, so I had [all] the girls. But, we worked it out really, really well. And Loretta—Loretta’s a hell of a gal.”

Palermo considered her time skating and traveling with her daughters as “really special.” She has a lot of fond and funny memories of taking them on the road as little girls, since whether growing up in a suburb of Chicago or on the road with the Roller Derby, kids will be kids. One particular story that makes Palermo laugh took place when she was skating in Hawaii. She recalled, “In Hawaii, we had an apartment that was really, really close to the arena. It was on the same street.”

Palermo hired a babysitter to watch the girls at their apartment while she skated at the arena. But while she was at the arena, she laughingly explained, “[The girls] came in, and I said, ‘What are you doing here?’ Allison said, ‘Stacy fired the babysitter.’ Stacy was younger than Allison!…They fired the babysitter. I said, ‘Oh why—these kids!’”

When Palermo traveled on short weekend trips for the Roller Derby, she took her girls with her on the team bus: “After the race—they had pillows and that in the glove compartment in the bus and that’s where them and their dog, they’d sleep up there until we’d, you know, pull up to a truck stop or someplace to get something to eat, and here’s these two little kids with all these grownups, you know.” Yet sometimes the travel could wear on the young girls, especially around the holidays. Palermo had a ritual every

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1189 Palermo interview.
1190 Palermo interview.
1191 Palermo interview.
1192 Palermo interview.
1193 Palermo interview.
Christmas to take her girls to see Santa Claus at the Macy’s Marshall Field’s Walnut Room when they were at home in Chicago. One December, she told the girls to get ready for their annual Santa excursion. But this time the girls asked, “Why? We seen him in Pittsburg.”

Mary Youpelle and her husband Russ Massro took their children with them on the road when the kids were young and then were able to arrange their schedules to avoid conflict with the school calendar when the kids grew up. She recalled, “We took them everywhere we went.” But the couple did not travel regularly when the boys were in school. Instead they skated for five years straight in Los Angeles. “So that worked out great for us because the boys went to school and we could skate at night,” Youpelle explained. Russ also owned several liquor stores and car lots, so he would oversee these businesses during the day while Youpelle could be home with their children. She stated, “I would go out and skate at night...’cause we were here in Los Angeles...and during the day I would take care of the boys.” She had her children fed, bathed, and ready for bed by the time a babysitter arrived in the evening so she and Russ could head to the arena to skate.

Youpelle observed that “most of the skaters took the children with them when they were young. As they got older, most of the skaters quit.” This was certainly the case with Mary Lou Palermo and Bobbie Mateer and Bert Wall. Palermo gave up the sport for her girls. She explained, “Well, I think the girls got too old. They wanted to

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1194 Palermo interview.
1195 Youpelle interview.
1196 Youpelle interview.
1197 Youpelle interview.
1198 Youpelle interview.
stay home to be with their friends too. So I said, ‘Okay—we will stop.’”

Palermo skated her last game in 1967 in Houston, Texas, ironically the same city in which she skated her very first game. Bobbie Mateer and her husband decided to continue skating until their daughter Deborah started school. Mateer retired at the young age of thirty-one. She settled down into a new role of housewife and mother while their daughter was still young: “I was involved in community organizations and PTA and ran school carnivals and just the typical things that anybody would do in the neighborhood.” Although Mateer no longer skated, she took up new sports such as bowling, skiing, and tennis that were more conducive to her new life.

Quitting the sport or taking their children with them on the road was simply not a viable option for some of the women and their families. Sometimes they chose or rather circumstances forced them to leave their children with close family members. Carol Meyer and her husband did not give up skating after they had their first child, but they also did not want to subject their infant to the rigors of life on the road. So, when their daughter Dina was an infant and then toddler, Meyer and Roman left her at home with Roman’s mother from September until around Thanksgiving. However, once she was potty-trained, they would take her on road trips with them. “She was traveling with us until she was about four years old,” recalled Meyer. But once Dina started school, they

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1199 Palermo interview.
1200 After retiring, Palermo attended dental nursing school, but did not like it so she went into the restaurant business. She worked nights as a waitress at an Italian restaurant. Palermo interview.
1201 Mateer interview.
1202 Mateer interview.
1203 Mateer interview.
again quit taking her on the road, but they also curtailed their travel if possible. They remained at home in the summertime when she was off from school.\textsuperscript{1204}

A more permanent version of this route was taken by Ann Calvello, one of the most famous skaters in the Roller Derby. Calvello joined the Roller Derby in August 1949 as a young woman just a couple years out of high school. Although she would later become famous for her role as a notorious red-shirt skater with wild hair and even wilder antics, the first few years of her seven decade-long career was spent skating with home teams.\textsuperscript{1205} Soon after joining the Roller Derby, she fell madly in love with a derby referee named Roy Langley. The two married in 1952, and the following year, welcomed their daughter Teri Ann to the world. Calvello was crazy about her husband and wanted to spend the rest of her life with him, but their relationship turned abusive.\textsuperscript{1206}

Calvello witnessed her parents own abusive relationship as a young girl, which undoubtedly affected her childhood. According to Calvello’s brother Tony, the siblings saw their parents fighting a lot, and oftentimes it was Calvello who helped break up the “real fights.”\textsuperscript{1207} Calvello’s father was a sailor in the navy and spent a considerable amount of time away from home, but when he was around, he frequently struck their mother. The most notorious incident occurred when Calvello was just seven or eight. Apparently, Calvello’s father hit her mother particularly hard while she was standing on the stairs, causing her to tumble down. This incident stuck with the young Calvello for

\textsuperscript{1204} Meyer Roman interview.
\textsuperscript{1206}\textit{Demon of the Derby}.
\textsuperscript{1207} Tony Calvello, interview in\textit{ Demon of the Derby}.

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her entire life, and at the time she claimed that she would never speak to her father again.\textsuperscript{1208}

Calvello was clearly aware of the dangers of an abusive relationship. But she later stated, “When anyone gets married and [is] in love and everything, you don’t know you’re going to be in an abusive relationship.”\textsuperscript{1209} According to Gloria “Miffy” Mifsud, a former skater, neighbor, and friend of Calvello’s, Calvello was simply crazy about her husband, but he had a drinking problem. He became physical after drinking in excess. Despite her love for her husband and having a daughter together, Calvello found it increasingly difficult to live within that explosive environment.\textsuperscript{1210}

The breaking point occurred when Teri was just two years old. On a road trip, Calvello was chatting with her two good male friends, who were her pre-game hairdressers and who were also homosexual. Calvello’s husband got so jealous that he attempted to go after the men but then turned his fury on his wife. Langley allegedly punched Calvello in the stomach and “was just out of control.”\textsuperscript{1211} Calvello realized she could not stay in this type of relationship: “I’m not going to do it. I’m not going to be beat up,” she told herself.\textsuperscript{1212} She literally feared for her life and knew she had to make an immediate decision on what to do. So, she grabbed her daughter, the ironing board, the crib, and left. She stated, “He would’ve killed me.”\textsuperscript{1213} Even decades after the

\textsuperscript{1208} Ann Calvello, interview in \textit{Demon of the Derby}; Calvello in Michelson, 70.
\textsuperscript{1209} Calvello, in \textit{Demon of the Derby}.
\textsuperscript{1210} Gloria “Miffy” Mifsud, interview in \textit{Demon of the Derby}.
\textsuperscript{1211} Calvello, in \textit{Demon of the Derby}.
\textsuperscript{1212} Calvello, in \textit{Demon of the Derby}.
\textsuperscript{1213} Calvello, in \textit{Demon of the Derby}.

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crumbling of her marriage, she cried as she lamented the loss of the life she could have had and what she and her husband could have been.\textsuperscript{1214}

But life did not work out that way for her, and she was forced to make some hard decisions along the way. One of those included giving up her daughter. When Teri was young, Calvello believed that she could not have raised Teri on her Roller Derby salary.\textsuperscript{1215} Her limited finances allowed her to support herself but not a family. Calvello had been skating since she was nineteen and had no other real skills to make a living.\textsuperscript{1216} Her own parents would not have taken her, and she had nowhere to turn but to Langley's family. She left Teri to be raised by her husband's mother and grandmother. Calvello felt like she was abandoning Teri but also believed it was something she had to do, for both of their sakes.\textsuperscript{1217}

Teri only experienced a real relationship with her mother as an adult. She never lived with her mother as a child and only spent time with her twice a year at Christmas and Easter and possibly for a couple weeks in the summer if Calvello was not skating abroad. She has no childhood memories of bonding with her mother because it never happened. She never scraped her knees as a young girl and ran to her mother for comfort. She simply was not there. But her grandmother and great-grandmother did not talk ill of Calvello. No one ever discussed why their situation was the way it was. They simply told Teri that her mother was skating, that Teri was there with them, and that was

\textsuperscript{1214} Calvello, in \textit{Demon of the Derby}.
\textsuperscript{1215} Gloria Mifsud was also a single parent and had to move in with her parents because she could not afford an apartment on her own salary. \textit{Demon of the Derby}.
\textsuperscript{1216} This was also a problem for Ann and other long-time skaters when the Roller Derby shut down in 1973. They had been skating all their adult lives and didn’t know what else to do.
\textsuperscript{1217} Calvello, in \textit{Demon of the Derby}.
While she did not necessarily vilify her mother for leaving her, Teri was in some ways critical of, or at least questioned, her mother’s motives. Teri stated, “My personal feeling is that she just wanted to skate and that’s what she did.” She believed that was simply the choice her mother made.

Calvello always seemed bigger than life to Teri. She remembers her mother’s outrageous clothes, shoes, and hair. When not on the track, Calvello usually wore miniskirts and sky-high heels. Her multi-colored bouffant hairstyle always stuck out in a crowd. Calvello constantly told her daughter to sit up straight and to “put her tickets out,” meaning to put her breasts forward. Teri’s memories consist of her tagging along behind her mother as she strutted purposely around in tight dresses and pointy bras.

Around the time Teri was fifteen years old, she began spending more time with her mother and by age seventeen, lived with her in an apartment in San Francisco. Despite not raising her daughter as a young child, Calvello still considered herself to be motherly. She stated, “I remember as a kid going [to Golden Gate Park] to the playground and everything, and all of a sudden I have my daughter and I can take her to the same playground, and I got like eleven nieces and nephews and, believe it or not, I’m very domestic. I don’t want to ruin my image, you know, with the fans.” She believed in what she called “old fashioned” manners and bringing her daughter up “right,” which perhaps explains why she gave her daughter up if she thought she could not provide this type of upbringing. When she did have her daughter with her as a teen she tried to instill these important values. “I still say please and thank you, and respect

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1218 Teri Ann Conte, interview in Demon of the Derby.
1219 Conte, in Demon of the Derby.
1220 Conte, in Demon of the Derby.
1221 Calvello in Michelson, 70.
the elders,” she explained in the early 1970s. “In fact, my daughter has her boyfriends, and when they call I won’t let them talk to her until they say can I please talk to her, and thank you, cause that’s the way I was brought up and still do.”

Calvello took great pride in her daughter’s manners and responsibility but also her independence. She stated, “I’m very lucky with my daughter about this kinda thing. I just happen to have a daughter who calls me when she’s five minutes late, and I thank God every night, believe it or not.” Calvello appreciated the compliments she received on her daughter’s good behavior. “When we go to a soda fountain for some sodas after the game, they’ll come up to me and say ‘Ann, your daughter’s so well-behaved and such a lady and everything.’ You know, to me this is a great compliment because I tried to bring her up this way.”

As any concerned parent, Calvello wanted the best for her daughter. “Really, the only reason I go on the road now is to make sure my daughter gets her education,” she explained around 1970. “She’s a senior in high school now, and I’d like to put her through college. I’d like her to do whatever she thinks she’s gonna do the best at... I’m not bragging or anything, but she’s a beautiful girl, got a beautiful figure, a wonderful personality.” Calvello was even open to her daughter becoming a skater, but she wanted to make sure she did it on her own terms, not her mother’s. “She gets a kick out of skating now and then... But she’s not going to do anything till she graduates from high school. Then it’s up to her. She likes skating, but she’s very independent, like I am. She’s a Leo, too, and she says, ‘Mom, I don’t wanna live on your name. I wanna go out

1222 Calvello in Michelson, 70.
1223 Calvello in Michelson, 68.
1224 Calvello in Michelson, 69.
1225 Calvello in Michelson, 69.
on my own.’ Some skaters’ kids, they want their parents’ names and everything. And some don’t.” She explained, “If she wants to she can go in it. But if she does, she’ll go in as Teri Langley. She comes right out and tells me, and I admire her for it.”

By the mid-1960s Ann Calvello was one of the most famous Roller Derby skaters of all time, yet her career both helped and hurt her relationship with her daughter. Whether Calvello was unable to financially provide for her daughter by herself or whether she was forced to make a choice between her career or her family is still uncertain. But her situation exemplifies the difficult choices the athlete-mother faced. Athlete-mothers often had to choose between being a present mother or their athletic career. Those who attempted to combine both faced the difficult reality of raising a family on the road.

**Diaper Derbies**

The children who grew up amongst the Roller Derby family tended to have unconventional childhoods. They could wake up in Los Angeles and go to sleep in Texas. Many of the parents tried to provide as stable and normal a childhood as possible, but since their children traveled with them across the country and spent their youths growing up around the arenas in which their parents skated, this was not always possible. Many of the parents tried to incorporate normal activities for their children at the different places they were skating. “We’d go to parks, you know, in cities. We’d go visit whatever attractions were in [the towns]...the zoo or the circuses, or whatever you take kids to do,” explained Bobbi Mateer.  

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1226 Calvello in Michelson, 70.  
1227 Calvello in Michelson, 70.  
1228 Mateer interview.
Like Mary Youpelle and Mary Lou Palermo, some skaters did not travel from September to May so their children could attend school on a regular basis. Others, however, completed their schooling on the road with tutors or attended private schools paid for by the Roller Derby to accommodate the parents’ hectic schedules. Bobbie Mateer was herself merely a girl of sixteen and a Junior in high school when she joined the Roller Derby with her parents’ permission. The Roller Derby paid for a tutor to help Mateer keep up with her studies and finish high school. She worked with the tutor twice a week and graduated on time with her class a year after she joined the derby.\footnote{Mateer interview.}

Mike Gammon’s entire childhood was spent around the Roller Derby. He began skating at age three and turned professional at the young age of fifteen. As the son of star skaters Gerry Murray and Gene Gammon, the Roller Derby paid for Mike to attend a private school in West Chester, New York, when his parents were star skaters for the New York Chiefs.\footnote{As stated previously, Paul Milane was actually Mike Gammon’s biological father, but after marrying Gerry Murray, Gene Gammon helped raise Mike, and Mike later took his stepfather’s last name.} And when Murray was transferred to the San Diego team, they paid for Mike to attend a private school there as well.\footnote{Murray interview.} Later in life, his mother asked him, “Did you miss having a normal life as a kid, even going to school?” Mike replied, “No, Ma. It was alright. I enjoyed it.”\footnote{Murray interview.} Mike later stated, “I think I had everything that a kid growing up needs, and then some. I mean it was different, but I don’t think it...
was bad. And for me, it was a good life.”

Yet watching thousands of fans either cheering or jeering at your parents every night combined with the lively atmosphere of a Roller Derby game must have been an exciting environment to experience as a child. Gerry Murray recalled dressing her son up in a cuffed navy shirt with a tie and little dress shoes and taking her son with her on interviews when he was really little. She’d introduce her son to the reporter and “Mike’d stick his hand out and say, ‘Glad to know ya!’” At the age of three and a half, Mike was already skating by himself around the track, in full uniform, at night. If a skater threw their helmet, he would skate to pick it up and then would place it on the side of the track so the offending player could skate around and retrieve it.

As exemplified by such skaters as Mike Gammon and Barbara Baker, who were raised around the Roller Derby and then joined themselves later in life, children who grew up around the banked track had a distinct advantage. As a 1953 Roller Derby program article explained, “The youngsters of today are the stars of tomorrow...The children of wheelers have a head start on all competition in the race for berths on Roller Derby teams. Most of the junior editions of today’s stars have already received their banked track baptism and several have shown tremendous potential for the future.”

In fact, at the young age of eleven, they already predicted the star power of Gammon:

\[1233\] As cited in Coppel, 83.
\[1234\] Murray interview.
\[1235\] Murray interview.
“Young Mike Gammon is perhaps the most outstanding of all the young skaters whizzing around the Masonite at speeds that would do justice to many present day rookies.”

The Roller Derby often featured races between the skaters’ children called “Diaper Derbies” that took place at halftime. The winner of the mini-derbies usually received a silver dollar. Mike Gammon won his fair share of races before officially joining the derby. His proud mother claimed, “He won all of them!” These races went along with the popular match races where two adult skaters would challenge each other halftime in timed trials with contact to win prize money as well. They provided skaters with some extra incentive and the audience with some extra entertainment. The same could be said for the diaper derbies. Mike recalled, “I did halftime attractions when I was about four, I was out in the infield when I was ten. The last match race I did when I was fourteen or fifteen, against Buddy [Atkinson], Jr.”

As the audience became more familiar with their favorite skaters’ offspring, fans founded family fan clubs. By the early 1950s, over 150,000 Roller Derby fans belonged to 310 thriving fan clubs. Gerry Murray and Toughie Brasuhn were the focus of over a thirty fan clubs just between them. Plenty of Mr. and Mrs. fan clubs also existed for married couples in the derby and family fans clubs sprung up to support the kids of popular skaters. According to the official Roller Derby program of 1951, “the Gammon and Monte Family Fan Clubs give presents to the children of both families, and if this...

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1237 “Shadows of the Future.”
1238 Murray interview.
1239 As cited in Coppage, 83.
sort of thing keeps up unto the third and fourth generations, the Gammons and Montes
won’t ever have to worry about where their next mouthful is coming from.”

A Family Atmosphere

After those few initial years when the Roller Derby management attempted to
prevent derby marriages, they worked hard to cultivate a family atmosphere that appealed
to their fans, countered the rough image of women skaters, and provided a sustainable
lifestyle for the skaters with children. The Roller Derby News and RolleRage
publications often highlighted both mothers and fathers amongst their skating ranks. For
instance, they often published birth announcements like the following that appeared in
the May 1956 edition of the Roller Derby News: “Former Roller Derby referee and public
relations man Fred Carpenter is passing out cigars today. His wife, Mickey, presented
him with a baby girl. The Carpenters have a 2 year old son.”

The newspapers made sure to emphasize how important marriage and family was
to both skating sexes. They often published feature stories or columns on specific skaters

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1240 Jeane Hoffman, “The Fan Club Comes of Age,’’ National Roller Derby Official
Program 1951, 5. Children proved themselves to be avid fans of the sport and also
formed an integral part of the fan base. Junior fan clubs were available for kids ages ten
and eleven who, apparently, “name themselves after their favorite team and challenge all
comers to a playground battle.” As a young girl in the mid-1950s, Carol Meyer Roman
remembers watching the Roller Derby on television with her grandmother, who was
Spanish. She recalled, “All I know is my grandmother would watch it, and I would like
it. And my grandmother didn’t speak English, so I hear her in her language.” Similarly,
Lenny Berkman, first started watching Roller Derby on television with his father and
later he began watching it live at the 14th Street Armory in Brooklyn. However, when he
was in the sixth grade, Berkman took it upon himself to cover the Roller Derby for his
class newspaper: “We had a school, class rather, blackboard newspaper, and we had to
each of us basically write a report that could fit within the chalk boxes we were allotted
and then the class would vote on the best story to go into sports, the best story to go into
news, so forth, and there was one other Roller Derby fan with me in the sixth grade, and
he and I traded putting up the Roller Derby news that week.” Meyer Roman interview;
Lenny Berkman interview.

that introduced the readers to their backgrounds and lives off the track. In a feature on
skater Gerri Abbatello, writer Sandy Lepelstat stated the following, “While it may be true
that there’s nothing Gerri would rather do than skate, she still wants very much to be a
good wife and mother, and to own her own home someday.”1242 Lepelstat highlights
Abbatello’s dedication to skating but made sure the audience knew that her desire did not
detract from traditional feminine wants and needs. To further create an image of
traditional femininity, Lepelstat continued with, “Spaghetti and southern fried chicken are
her favorite dishes, and she likes to wear dressy clothes and her blue and white pumps.
Gerri has no favorite colors in clothes, just ‘anything that goes with my brown eyes,’ she
stated.”1243

Similarly, when Mary Youpelle announced her retirement because she was
pregnant, the paper lamented her skating loss but lauded her decision to have children. A
Roller Derby News editorial stated, “Monday, January 28, 1957, at approximately 10:00
p.m. Mary ‘Pocahontas’ Youpelle sounded the death toll of an era of Roller Derby. With
these simple words: ‘I’m retiring from Roller Derby,’ Pokey filled us with a great
sadness.”1244 But the editorial took an uplifting turn: “Pokey must have realized that we
wouldn’t let her go easily, so she eased the blow, and filled us with joy, by saying these
beautiful, simple words: ‘I’m going to become a mother.’” The author continued,
embracing the family atmosphere of the Roller Derby: “Pokey, who has given us so
much, is now giving us even more. She is letting us share in this wonderful experience
that is happening to her and Russ. Pokey said, ‘Maybe someday Russ and I will have a

1243 Lepelstat, Roller Derby News, June 1956.
skating after the birth of her second child.
little one of our own skating around the track.’ When we heard this, we knew Pokey was not deserting us—instead, she is giving us a great treasure—for someday there will be a young girl or boy skating in Roller Derby…Yes, our Lady has retired, but she will always be in our hearts. God Bless Pokey, Russ, and their baby-to-be.”1245

Roller Derby men were not exempt from this type of coverage either. In a feature on skater Edward “Chick” Chokota, staff writer Sandy Lepelstat provided the regular background information on how Chick joined the Roller Derby and who helped him improve as a skater. But then she added, “In the vital statistics department, girls, Chick is 5’11”, 155 pounds, has brown hair and eyes, is single, and said his ambition is to get married.”1246 And in the same article that discussed Mary Youpelle’s retirement, it was announced that Russ Massro, her husband, was voted the 1956 Roller Derby King. Massro was to be “King and Papa the same year.”1247

The newspapers often featured pictures of both male and female skaters with their children. The November 1939 Roller Derby News issue included a large picture of Johnny Rosasco and his son Johnny, Jr. who sported his own pair of miniature roller skates. The caption read, “Looks as though the youngest Johnny is preparing to follow in his daddy’s footsteps…and if he turns out anything like his ‘old man,’ a very welcome addition to the Roller Derby he’ll be in about fifteen years! The Rosascos were recently blessed with another child, a girl.”1248 And when Toughie Brasuhn and Gerry Murray were elected to the Hall of Fame, the Roller Derby News featured front page pictures of each skater with her son. The caption below the picture of Brasuhn stated, “Handsome

1245 Henley.
1248 Roller Derby News, November 1939.
Billy, willowy son of Roller Derby star Midge (Toughie) Brasuhn is all smiles and presents his mom with new official Roller Derby skates after the good news was released that she was voted by the nations’ sports writers in the ‘Hall of Fame.” The picture of Murray and her son Mike Gammon featured the two reading about her election together.\[1249\]

The Roller Derby provides a unique case study on motherhood and women athletes. Roller Derby management adopted many of the traditional family values of the era in terms of acknowledging the importance of motherhood and women’s roles as mothers. However, they drew very different conclusions from the traditional ideas emphasizing motherhood than those involved with the sport of basketball. In many ways, Roller Derby was a progressive sport that included and lauded the mothers in its ranks. Family was very much a part of the sport and was publicized as such. Roller Derby management tried to make it easier on mothers and accommodated their needs while traveling so they could effectively combine their dual roles.

But their progressive ideology and behavior only went so far. While promoting a generally progressive attitude toward women athlete mothers, the Roller Derby could not escape the era in which it resided. No maternity pay was available for pregnant skaters when they took time off, unless they continued on as a coach. General parenting duties fell heavily on the mother’s shoulders although both parents were in all likelihood around their children more since they family traveled together as a unit. But despite a few traditional adherents, having children did not weaken the women’s value. The Roller Derby needed the women skaters and so motherhood came to be an accepted and

\[1249\] Roller Derby News, June 1956.
\[1250\] Roller Derby News, June 1956.
expected part of the woman skater’s life. Instead of pushing mothers into a singular role and out of their sport as seen in the previous chapter on basketball, skater Mary Lou Palermo explained, ‘[The Roller Derby] always worked it out.’\textsuperscript{1251}

\textsuperscript{1251} Palermo interview.
CHAPTER 6
FINENITY IN THE “POST-FEMINIST” PRESENT

“I also started wearing a little red lipstick before every game. It became part of my pregame routine, no matter who we played or where we played. To me, it seemed natural.”
Lisa Leslie, WNBA player, 2008

“I continue to do it because it keeps me in shape, is a healthy channel for my aggression, and really, it’s an excuse to wear fishnets and mini shorts on the daily!”
Elizabeth Nelson, Sioux Falls Roller Dollz skater, 2010

In December 1973, Jerry Seltzer made an executive decision that would affect the future of Roller Derby and the lives of the skaters. After an almost forty year run, he shut down the sport. He called the skaters in for a meeting in New Haven, Connecticut, and simply said, “We just can’t go on.” Seltzer recalled, “I don’t think anybody expected it, and it really affected me for years afterwards because you almost feel like a parent. You feel very responsible.” Many of the skaters had skated for the Seltzer family for decades. According to Seltzer, “they kind of believed that Roller Derby was an institution—that I was the current caretaker but that somehow it was going to go on.” But it didn’t, at least not in its contemporary form.

The skaters’ personal and professional lives were wrapped up in the sport and obviously this was difficult news to swallow. Many never held other jobs or had any other real professional skills. Ann Calvello had been skating since 1948, the year after

1253 As cited in Barbee and Cohen, 113.
1254 Seltzer interview.
1255 Jerry Seltzer in Demon of the Derby.
1256 Seltzer interview.
she graduated from high school. She took the news hard. “What’s a person to do, you know? I skated all my life.” She earned good grades in school, but twenty-five years had passed since she graduated. The skaters were simply in utter disbelief. “It was like a death,” explained skater Jan Vallow. “We were all in shock.”

In hindsight, the warning signs were there. The Roller Derby was a cash institution, which never took out bank loans, and throughout its entire existence experienced repeated boom and bust cycles depending on the cash flow of each season. In its last few years, although still popular, the sport was not as profitable and could not keep itself afloat financially. Two factors contributed to its demise in late 1973. First, the Roller Derby had been broadcast on the KTVU television station with great ratings and support. But in 1971 or 1972, the owners of the broadcasting station hired a new program director who hated the Roller Derby. He decided to move their time slot from 7 p.m. on Sunday night to 4 p.m. Sunday afternoon. This simple switch caused the ratings to plummet, which in turn affected live attendance as well. The second factor concerned the national gas crisis. The Roller Derby travelled across the country in cars and trucks, covering hundreds and sometimes even thousands of miles in a week. With gas supplies dwindling and sometimes being cut off altogether, it was increasingly difficult to travel from arena to arena. And since the arenas were not getting the fuel they needed to stay afloat, many cancelled their Roller Derby bookings. On top of dealing with these external issues, Seltzer explained, “We just never had that much cash to go from one year to the next.” There was no nest-egg for the sport itself.

\[1257\] Calvello in *Demon of the Derby.*  
\[1258\] Jan Vallow in *Demon of the Derby.*  
\[1259\] Seltzer interview.
After Roller Derby folded, skaters had the option of joining their former competitor skating units, previously called outlaw units, or the popular but more outrageous Roller Games organization. Most of the skaters decided skating for these units simply was not the same. Many of these leagues, particularly Roller Games, relied more on theatrics, scripted plays, and predetermined outcomes rather than legitimate skating. Roller Games, ran by Bill Griffiths and based out of Los Angeles, commonly featured such theatrics as a dwarf with a megaphone, “mock fighting [and] spanking.”

Throughout the next two decades, various roller derby skating organizations, some sponsored by skaters themselves and some sponsored by sports promoters, popped up but never lasted for any significant amount of time. Yet, the sport also never officially died out, even if the copyrighted and patented version of Roller Derby did. Even in the late 1990s, there was an attempted revival of the sport. This time skaters used inline skates, the popular Roller Blades of the era, and a television series format. Drummed up by long-time television producer partners Stephen Land and Ross Bagwell, the new

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1260 Fortunately, there was a small nest-egg for the skaters when the Roller Derby folded. According to Jerry Seltzer, “The good thing was that we had done something very unusual; we had put in a profit-sharing plan so that fifteen percent of what we made [every year] automatically went in. And based on [the skaters] salary was the percentage that they got. And it had been in [existence] for over ten years, which most of them didn’t believe...So when we closed down, you know, they got at least $5,000. Some got as much as $60,000, which was a lot of money at that time.” Seltzer interview.

1261 Deford, *Five Strides*, 124-125. John Hall explained that the managers of the Roller Games did not have the skills of those in Roller Derby, so in order to compensate, they highlighted promotional aspects of the game like skater rivalries and match races. Hall interview.

1262 Roller Games in its original form only outlasted Roller Derby by a couple of years. However, various units under the Roller Games name resurfaced throughout the 1970s and 1980s. It is very difficult to follow the names of the various teams, units, and leagues which cropped up and were often interchangeable in the late 1970s and 1980s. See the Roller Derby Hall of Fame website for more specific details. http://www.rollerderbyhalloffame.com, Accessed, 7 Aug. 2012.
version was called the World Skating League/Roller Jam and was featured on the television network TNN.\textsuperscript{1263} Jerry Seltzer served as a consultant for the league and was given the official title of Commissioner, while other former Roller Derby veterans like Nick Scopas and Buddy Atkinson Jr. were hired as trainers. But like the other leagues of the past, Roller Jam only lasted a couple years.\textsuperscript{1264} No one could make the sport work quite like the Seltzer family.

**A Rise in Professionalism**

As professional Roller Derby abruptly came to a close in the early 1970s, women’s basketball embarked on a meteoric rise with the passage of Title IX in June 1972. The landmark legislation forced any schools receiving educational dollars from the government to fund women’s sports on an equal and consistent basis. Although incredibly difficult to oversee and enforce, Title IX channeled a significant amount of organizational money and scholarship funds to women athletes. As Donna Lopiano, former Women’s Athletic Director at the University of Texas explains, women’s sports programs saw a complete overhaul due to Title IX. They went from “nothing to something.”\textsuperscript{1265} Women’s basketball in particular experienced a huge surge in terms of popularity at both the high school and college levels. Within five years of its passage, forty-nine of the fifty states sponsored a statewide tournament for girls and less than a decade later, “the number of high school basketball players would grow more than tenfold, from approximately 400,000 to 4.5 million.”\textsuperscript{1266} Similarly, at the college level, by the 1976-1977 school year, college women’s participation in athletics had tripled, with

\textsuperscript{1263} Coppage, 98-103.
\textsuperscript{1265} Lopiano interview.
\textsuperscript{1266} Grundy and Shackelford, 170.
more than eight hundred colleges offering women’s basketball teams.\textsuperscript{1267} And after decades of playing in world championships, the Olympics finally included women’s basketball as a sanctioned sport in the 1976 games in Montreal. The Americans surprised the nation and the international community by snagging a silver medal at their very first games.\textsuperscript{1268}

In the years immediately following the passage of Title IX, smaller colleges like Wayland Baptist College in Texas and Queens College in New York, who had a tradition of supporting women’s basketball, dominated the college game until large, publicly-funded state schools brought their women’s athletic teams up to speed.\textsuperscript{1269} Colleges like Immaculata University in Pennsylvania and Delta State in Mississippi won the early championships before powerhouses such as USC, Louisiana Tech, UCLA, Old Dominion, and the University of Texas dominated the game in the 1980s. For instance, when Donna Lopiano joined the staff at University of Texas-Austin in 1975 as the women’s athletic director, Title IX was just coming into effect. The budget for all university women’s sports her first year was $70,000. Her salary was $20,000 of the budget, another $10,000 went for scholarships, and the rest was divided among all the coaches, their staff, and their individual sports budgets. By the time she left almost two decades later, the women’s sports budget had grown to four or five million dollars and the university had developed a large women’s sports fan base. No longer were the

\textsuperscript{1267} Porter, 1.
\textsuperscript{1268} Porter, 6. The U.S. women’s basketball team finished eighth at the World Championships in 1975, so no one had high expectations for them at the Olympics, and in fact, many were surprised they even qualified for the games. But despite brutal losses to the Russian and Japanese teams, the U.S. upset the higher ranked Czechoslovakian team to play in the gold-medal game, which earned them the silver medal after their loss to Russia.
\textsuperscript{1269} Porter, 28-29; Grundy and Shackelford, 159, 170.
parents of the women’s basketball players the only ones in the crowd. The women’s basketball team drew an average of 8,000 to 9,000 fans per game.\textsuperscript{1270}

Nevertheless, women’s sports were not yet on par with their male counterparts. First of all, many high schools and colleges had no women’s basketball foundation on which to build. Unlike the hotbed states of Tennessee, Georgia, Mississippi, Texas, Iowa, etc. where women’s basketball had a long legacy, other states were forced to build programs from scratch. For instance, in Indiana and New York, men’s basketball at the high school level had long reigned supreme but women’s teams were largely non-existent through the 1950s. Where they existed at all, they were small and under-funded.\textsuperscript{1271} Women received more coaching opportunities through the 1970s and 1980s, which was an improvement, but as Grundy and Shackelford noted, “while the jobs were easier to get, they were far more challenging to handle.”\textsuperscript{1272} These women lacked experience in coaching, often juggled other part-time jobs tied to Physical Education departments, faced challenges by hostile men in their athletic departments, struggled to draw in a fan base, and earned less than male coaches. Even in schools where women’s teams were among the top in the nation, the women’s team’s “second-class status was palpable.”\textsuperscript{1273}

Despite not achieving immediate equality after the passage of Title IX, the rapid growth in women’s basketball at both the high school and collegiate levels prompted some to consider professional basketball as a potential possibility for women by the late 1970s. The first Women’s Professional Basketball League (WBL) tipped off in late

\textsuperscript{1270} Lopiano interview.
\textsuperscript{1271} Grundy and Shackelford, 153. My hometown in central Indiana did not have a girls varsity program until the mid-1970s. My mother played on their first varsity girls team in the 1974-1975 season, and my grandfather coached the girls team from 1981-1984.
\textsuperscript{1272} Grundy and Shackelford, 151.
\textsuperscript{1273} Grundy and Shackelford, 156.
1978, under the leadership of sports entrepreneur and promoter Bill Byrne.\textsuperscript{1274} The WBL consisted of eight franchise teams at its onset: the Chicago Hustle, Dayton Rockettes, Houston Angels, Iowa Cornets, Milwaukee Does, Minnesota Fillies, New Jersey Gems, and the New York Stars.\textsuperscript{1275} Molly Bolin was the first player to sign with the new league as a member of the Iowa Cornets, the new professional team in her beloved home state.\textsuperscript{1276} Not only did she become a star of the league, but she also became the face of the league in many respects. Bolin was a media darling who gave her all to promote the new league, as discussed in Ch. 4. She represented the attractive, intelligent, and athletic woman the American public liked to see. Yet her good looks led others to question the legitimacy of women’s sports—were they true athletes? Molly Bolin embodied the dichotomy that plagued the WBL.

The national media still viewed women’s basketball, as opposed to sports like tennis, gymnastics, or field hockey, as a rougher, more masculine sport whose female athletes were potentially suspect in terms of their femininity and sexuality. More and more girls and women were playing the game at all levels, but breaking into the professional ranks proved more difficult than first anticipated. Just because women’s basketball was successful at the grade school, high school, and college levels did not necessarily translate into a profit-generating, fan-driven, media-hyped professional league. And women basketball players still faced the negative stereotypes that had long

\textsuperscript{1274} At least two earlier leagues were scheduled to form between the years of 1975 and 1977, but their funding and backing never materialized. No games were ever played, thus making the WBL the first official women’s professional basketball league.\textsuperscript{1275} Porter, 11.

\textsuperscript{1276} Bolin Kazmer interview; “Former Moravia Star First to Sign With Women’s Cage Team,” Jeff Davison, \textit{Centerville Iowegian}, 29 June 1978, IWA.
plagued women’s sports, those that described them as unfeminine, unladylike, rough, tough, lesbians.

League management and team owners knew they would have to work extra hard to combat these images and to draw in a permanent fan base. Despite offering a “solid product” in its own right, the players had to fight against what historian Mary Jo Festle describes as the disadvantage of their gender.1277 They constantly had to prove their femininity by adopting “apologetic behavior.”1278 As previously mentioned, Karen Logan, a player with the WBL who also helped form the Chicago Hustle team told one Utah newspaper in June 1978, “We will not hire one girl on our team who looks masculine. The only way society will accept our team or league, in general, is for us to show that it’s a normal thing to do. It must be family entertainment.”1279 Logan’s quote indicates that society was still resistant to women in untraditional jobs, or even untraditional women (i.e. the so-called hairy, anti-men, anti-family feminists of the 1970s), so the basketball players needed to distance themselves from that image and had to demonstrate that women could remain traditional feminine beings and play basketball.

The WBL marketed and promoted the femininity of its players in ways that had long been utilized by women’s sports teams and leagues that were breaking new ground or trying to prove their legitimacy. For instance, Larry Kozlicki, the owner of the California Dreams team which joined the WBL in its second season, forced his players to attend the John Robert Powers charm school. The All-American Girls Professional Baseball League had required its players to do the same back in 1943 to ensure the

1277 Festle, 253.
1278 Festle, 255.
1279 As cited in Porter, 88.
femininity of its players and to “[promote] the identification of the league as a sports organization that stressed femininity.” Kozlicki employed a similar strategy. For five weeks, his players learned to “walk, sit, eat, and talk with poise.” Kozlicki and the coach of the team Mel Sims insisted the course would also be instrumental in teaching the players how to deal with the media and interview with press. Sims stated, “Women athletes are not used to being in the limelight.” While this may be partially true, the ultimate goal “was to portray a feminine, heterosexual image.” Kozlicki thought his players would appreciate the opportunity to brush up on their feminine wiles and was surprised that many balked at the idea of attending charm school. “You have to spend a lot of time playing basketball to make it to the pros,” he explained to Mademoiselle magazine in March 1981. “And that means you’ve never had a chance to sit around learning makeup techniques. I thought the girls would be grateful for the chance.”

Charm School came second only to the publicity stunt of the WBL’s New York Stars, who played a charity game sponsored by Playboy and pitted the Stars against a basketball team that featured several of the Playboy Bunnies themselves. Similarly, one man proposed to the Dallas Diamonds owner Jud Phillips that he require his players to compete in “high-heeled sneakers and short skirts.” Phillips was understandably

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1281 Festle, 255.
1282 As cited in Porter, 97.
1283 Festle, 255.
1284 As cited in Porter, 96.
1285 As cited in Porter, 102.
appalled. He stated, “That is the most ridiculous thing I have ever heard in my life. This is basketball, this isn’t Miss America or whatever.”\textsuperscript{1286}

As ridiculous as the high heels suggestion was, the lines between beauty contest and female sporting competition had long been blurred. The history of AAU women’s basketball beauty contests underscores this point. To appeal to a judgmental public, women players had long engaged in such tactics to be able to play the sport they loved, whether they liked them or not. Molly Bolin was the main focus of this “feminine bargain” during the WBL’s existence.\textsuperscript{1287} Bolin did whatever she could to help promote the league, including pin-up posters which were currently popular by likes of Hollywood starlet Farrah Fawcett. Bolin’s reasoning was that she was trying to create a personality to draw fans to come see the game because fans in the early stages of the professional women’s game were not coming out in droves. She explained, “It was the complete opposite. You had to let them hear about who you were, and then they’d be curious to see if you could really play...You know, you’d get their attention first, and \textbf{then} they would come see you play.”\textsuperscript{1288}

This type of publicity could easily be called cheesecake and written off as exploitation of the women players. But not all the players viewed it as such and with the backlash to the feminist movement gearing up during the conservative era of the 1980s, it was in many ways very realistic and intelligent marketing. As Logan explained in 1978, “We’re in a new sport, and we have to play by the rules that will sell the sport.”\textsuperscript{1289} Bolin summed up the situation of the WBL: “This is before the Jane Fonda aerobic movement,

\textsuperscript{1286} As cited in Porter, 102.
\textsuperscript{1287} Festle, 255.
\textsuperscript{1288} Bolin Kazmer interview.
\textsuperscript{1289} As cited in Porter, 98.
for God’s sake. Women weren’t even supposed to sweat.”\textsuperscript{1290} Both marketing and professional sports were a part of the “man’s world,” and girls and women’s sports, except for the more feminine tennis and golf, “got very little attention.”\textsuperscript{1291} “…There was definitely a set social structure in our country in the late 70s and early 80s that was NOT favorable to women athletes,” Bolin stated.\textsuperscript{1292} Men did not have to engage in such sexualized marketing and publicity gimmicks to promote their sports.

Furthermore, the public had a distorted view of what the woman athlete of the late 1970s and early 1980s looked like, despite girls and women across the United States participating in more and more sports as the decades progressed. They still believed she looked like, as one Iowa newspaper reporter noted in 1979, the “Incredible Hulk.”\textsuperscript{1293} Bolin, and the majority of the WBL, did not look like this. Bolin recalled, “…That’s what everybody expected. So I ran into that a few times when I’m cashing my [WBL] check at the bank, [with the teller] going, “Oh, you play in the [WBL]—you don’t LOOK like a basketball player.” She always responded with “Really? What are we supposed to look like?”\textsuperscript{1294} Similarly, when she played professional basketball with a couple California teams, Bolin would occasionally attend casting calls for commercials that asked for female basketball players. She never got hired due to the fact the casting agents never thought she actually looked like a basketball player.\textsuperscript{1295} Her brown eyes, flowing blonde hair, and slender build did not align with the stereotypical image they believed

\textsuperscript{1290} As cited in Porter, 98.
\textsuperscript{1291} Personal correspondence with Molly Bolin Kazmer, 31 January 2011.
\textsuperscript{1292} Personal correspondence with Molly Bolin Kazmer, 31 January 2011.
\textsuperscript{1293} Bob Dwyer, “Molly,” Des Moines Register Peach, 13 November 1979.
\textsuperscript{1294} Bolin Kazmer interview.
\textsuperscript{1295} Bolin has stated, “I think you can be an athlete and still look good. You don’t have to be a hulking 6-footer with a piece of beard on your chin and rippling muscles.” Dwyer, “Molly.”
they were asking for. Bolin stated, “Once I got a call back when I was a finalist for a commercial and they told me to come back with my hair in pigtails and no makeup.”

The women playing professional basketball for the first time were placed in a precarious position. On the one hand, it was irresponsible to not do everything in their power to help establish the brand new league, including various marketing ploys and publicity stunts. On the other hand, where is the line between marketing and publicity for a product versus selling women’s sexuality? Why is it that women have to market themselves in ways that male basketball players do not? Why can’t women’s basketball sell itself?

Ultimately, women athletes lived a daily contradiction. Minnesota Fillies player Kathy DeBoer explained the unfortunate dichotomy: “I had been a girl jock, if you will, for my whole life, so the tug-of-war between being cute and pretty and tough and strong and physical and aggressive was something that we lived everyday.” Players like DeBoer and teammate Marie Kocurek refused to wear make-up and get dolled up before games. They viewed themselves as legitimate competitors, real basketball players. Their team owner repeatedly told them they were entertainers, but they insisted that they were athletes and appearances were irrelevant in sports. Kocurek explained, “I just thought if you play the best you can, that if you do well, you win, that is why folks want to come

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1296 Pigtails were common with women athletes during this era, but Bolin most often wore her hair down when she played and wore makeup. She explained, “I was really aware of my image and got ready for a game like I was going out on a date. I had learned in high school how people scrutinized and judged me, and I wanted to always be my best when I stepped in front of a crowd.” Personal correspondence with Molly Bolin Kazmer, 31 January 2011.

1297 As cited in Porter, 91. DeBoer’s use of the term “girl jock” demonstrates the still current need to appropriate a male athletic synecdoche for a female activity. The term “tomboy” is used to describe young women, but no female equivalent to jock exists for adult women.
and see you play.” But as Kocurek learned that was a naïve and idealistic belief for a woman athlete in the late 1970s and 1980s; “That wasn’t the only reason why folks came.”

The issue was a double edged-sword. Molly Bolin understood that people were not just coming to see basketball, and she capitalized on her own appeal. She was a beautiful woman who had a mean jump shot. She earned her nickname “Machine-Gun Molly” from her methodic, reliable and, rapid-fire shooting—not her drop-dead good looks. But while her outstanding skills earned her the co-MVP honor in 1980, her looks brought curious spectators to the stands. “People always warned me about exploitation, like it was a dirty word,” she stated. “But it’s all about putting people in the seats, isn’t it? You don’t have to look like a man, act like one or play like one in this game. And I just wanted to show that women aren’t trying to be like men. If you really want to make it when you’re new, you’ve got to grab everything you’ve got and go with it.” She also never tried to “put out a message about the whole league.” She explained, “It was more about who I was and what I wanted to do. And that was my

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1298 As cited in Porter, 91.
1299 As cited in Porter, 91.
1300 At first Bolin resented the nickname “Machine Gun Molly.” A writer from the Washington Post wrote an Associated Press story, and “it was just a description he used in his story,” according to Bolin. But during her next couple of games, the announcers referred to her as “Machine Gun Molly.” “At first, I was, like, kind of offended, you know, ‘cause it sounds like a real gunner and all that stuff, and then it just…I could not shake it. And I got to the point, well, if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em.” So Bolin jumped on the nickname bandwagon and in the third WBL season, she even took some publicity photos of her with a replica machine gun. Bolin Kazmer interview.
1301 As cited in Grundy and Shackelford, 185-186.
personality...How is that exploitation if I wanted to do that—nobody’s making me do it. I thought it was fun. I wanted to do it. I felt like it was in good taste.”

Yet the WBL failed after three seasons. Neither Bolin’s “sex sells/attention grabbing” approach nor Kocurek and De Boer’s “sport sells itself” approach was realistic in the early 1980s. Women’s team sports did not have a strong enough foothold to sell themselves—the old attitudes that women playing these sports must be masculine or lesbian had not been eradicated. The basketball purists, in hindsight, came to understand that they were entertainment, whether they wanted to be or not. But women who entertained and appeared too feminine or heterosexual were not legitimate either. They were not taken seriously as competitors by the critical media. The 1981 Parade article referenced earlier outlined this very problem. Janie Fincher, who played with the Chicago Hustle, was described as having “honey-blond hair, the eyes of jade, the supple body that’s enough to make a grown man howl in the moonlight.” In the eyes of the male journalist, Fincher “in her worst moments...looks more like a professional cheerleader than a professional basketball,” which led people to “question her legitimacy.”

Bolin acknowledged the backlash of her attention-getting publicity. Her basketball records were “backseat to the publicity photos.” But perhaps even more importantly, some of the athletes were not being true to themselves. “I did just about everything to help make that league work, including getting hairdos. You reach a certain point (where you think), ‘Well, I can only look so feminine or such and still be me,’” lamented three-time All-Star Althea Gwyn. “I’m not going to walk around in a bikini

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1302 Bolin Kazmer interview.
1303 As cited in Porter, 87.
1304 Bolin Kazmer interview.
tryin’ to play no basketball. We sweat…It was tiring, trying to live up to an image that you’re not.”

De Boer hit the nail on the head: “Women’s team sports [were] something that was completely outside the box. It was such a new concept that they didn’t know from a marketing concept what they were trying to do. Were they selling basketball or were they selling women? Was this some kind of a skin show, or were you actually trying to market a sport?” It was a two-fold dilemma. If the WBL did not attempt to survive by utilizing such good-looking stars as Bolin, Janie Fincher, and the blonde twins Faye and Kaye Young, the league would fail and women’s sports progress would not be achieved. “But,” as Mary Jo Festle succinctly explains, “catering to the sexist attitudes of their audience also harmed the cause because it delayed real acceptance of women as serious, professional athletes.”

The WBL was simultaneously ahead of its time and a product of its time. For the next two decades, any American woman who wished to play professional basketball had to do so overseas. However, more women had the opportunity to play at the college level in the 1980s than ever before, even if no professional opportunities existed in the United States. During this decade, women collegiate basketball players received access to more scholarship opportunities, while their teams received better funding. Their coaches were also paid on a higher scale, and the collegiate game received corporate and university funding. Similarly, as the college game grew, more games were televised locally and

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1305 As cited in Porter, 90.
1306 As cited in Porter, 92.
1307 Festle, 257.
1308 Grundy and Shackelford, 166; Festle, 249.
nationally, and little girls across the county with aspirations to play at the college level now actually had that opportunity.

The women’s game garnered more media attention as top women’s college programs grew into powerhouses and star players gained access to the media spotlight in the 1980s. The USC women’s basketball team, led by Cheryl Miller, Cynthia Cooper, Pam and Paula McGee, became “a new force in women’s basketball...The Women of Troy were also the first national champions from a major media market, and their charismatic style, aptly managed by USC’s well-heeled public relations department brought the game a flood of publicity.”¹³⁰⁹ Players such as the McGee twins and Miller represented a new era in women’s basketball, one where black women were heavily recruited from urban centers to play at nationally-renowned colleges. Despite seeming advances these star players faced the historic double burden.¹³¹⁰ As “racial pioneers” they still “ran into racial stereotypes that cast them as arrogant or undisciplined.”¹³¹¹ And as women, they experienced the media’s emphasis on their femininity, just like the players in the WBL: The McGee twins discovered that “sex appeal could easily overshadow achievement.”¹³¹²

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¹³⁰⁹ Grundy and Shackelford, 193-194.
¹³¹⁰ These black women basketball stars faced discrimination due to both their sex and their race (thus the double burden).
¹³¹¹ Grundy and Shackelford, 199.
¹³¹² Grundy and Shackelford, 198. In the 1980s, many black female athletes were largely sexualized in the same ways as white female athletes and also engaged in apologetic behavior. For instance, an article that appeared in the May 7, 1981 edition of Jet Magazine described the McGee twins as “honey-toned cuties” and made sure to ask what type of men the twins liked to date. Pam McGee stated, “The thing I hate about basketball is the stereotype. Even before they meet us people have an idea that we’re [like the Hulk]...But our mother always told us ‘just because you play basketball, a man’s sport, it doesn’t mean you have to lose your feminine ways.’” Paula further explained, “Our motto is, on the court we play like a man but off the court we’re strictly
While the women’s game at the college level was on the upswing in terms of interest and media attention, “support [at the federal level] for the sport lagged behind the rising quality of play.”\textsuperscript{1312} Essentially, the conservative political revival initiated by Ronald Reagan’s election to president in 1980 thwarted attempts to build or revitalize women’s sports.\textsuperscript{1314} The Reagan administration halted the progress of Title IX when they challenged what they called the “social engineering” of liberals to force “false equity on institutions and society.”\textsuperscript{1315} “Rather than confront social inequities,” explained Grundy and Shackelford, “Reagan-style conservatives tended to explain them away. If there were no women’s sports teams, it was most likely because women had not wanted or needed them.”\textsuperscript{1316} A federal task force led by Vice President George Bush scrutinized federal legislation such as Title IX to determine “burdensome, unnecessary or counterproductive Federal regulations”\textsuperscript{1317} that should be dismantled.

Although conservatives ultimately failed to completely revoke Title IX, real growth was in fact stymied by the Reagan and Bush presidencies because they “put a damper on enforcement.”\textsuperscript{1318} The 1990s, however, marked again a new era in women’s basketball, one with forward momentum. It was “this generation that elevated the game to new heights”\textsuperscript{1319} that included a lasting professional women’s basketball league. But first college players like Sheryl Swoopes, Rebecca Lobo, and Lisa Leslie brought

\textsuperscript{1312} Grundy and Shackelford, 194.
\textsuperscript{1313} Grundy and Shackelford, 200.
\textsuperscript{1314} Grundy and Shackelford, 201.
\textsuperscript{1315} Grundy and Shackelford, 200-201.
\textsuperscript{1316} Festle, 217.
\textsuperscript{1317} Grundy and Shackelford, 201.
\textsuperscript{1318} Grundy and Shackelford, 216.
national attention and fame to the college game in the nineties. In 1993 after her Texas Tech team captured the NCAA national championship title, Sheryl Swoopes became the first woman athlete to have a basketball shoe named in her honor—the Nike Air Swoopes.\textsuperscript{1320} The NCAA final championships for the next two years further grabbed the media and the nation’s attention. In the 1994 finals, the UNC team bested the Louisiana Tech team by nailing a last-second three pointer with only seven-tenths of a second left, making it an instant highlight reel hit. During the following season, UCONN defeated the number-one ranked Tennesse Lady Vols, coached by Pat Summit in what is now widely considered to be the most famous game in women’s basketball history.\textsuperscript{1321} In the NCAA finals in March of the same year, UCONN again defeated the Lady Vols in an upset, marking UCONN as a team of national preeminence.\textsuperscript{1322}

The success of the American college game translated to international victory at the 1996 Summer Olympics. Led by the media darlings and recent college grads Lisa Leslie (USC) and Rebecca Lobo (UCONN), amongst others, this beloved team has been credited with elevating the game of women’s basketball, namely through the awareness they brought with their outstanding skills, amazing winning streak, and also their “grit and charm.”\textsuperscript{1323} And charm was still a crucial component to their success, even in the latter years of the 1990s. While it was certainly true that the Olympic team captured

\textsuperscript{1320} Grundy and Shackelford, 217.
\textsuperscript{1321} Grundy and Shackelford, 218.
\textsuperscript{1322} UCONN and Tennessee have remained powerhouses in women’s basketball ever since 1995.
\textsuperscript{1323} Grundy and Shackelford, 223-224. Indeed, my own first recollections of women’s basketball outside of our local high school stars and in-state college heroes was of this 1996 Dream Team. I hung their poster on my closet door and often sat looking at it, inspecting each of the players, and daydreaming which one I wanted to be like, mainly based on their looks.
audiences with their exceptional skills, “it quickly became clear that media sympathies still lay with good looks and bare flesh, and accounts of on-court action regularly jostled with images featuring bikinis, sports bras and high-fashion wear.”

The duo of Lobo and Leslie provided the media with the age-old ideal combination of “toughness on the court and glamour off.” Lobo demonstrated outstanding talent, and she also “was a soft-spoken, articulate white-woman who radiated cheerful optimism, charming almost everyone she met.” Along the same lines, Leslie, “with her model looks and demeanor” attracted the media’s attention off the court while dazzling them on the court with her exceptional speed and shooting ability.

The next real attempt at women’s professional basketball in the United States occurred after the highly successful women’s national basketball team dominated world competition with 60-0 record, capped by a gold medal at the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta. The success of the women’s Olympic team, on the court and with their sponsors, proved that the time was ripe for another shot at women’s professional basketball. Going from famine to feast, women basketballers now had two professional leagues from which to choose, with two very distinct models and approaches. The dichotomy was, in many ways, reminiscent of the AIAW and NCAA struggle for power in the early 1980s. In the fall of 1996, the independently owned American Basketball League (ABL) got underway with eight franchises spread across the country. Their goal was to remain separate from any men’s basketball organizations and to concentrate...
exclusively on women’s basketball. Thus, they placed teams in areas that were known for having strong women’s college programs and a solid fan base in which to draw upon. Management placed former college stars back in the geographic area where their market was greatest. For example, the San Jose Lasers took former Stanford star Jennifer Azzi, while the All-star point guard Teresa Edwards, graduate of the University of Georgia, played for the Atlanta Glory, and Jennifer Rizzotti, a standout for UCONN, was sent to the New England Blizzard. The ABL, whose slogan was “It’s a Whole New Ballgame,” offered high salaries averaging around $80,000/year, medical insurance, and stock options, all of which appealed to many of the talented players coming out of college or who had recently played in the Olympics. They scheduled their forty-game inaugural season to coincide with the traditional fall/winter basketball season and wisely scheduled games in smaller arenas to save on rental costs. The league averaged over 3,500 fans per game.1330

The WNBA began its inaugural season in the summer of 1997 just seven months after the ABL played their first game. Bolstered by their logo “We Got Next,” the WNBA took a divergent approach. They were sponsored by the men’s National Basketball Association (NBA) and originated with eight teams, all owned by existing NBA franchises. This provided the WNBA with access to “state-of-the-art arenas”1331 but prevented them from capitalizing on popular women’s markets in such basketball hotbeds as Tennessee and Connecticut. They decided to play their games in the summer months to complement the NBA’s off-season and “to maximize the opportunity for TV

1330 Grundy & Shackelford, 224-226.
1331 “The Inaugural Season,” Advertising Supplement to USA Today, Friday June 20, 1997, University Archives, University of Kansas Libraries.
exposure by taking advantage of the summer lull in men’s college and pro sports.\textsuperscript{1332} However, they paid their women considerably less than the ABL—most WNBA players earned between $30,000-$35,000 the first year. The WNBA did not offer as great a benefit package as the ABL either.\textsuperscript{1333}

The WNBA was initially unable to draw as much talent to their league as the ABL because of their low pay, but they did have three major stars in Lisa Leslie, Rebecca Lobo, and Sheryl Swoopes, all of whom were compensated accordingly. Yet, the WNBA, with the promotional, marketing, and broadcasting power of the NBA firmly in their corner, put on an excellent show. The league snagged television deals with ESPN, NBC, and even the women’s Lifetime Television network. They signed corporate sponsors including Nike, Coca-Cola, McDonald’s, Anheuser-Busch, Sears, and General Motors, and the league bought a “ten-page, full-color promotional piece [that] ran in the \textit{USA Today}.”\textsuperscript{1334} Sears featured an ad within the promotional piece that applauded the long-anticipated arrival of women’s professional basketball and their role in the historic moment, despite the fact that the WBL existed in the late 1970s and early 1980s and the ABL had already played its first season. The ad stated, “Over the years millions of women have walked through our doors. Today, Sears is opening a NEW one. Sears is thrilled to be a WNBA sponsor in its inaugural season, helping to hold open the door of opportunity for an incredible group of women: the athletes of the WNBA. We are proud to celebrate their extraordinary talent and applaud their long-awaited arrival. Welcome to

\textsuperscript{1332} Grundy & Shackelford, 224-225.
\textsuperscript{1333} Grundy & Shackelford, 226.
\textsuperscript{1334} Grundy & Shackelford, 226.
a changing world."\footnote{1336} This type of support and coverage paid off when Rebecca Lobo’s New York Liberty team defeated Lisa Leslie and the Los Angeles Sparks by a mere ten points at the opening game on June 21, 1997, in front of 14,000 fans.\footnote{1337} Fan attendance and enthusiasm remained high throughout the season and, in fact, “far exceeded projections.”\footnote{1338} Between the three television networks broadcasting the WNBA, over 50 million viewers tuned in to watch their inaugural season.\footnote{1339}

Despite a deep talent pool and rising fan attendance during the ABL’s second season, league investors worried about their marketing and their competition with the WNBA. They lost hope of sponsorship from Nike and of ESPN broadcasting, both of whom made deals with the WNBA. The ABL still received good sponsorship with Reebok and Phoenix Home Life Mutual Insurance and managed to nab a solid national TV contract with Fox/Sports Channel. Unfortunately, this simply was not comparable to the media outlets and sponsorship-backing the WNBA procured and the awareness these outlets generated. By the ABL’s third season, they lost the vast majority of college All-Americans to the WNBA draft and their TV contracts quickly dwindled, which simultaneously dashed hopes of securing further sponsors. Not even halfway into their third season, the ABL filed for bankruptcy and folded.\footnote{1340}

The failure of the ABL was reminiscent of the NCAA swallowing the AIAW in the early 1980s. The ABL like the AIAW wanted to provide an outlet for women that was focused on women’s basketball—not men’s basketball. But as with the NCAA, the

\footnote{1335} “The Inaugural Season,” Advertising Supplement to USA Today, Friday June 20, 1997, University Archives, University of Kansas Libraries.
\footnote{1336} Grundy & Shackelford, 226-227.
\footnote{1337} Grundy & Shackelford, 227.
\footnote{1339} Grundy & Shackelford, 229.
WNBA was attached to the more powerful and financially secure NBA and used their model of organization and governance. In the end, power and money won out. The ABL players and coaches “were absorbed into the WNBA through the following spring’s draft, bringing a shot of skill to a league brimming with exposure but shallow in talent.”

Since the boost of talent, the WNBA has continued to expand with twelve teams as of the 2012 season. Remarkably, the players association established a collective bargaining agreement in 1999, which was the first ever for women’s team sports. Advances continue to be made but at a very slow pace. League metrics are on the rise in terms of television viewership, sponsorship revenue, merchandise sales, and season-ticket renewals. Regular season game attendance, however, was the lowest it has been since the league’s founding in 1997, and financially, the league “has never made a dime.” None of the teams turned a profit until 2010, and then, only the Connecticut Sun was a “cash-flow positive” team. According to NBA commissioner David Stern, the men’s organization has subsidized the WNBA up to $4 million a season.

Outside of financial issues, the league struggles to expand its fan base, but as current WNBA President Laurel Ritchie stated, “I have to remind myself that the WNBA is in its 16th year going on its

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1340 Grundy & Shackelford, 229.
1341 The WNBA started with eight teams and at one point was up to sixteen but several teams folded and the league currently has 12 teams in operation.
1345 Ozanian.
1346 Ozanian.
17th year. This is a process; it takes time to build a following. There are strong signs we’re headed in the right direction.”

But despite the longevity of the league and its impact on women’s basketball, many of the WNBA’s problems are a continuation of those that have plagued women’s basketball throughout its long history. While the league has undoubtedly provided strong role models for young, aspiring athletes, historically it has continued to promote a singular heterosexual, feminine identity. However, recent interviews and articles suggest that the league is engaging in a more open dialogue concerning sexuality. The WNBA, from its outset, has attracted a strong lesbian fan-base, but the league has consistently a projected a “family-oriented” atmosphere that promoted “healthy values” for women. It did not openly associate with their lesbian fan base until very recently. Former WNBA star Chamique Holdsclaw told the New York Times, “Sometimes it wasn’t the best players who were being promoted, but the best image.”

The image Holdsclaw referred to is that of the traditionally feminine, outwardly heterosexual woman athlete.

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1347 Rhoden.
1348 Rhoden; Kevin Pelton, “Wauters Balances Basketball, Motherhood,” etc.
1349 The phrase “family-oriented” is exceptionally offensive to the gay community when used in this type of context because it indicates that gays and lesbians, who cannot biologically reproduce with their partners, are not concerned with family issues or have a right to have their own families. It indicates that their gayness is not compatible with family-life, which is inaccurate, offensive, and discriminatory, and that only heterosexual families are legitimate.
1350 Oznian.
1351 Rhoden. In an unfortunate turn of events, Holdsclaw has recently caused the WNBA some major image problems. In November 2012, she was accused of firing a gunshot into the car of former girlfriend and current WNBA player Jennifer Lacy. In late February 2013, she was indicted for “aggravated assault, criminal damage and possession of a firearm during the commission of a felony.” “Chamique Holdsclaw, former WNBA player, indicted on assault charge,” www.cbsnews.com, Accessed 15 March 2013; Oznian.
Part of the problem lies with the fact that women still feel the need to engage in “apologetic behavior” to justify their athleticism because society continues to stereotype women athletes. It is common for girls and women to participate in athletics at various levels, but the link between women’s athletics and homosexuality, particularly at the college and professional levels, remains strong. This is not to say that homosexual women do not play sports—they do. But so do heterosexual women, and women athletes are not stigmatized as being straight. Being straight is normative, expected even.1352 Furthermore, the issue is not so much about whether women are straight or gay, but rather the social assumptions and stigmatizations of their lives based upon sexual preferences. Femininity, which most often is used as a code word for heterosexuality, is emphasized to promote a particular image and message about appropriate roles for women. As Pat Griffin explains about this emphasis on femininity—an indefinable ideal in itself—“The concern is not that women athletes are too plain, out of style, or don’t have good grooming habits. The real fear is that women athletes will look like dykes, or even worse, are dykes.”1353 The public fear of and discrimination against lesbians is the real issue at hand.

A perfect example appears in the now-retired WNBA superstar Lisa Leslie’s autobiography. Former NBA Los Angeles Lakers great Earvin “Magic” Johnson provided the foreword for Leslie’s 2008 book entitled Don’t Let the Lipstick Fool

1352 As Pat Griffin explained in the introduction to her book Strong Women, Deep Closets, “heterosexism is a system of dominance in which heterosexuality is privileged as the only normal and acceptable form of sexual expression. In this system of dominance, heterosexual identity is valued and rewarded, while homosexual and bisexual identity are stigmatized and punished.” Griffin, xv.
1353 Griffin, 68.
After much enthusiastic praise of her playing ability and work ethic, Magic Johnson writes the following: “Lisa took a lot of pride in making herself into a great basketball player, but she was always able to maintain her femininity at the same time...I think she shows women, both in sports and out of sports, that you can be a tremendous athlete and still remain a feminine woman.”

This passage indicates that even as late as 2008, a woman’s identity as an athlete was not inherently inclusive with that of her femininity. Femininity and athleticism were still at odds, and lesbianism was simply out of the question, at least in any sort of open manner.

But this is not to say that change has not occurred at all or that these issues are simple. Lisa Leslie is widely considered to be one of the all-time greatest women’s basketball players, and she earned this honor through her basketball skills, not the fact that she wore makeup before each game. She has earned the respect of both men and women alike. According to Leslie, her emphasis on femininity has to do with her upbringing and socialization—not with any sort of compensatory behavior for being an athlete. In fact, she has often been chastised by other players for her makeup and “ladylike” behavior. This image, and the fact that Leslie is considered to be more of a finesse player than a physical one, led coaches and players alike to challenge her on the court. But Leslie always held her ground. After one particularly contentious player who

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3354 The title itself represents the conflicting strands of femininity still tugging at women athletes in the 21st century. Leslie’s title addresses the belief that women who wear lipstick and have a more traditional “feminine” appearance are somehow not legitimate athletes, similar to the conflict and backlash Molly Bolin dealt with while playing in the WBL. Yet, highlighting that particular trait also sends a message about Leslie’s emphasis on heterosexuality and the importance of the “feminine” façade.

3355 Earvin “Magic” Johnson, foreword to Don’t Let the Lipstick Fool You, by Lisa Leslie with Larry Burnett (New York: Dafina Books, 2008), x.
continually engaged in trash talk pushed Leslie to the limit, she emphatically declared, “Don’t let this lipstick fool you! I will knock you out.”\footnote{Leslie, 191.}

But Leslie has never fully understood the negative implications of her own femininity: “Another thing that I hear all the time is, ‘Lisa, I love how feminine you are on the court, but you be ballin’! You work hard, but you are so feminine!’ I have no idea what they see. What is feminine?”\footnote{Leslie, 192.} According to Leslie, she is simply just being herself. She explained, “I do not put any extra swish in my walk. I am not prissy. I do not run around looking in a mirror all the time, saying, ‘Don’t mess up my hair,’ but I am perceived as being feminine, and that is not a bad thing.”\footnote{Leslie, 192.}

This femininity has simultaneously promoted her career and been held against her throughout her career: “I feel like a woman, and I like that I can bring that quality to my athleticism without either one having to suffer. I like wearing feminine clothes, but I am not consciously trying to be girly.”\footnote{Leslie, 192.} Wearing makeup to Leslie was a natural part of being a woman. “My mom wore lipstick when she drove her truck. And if my aunts were in a room and someone wanted to snap a picture, they would all yell, ‘Wait, wait, wait,’ so they could reach into their bras and pull out a tube of lipstick. And they all had lipstick!”\footnote{Leslie, 193.} It was natural for Leslie to put on lipstick, blush, and mascara before her games; “…My appearance has more to do with presenting myself well and having pride in who I am, how I look, what I do, and what I represent than with being feminine,” she explained. “I know that every time I step on the court, I am going to be watched and

\footnote{Leslie, 191.}
\footnote{Leslie, 192.}
\footnote{Leslie, 192.}
\footnote{Leslie, 192.}
\footnote{Leslie, 193.}
judged by thousands of people, so I work hard to showcase myself and the game in the best way that I know how... It is the only way I know how to be. And I would hate to miss my opportunity because I am preoccupied with other people’s ideas of how I should or should not be. It is not worth it.”

This is a statement pulled directly from the Molly Bolin handbook.

And both Bolin and Leslie make excellent points. Should they not be allowed to be themselves? Feminism is all about women being who they want to be and being respected for the decisions they want to make and being treated equally, with or without lipstick. But society has not caught up to this position yet. Leslie exemplifies change in that even as the “lipstick chick...girly girl” she has made her career as a highly-esteemed professional athlete, something Bolin was unable to do in the long run two decades previous. But the actual problem lies more with the women who do not adhere to the traditional image of femininity and heterosexuality. These women get to play basketball, an advance in itself, but they do not get the endorsements, the posters, and the popularity. Society does not want them to be the face of women’s basketball, despite the fact the women’s game has evolved to more like the men’s.

And while society may not embrace the more “masculine” woman or the lesbian to the extent they do the “feminine” heterosexual woman, all women have considerable more rights and protection to live their lives in any way they choose without the backlash of the previous century. In 2005, Sheryl Swoopes, former Texas Tech college star and a four-time WNBA champion and three-time league MVP, announced that she was a lesbian with the news of her endorsement of Olivia, a lesbian-centered cruise line. “I’m

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1361 Leslie, 193.
1362 Leslie, 194.
just at a point in my life where I’m tired of having to pretend to be somebody I’m not,” Swoopes explained. “I’m tired of having to hide my feelings about the person I care about. About the person I love.”\(^{1363}\) *USA Today* reported that her announcement was “not likely to create issues for her on the basketball court and may provide opportunities off it.”\(^{1364}\) Swoopes received positive support from Nike, who sponsors the WNBA, as well as her coach and the WNBA itself. Nike’s marketing manager Raye Pond stated, “We admire her courage, and her strength, and look forward to a continued relationship.”\(^{1365}\) Donna Orender, then-president of the WNBA, told *USA Today*, “Sheryl’s lifestyle choice is a non-issue for us.”\(^{1366}\)

Similarly, other players in the WNBA supported Swoopes and stated that her public revelation should not cause any “animosity from players or fans.”\(^{1367}\) Leaguemate Anne Donovan complimented Swoopes. “Sheryl’s proven herself as a class act. The people who will make a big deal out of this probably have a problem with the lifestyle. It’s not an issue with me.”\(^{1368}\) Lisa Leslie, who perhaps did not condone this type of lifestyle but did not feel it was her place to judge others, responded as such: “Let he who is without sin cast the first stone. We’re both role models who have made different choices. I don’t know why we’re even talking about it. It’s a private matter. It has

\(^{1365}\) Dixon, “Little Backlash…” 
\(^{1366}\) Oscar Dixon, “Swoopes to endorse lesbian cruise line,” *USA Today*, Wednesday October 26, 2005. 
\(^{1367}\) Dixon, “Little Backlash…” 
\(^{1368}\) Dixon, “Little Backlash…”
nothing to do with basketball.”\textsuperscript{1369} In theory, Leslie is correct. Femininity and sexuality have nothing to do with the sport of basketball, but they have everything to do with a woman’s identity, and since women basketball players’ identity is always suspect on some level, femininity and sexuality in turn have everything to do with women’s basketball. It is a vicious cycle really.

The WNBA appears to be moving towards a more open acknowledgement of the homosexuality of some of their players as well as embracing their lesbian fan-base. “The league realizes that it has to support and have a place for its gay community,” stated Chamique Holdsclaw. “A lot of gay people love sports and want to support the W.N.B.A. You have players, some star players now, who openly identify as being gay. Early on, the league would not market them because of that.”\textsuperscript{1370} Holdsclaw sees the WNBA’s strategy as having evolved: “That has changed. You have to be honest with your product and with the athletes that you’re dealing with. And get support from wherever you can.”\textsuperscript{1371}

In May 2012, a perfect example of this more recent openness was featured on the Seattle Storm team website, accessible off the WNBA’s home page. The website featured an article on Storm player Ann Wauters, highlighting two of the major issues in women’s sports: lesbianism and motherhood. Wauters returned to the WNBA for the


\textsuperscript{1370} Rhoden.

\textsuperscript{1371} Rhoden.
2012 season after both she and her partner each gave birth in 2011. The couple has a
dughter Lou and a son Vince only three weeks apart in age. Juggling motherhood and a
career in basketball continues to be problematic for WNBA stars, regardless of their
sexuality. Only about fourteen of the approximately 130 women in the WNBA are
mothers, slightly over 10 percent.

The stark reality is that pregnancy has been and “remains an undeniable business
consideration in the WNBA—and one that the NBA doesn’t have to worry about.”
Many professional women basketball players are afraid of hurting their career or letting
down their teammates and coaches by missing part or all of a season to have a child.
Three-time WNBA All-Star Marie Ferdinand-Harris “was terrified her personal choice
would compromise her professional career.” She recalled, “For a woman athlete, it’s
just so scary when you play ball for your whole life, and you feel like your coaches and
teammates and fans—you’re just all for them. So when you go and have a child…you
feel like you’ve let them down.” When Minnesota Lynx player Vanessa Hayden-
Johnson learned she was pregnant, “many people, relatives, friends, even agents—not

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1372 Laura Gottesdiener, “WNBA Players Win At Motherhood and Career,” 6 May 2011, www.huffingtonpost.com, Accessed 25 January 2013. In fact, pregnancy was an issue before the WNBA ever played its first game. Six months before the league’s opening game, then-president Val Ackerman received a phone call from Sheryl Swoopes, the first player to sign with the league and who was largely acknowledged to be their “standard-bearer.” Swoopes informed Ackerman that she was pregnant and would miss the first part of the WNBA’s inaugural season. However, Swoopes returned to the court a mere six weeks after giving birth to her son and helped the Houston Comets win the first-ever WNBA championship. “Motherhood a WNBA Reality.”
1373 Gottesdiener.
1374 Gottesdiener. Although Ferdinand-Harris experienced such feelings after learning of her pregnancy, she received exceptional support from both her coach and her teammates.
hers—advised Hayden not to have the baby."\textsuperscript{1375} But abortion was not an option for Hayden and her husband, and she credits her daughter with rejuvenating her career. After giving birth, Hayden found herself more motivated, focused, and wanting to be a good role-model for her daughter.\textsuperscript{1376}

Professional women’s basketball is still not overly conducive to pregnancy and motherhood. The collective bargaining agreement reached between the WNBA and its players allows a pregnant player to draw fifty percent of her salary, “either for the length of time she is out or until the end of her contract.”\textsuperscript{1377} Once the mother returns, she often has to travel for days or weeks at a time, and “unlike the L.P.G.A., which offers free on-site child care at its domestic events, the W.N.B.A. has no such perks.\textsuperscript{1378} In reference to being away from her children, Taj McWilliams Franklin explained, “It’s a Catch-22. Women love their careers and they love their families. Sad as it is, you have to give up something of one or the other in order to be good at one.”\textsuperscript{1379} McWilliams-Franklin verbalizes the issues many working mothers face. The social emphasis on mothers as the primary caretakers make combining motherhood and a career problematic but the same does not apply for men. They too combine fatherhood and a career, but no one dwells on what they are giving up.

\textsuperscript{1376} Augustoviz.
\textsuperscript{1377} Gottesdiener.
\textsuperscript{1379} Crouse.
Roller Derby Revival

Roller Derby has always been a sport of endurance, and despite its official "demise" in 1973, it has continued to endure the test of time. The most recent revival of the sport originated out of Austin, Texas, in early 2001, and now has approximately 1300 leagues across the world with over half of those leagues concentrated in the United States.¹³⁸⁰ While this version of the sport is continually evolving (really all the versions, even Seltzer's, continually evolved), it now has a full decade under its belt, thousands of amateur players, and international status with a Roller Derby World Cup championship, so I believe it is safe to say that roller derby, in some form of this modern incarnation, is here to stay.¹³⁸¹

A rascally barhopping, promoter-type originally from Tulsa named Dan Policarpo decided that his new residence Austin, Texas, was ripe for a revival of the sport of roller derby. But Devil Dan, as he was nicknamed, had no intentions of fulfilling Leo Seltzer's dream of bringing Roller Derby into the mainstream athletic world as a legitimate sport. He thought it would be fun to start a women's roller derby league that was more circus and skin than legitimate sport and quickly began canvassing Austin with posters

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¹³⁸⁰ "Roller Derby Worldwide," http://www.derbyroster.com/, Accessed 30 August 2012. Although this website lists about 732 American leagues as being in existence, new leagues are constantly cropping up while older leagues sometimes split into two leagues or die out altogether. It is difficult to get a precise number of leagues without an overarching single organization that governs all the leagues.

¹³⁸¹ Then again, I am not the first to claim that Roller Derby, in a particular version, is here to stay. The Seltzers thought the same throughout their tenure with the sport, and Brian Hughes, the Vice President of TNN, which sponsored Roller Jam, insisted “…It’s here to stay. Absolutely.” Yet Roller Jam folded after just a couple of years. So, I suppose I’m joining the historical ranks of people making these claims, but I am comfortable with doing that.
announcing his vision.\textsuperscript{1382} “I wanted to take a pop culture institution from the past and reload it with new information,” explained Policarpo. “There were all these aggressive women running around. Some were into the whole tattooed rockabilly look, and I just thought of an all-girl roller derby league.”\textsuperscript{1383} But Policarpo envisioned a sort of roller derby “freak-show.”\textsuperscript{1384} Policarpo described his vision as such: “I wanted more smoke and mirrors, more like ‘Rollerball’ than roller derby. There was a circus in town at the time and I wanted it to be like that, but more extreme, like clowns fighting each other with knives.”\textsuperscript{1385} He recruited a group of about fifty women from the vibrant, cultural scene rooted in the Red River Street area of Austin, to meet at the bar/restaurant Casino El Camino on Sunday January 11, 2001, and lured them in with the following speech:

“The girls in this town are really angry. I want to start a Roller Derby, like a sideshow, with hot girls and fire twirlers…Don’t worry about knowing how to skate. The sound effects and light show will make up for it.”\textsuperscript{1386} Devil Dan’s vision incorporated the most outrageous, theatrical aspects of the 1960s and 1970s Roller Derby and Roller Games

\textsuperscript{1382} Apparently Devil Dan overheard someone talking about some form of roller derby one night in Austin and he “co-opted the brainstorm and ran with it.” Melissa “Melicious” Joulan, \textit{Rollergirl: Totally True Tales from the Track}, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007), 53.

\textsuperscript{1383} Corcoran.

\textsuperscript{1384} Corcoran.

\textsuperscript{1385} Corcoran. Directed by Norman Jewison and starring James Caan, \textit{Rollerball} was 1975 futuristic sci-fi action movie. The film takes place in a future corporate industry-run society that has replaced the evils of war with the sport of Rollerball, which a reviewer in the \textit{New York Times} describes as “a combination of the kind of roller skating you see in a roller derby, professional wrestling and pinball, and it’s supposedly so brutal, vicious and exciting that it works off all aggressions…” Vincent Camby, “Film: Futuristic World of ‘Rollerball,’” 26 June 1975, \url{http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9A01EFD1103CE034BC4E51D806838E69EDE}, Accessed 5 September 2012; “Rollerball (1975), \url{http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0073631/}, Accessed 5 September 2012.

\textsuperscript{1386} As cited in Joulan, 53; Barbee and Cohen, 32-33.
(such as the use of little people for exotic show) and placed himself firmly at the head of the whole show, P.T. Barnum-style. The citizens of the hip underground and local music scene in Austin as well as the bar and nightclub owners contributed to the fundraising for the new roller derby.\textsuperscript{1387}

Per Devil Dan’s suggestion, the women quickly divided themselves into four themed teams, apparently according to whichever local bar they patronized the most. Each team was captained by popular Austin “scenesters.”\textsuperscript{1388} Roller derby was reimagined and reborn with the new teams, new captains, and new players, all of whom adopted a derby pseudonym (henceforth called a derby name) that highlighted some aspect of their personality with a fun play-on-words or an alias that functioned as a sort of alter ego.\textsuperscript{1389} April Ritzenthaler, aka La Muerta, headed the Putas del Fuego; Nancy Haggerty, aka Iron Maiden, led the Hellcats; Amanda Hardison, aka Miss Information, captained the Holy Rollers; and Anya Jack, aka Hot Lips Dolly, managed the Rhinestone Cowgirls.\textsuperscript{1390} As Ritzenthaler explained, “We thought we should be larger than life. Naming yourself gave you that extra inspiration to fill out that character.”\textsuperscript{1391}

The new roller derby women continued recruiting for the league and their individual teams and for the first time tried their hand at skating. But before the league could really take off, they needed to be financially viable, so first and foremost they focused on fundraising. But in March 2001, they realized that Devil Dan had somehow

\textsuperscript{1387} Joulwan, 53.
\textsuperscript{1388} Joulwan, 53; Barbee and Cohen, 33.
\textsuperscript{1389} Barbee and Cohen, 33.
\textsuperscript{1390} Barbee and Cohen, 33; Joulwan, 53.
\textsuperscript{1391} At the beginning of the revival, many women adopted derby names not only because they enjoyed having an alias, but also because they did not necessarily want their real names tied to the alternative and somewhat controversial sport of roller derby for professional or personal reasons. Barbee and Cohen, 157-158.
blown all the money they raised so far and then skipped town. The women were invested in the new roller derby, both literally and physically, and did not want to give up on it so soon despite the deep betrayal of Devil Dan. The four captains grabbed the reigns of the fledgling league (with Heather Burdick, aka Sugar, replacing Amanda Hardison as captain of the Holy Rollers), making it all up as they went.

The captains lacked any model on which to base their league and none of the women leaders had any real skating skills. One original member described the league as “just party girls hanging out in bars and talking about something that may or may not happen” and explained, “We did more drinking than we did skating.” The members had no real concept of what Roller Derby had been or even what it should be. According to authors Jennifer Barbee and Alex Cohen, the original members really created their own version of the sport: “From a recollection skewed by youthful idealism and media input, these pioneer skaters reincarnated the sport as a cross between the hard hits of Saturday afternoon [Joan] Weston versus [Ann] Calvello brawls and the fashion bonanza of Farrah Fawcett duking it out on skates in Charlie’s Angels.”

The captains of the teams officially joined together to institute more formal control after Devil Dan’s disappearance. They formed Bad Girl Good Woman (BGGW) Productions, which stood as the “league’s governing council, tasked with giving the

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1392 Devil Dan has a slightly different version of events, claiming the girls took the money and refused to return his calls. “I picked the four captains based on how strong they were, but they went behind my back, trashed my name, and decided to do it without me,” alleges Dan. The captains “dispute this, saying they never again heard from Policarpo.” He had left Texas for Tulsa by August 2001. Corcoran.
1393 Joulwan, 54; Barbee and Cohen, 34-37; Mabe, 61.
1394 As cited in Barbee and Cohen, 35.
group structure and division" but eventually grew to be more of a business than an amateur sports league. The four captains dubbed themselves “The She-E-Os” and were determined to make roller derby succeed, but with their own personal flair and without any male leadership or control—“no men allowed.” The BGGW league initiated the Do-It-Yourself ethic that has since become a staple in modern roller derby culture, as well as the institutionalization of “sexy uniforms, skater alter egos, and new-school rules combined with unparalleled athleticism and fearlessness.”

It took the first league about a year and a half to research the game, revise the rules, raise money, promote the league, recruit more skaters, develop skating skills, and decide on their penalty system. But by early summer 2002, they were finally ready for their debut. On June 23, 2002, BGGW held a roller derby bout at Skate World in north Austin before a crowd composed of family and friends to serve as a trial run.

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1396 Barbee and Cohen, 36.
1397 This vision for the sport did not sit well with many of the BGGW skaters as the months wore on and eventually led to a split in the league.
1398 Mabe, 61.
1399 Mabe, 61. It is important to note that the game is currently evolving away from the more “showy” aspects of the game (i.e. sexy uniforms and skater names). Many teams are adopting more standard team uniforms and more individual players are skating under their own names, although most derby leagues still operate under a DIY, punk rock-type ethos.
1400 Barbee and Cohen, 42. Under the Seltzers’ Roller Derby, when teams competed against each other, they were called games, as is the term used in most team sports. However, in the modern roller derby world, games are now called “bouts,” like how the boxing community uses the term for their fights. The reason for this is because April Ritzenthaler, one of the skaters involved in the creation of the new sport, had been involved with boxing, so she decided to use the term “bout” instead of “game.” The description stuck and thus roller derby skaters no longer play games but rather have “bouts.” “Jerry Seltzer: My Thoughts on Life, Roller Derby and More” blog, http://rollerderbyjesus.com/2011/08/05/springtime-for-roller-derby/, Accessed 6 March 2013.
Hellcats defeated the Rhinestone Cowgirls with the close score of 45-38. Buoyed by the success of their experimental bout, BGGW held their first official public bout at the Playland Skate Center, also in north Austin, on August 22, drawing in approximately 400 fans who paid five dollars each for a ticket. By their league championship in October, they sold over 1,100 tickets. Roller derby had resurfaced in a big way.

As with any beginning organization, particularly one that had limited structure and an unclear vision, problems quickly surfaced between the skaters and the She-E-Os concerning league governance. The She-E-Os retired mid-season that first year to concentrate on running the league with the intention of creating a profit-generating business, but to the skaters, this looked like an attempt to consolidate control and exploit the hard work of the league members, who were paying dues but not seeing many of the kickbacks. A failed attempt to raise money off the sales of a league calendar featuring the skaters and a heated insurance controversy concerning an injured player brought the anxieties and tensions of the league to a head. In April 2003, after a heated league meeting attempting to air their grievances with the She-E-Os failed to resolve any major issues, a large majority of the skaters decided to break off and form their own roller derby league, the Texas Rollergirls, which was structured to be “by the skaters, for the skaters.”

A fierce, and often unpleasant, rivalry remained between the two leagues. Shortly after the split, the BGGW She-E-Os invested in an authentic banked-track from the original San Francisco Bay Bombers team, renamed their league the TXRD Lonestar

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1401 Barbee and Cohen, 42.
1402 Michael Corcoran, “Return of the Roller Derby: Revival with roots in Austin has been bruising on track and off,” Friday May 30, 2008, www.austin360.com, Accessed 31 August 2012; Joulwan, 3-13; Barbee and Cohen, 42. Cocoran lists the date of their first public bout as August 4 but Barbee and Cohen list is as August 22.
1403 Joulwan, 82.
Rollergirls, and gradually relinquished control to the skaters. The TXRD skaters eventually adopted the skater-owned-and operated league model their rivals developed, which is somewhat ironic since the original league structure and leadership was the catalyst for the split.\textsuperscript{1404}

Since the revival of banked-track roller derby and the institution of flat-track Roller Derby in Austin, amateur leagues have spread like wildfire across the country. Flat-track is the most adopted form of the sport, for no other reason than banked-tracks are extremely expensive to purchase, maintain, and move. This means that leagues need a permanent space in which to house the track, which can also be exceptionally costly. As of September 2012, only twenty-two banked track roller derby leagues exist across the United States in comparison to over 1100 women’s flat track leagues.\textsuperscript{1405}

In the years since the reemergence of the sport, a national volunteer, tax-exempt organization has emerged to govern the women’s flat track leagues. The Women’s Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA) describes itself as “the international governing body for the sport of women’s flat track roller derby and a membership organization for leagues to collaborate and network.”\textsuperscript{1406} WFTDA, which has an official membership of 159 leagues with 91 more in their apprentice program, essentially “sets standards for rules, seasons, and safety, and determines guidelines for the national and international athletic competitions of member leagues.”\textsuperscript{1407}

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\textsuperscript{1404} Barbee and Cohen, 47; \textit{Hell on Wheels}, dir. Bob Ray, 90 min., prod. Werner Campbell, Indie Pix, 2009, DVD.
\textsuperscript{1407} “All About WFTDA,” http://wftda.com/about-WFTDA, Accessed 6 September 2012. Although a large number of women’s leagues are not officially a part of WFTDA, the
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WFTDA grew out of an organization dubbed the United Leagues Coalition (ULC), which was founded in 2004 by “a handful of flat track roller derby leagues, each owned and operated by skaters sharing the singular, driving compulsion to re-imagine roller derby as a modern sport.” Leading the charge was the Texas Rollergirls, the Austin-based league that split from BGGW. The ULC’s first official meeting was held in 2005, with 20 flat-track league representatives present. The group established the purpose, goals, and mission of their organization and voted to rename themselves the Women’s Flat Track Derby Association. WFTDA allowed new members to join in September 2006, and have established themselves as the premier governing body of the modern sport of women’s flat track Roller Derby.

WFTDA, run by a volunteer board of directors, a handful of paid employees, and unpaid skaters who donate their time as members of the organization, provides a great service to the derby world, bringing it cohesion, structure, and inter-connected networks. But WFTDA is in many ways plagued by modern gender politics and is currently unable to bridge the gap of equality that was achieved in decades past within the sport of Roller Derby. WFTDA bought into the Austin-based idea that modern roller derby was for women only—the sport, in fact, has been described as “the third wave of feminism” and has ties to the woman-centered Riot Grrrl movement. A vast majority of the

vast majority abide by WFTDA rules and regulations. There are a variety of reasons why leagues have not joined WFTDA. For instance, they may not be eligible for some particular reason, it is too costly, they do not want the extra work, or they want to develop their league before joining a national organization, amongst other reasons.

1409 Barbee and Cohen, 61.
1411 As cited in Cocoran; The use of wave metaphors is highly debatable in itself but that does not diminish the ties of Roller Derby to feminism in general.
women’s flat track leagues, both those belonging to WFTDA and those that do not, promote their leagues as a space for empowered women, who work hard, challenge themselves, and enjoy teamwork.\footnote{1412} For instance, the Green Mountain Derby Dames, a WFTDA league located in Burlington, Vermont, adopted the following mission statement:

The mission of the Green Mountain Derby Dames is to empower women personally and athletically through the sport of roller derby. As a skater-owned and operated organization, it is our intention to hold ourselves to the highest standards of respect and sportswoman-ship on and off the track, uphold the rules and values of the Women’s Flat Track Derby Association, and to be a positive force in our community.\footnote{1413}

Similarly, in Terre Haute, Indiana, the Bash Valley Clobber Girls, currently a non-WFTDA league, strive to be “a grassroots organization created to inspire women through companionship, sportsmanship, and a love of roller derby.”\footnote{1414} They describe their members as a “diverse group of women from all walks of life who come together to participate in this full-contact sport.”\footnote{1415}

Women across the country have embraced this type of athletic outlet, particularly since the sports world has long turned a cold shoulder to women’s sports. Women-run


\footnote{1413} http://www.gmanderbydames.com/about-gmdd.html, Accessed 6 September 2012. Side note on the Green Mountain Derby Dames. They have most definitely empowered their women. When I played against them in the spring of 2012, they annihilated my team. They were a solid group of athletes!


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sports organizations that focus on the empowerment of women, outside of physical education departments, have been few and far between. But what is particularly interesting with modern roller derby is WFTDA’s stance about men’s involvement in the sport and their relationship with men’s roller derby. To join WFTDA, a team must be a part of a league that only competes against other women, and female skaters must own 51% of the league.1416 Women have finally gained control of a sport and intend to exercise that control. They want to determine the future of their own sport.

While almost every single league in existence nods their heads to the long history of Roller Derby and pays a brief tribute to the history of the sport on league websites, most leagues seem to ignore or at least forget the fact that Roller Derby was one of the first sports to include women as equal competitors alongside men from the very beginning. Yet, women no longer want to include men as their partners on the track.1417 This has long been a problem for Pioneer Valley Roller Derby (PVRD), a co-ed league located in Northampron, Massachusetts. PVRD, founded in 2005 by Sarah Lang and Jake Fahy, began separate men’s and women’s teams that belong to one united league, whose members practiced together, like the Seltzer version of days-gone-by. PVRDs men’s team was, in fact, the first men’s team created after the 2001 revival. As Fahy explained, “Really, it was just that I wanted to play. We knew that guys weren’t doing it, so we knew that that would be a change or would not be usual, so to speak, but I don’t

1417 I’m not suggesting that men and women still skate together on the track. I’m merely remarking on the fact that men and women no longer belong to the same teams or the same leagues for the most part.
know if we really thought it was that big a deal at that point.”

But because PVRD is owned by both Lang and Fahy equally, and its members play competitors that are not women (meaning the men’s team competes against other men), the women’s team will never be able to join WFTDA as their rules currently stand. And of course, their men’s team may not join either.

But the skaters at PVRD are a dedicated, innovative, and hardy group of people, so as men’s roller derby continued to spread, they decided to fill the hole themselves by creating a men’s roller derby organization, since they could not officially belong to or be governed by WFTDA. In 2007, PVRD, along with the men’s teams the Harm City Homicide, New York Shock Exchange, and the Death Quads of Connecticut, formed the Men’s Derby Coalition (MDC). They described themselves as “a loose federation of men’s derby leagues [whose] primary goals were to promote men’s derby through sharing resources and contributing to the derby community.”

But as men’s derby continued to grow, MDC realized they had “gained enough momentum to require national level organization and games sanctioning.” From the foundation of MDC emerged the Men’s Roller Derby Association (MRDA). The new organization, largely run by “the same passionate men and women,” emphasizes resource sharing between

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1418 Jake Fahy, interview with author, 14 September 2012, phone interview, digital audio recording, W.E.B. Du Bois Library, University of Massachusetts-Amherst, Amherst, MA.
1419 Fahy stated, “I would like to see our women be eligible to join if that is their choice. I personally would like to see a change made in that particular language.”
1420 Erich Bennar, interview by author, phone interview, digital audio recording, W.E.B. Du Bois Library, University of Massachusetts-Amherst, Amherst, MA; Fahy; Barbee and Cohen, 215.
men’s leagues but also provides specific benefits to leagues that join MRDA: “Such benefits include umbrella insurance coverage, insurance reciprocity with WFTDA, and the ability to compete in the annual MRDA Championship tournament.”

MRDA intends to compliment WFTDA with their organizational structure and has received encouragement from the women’s group. Indeed, MRDA leadership has formed an unofficial partnership with WFTDA.

MRDA, like WFTDA for women, is a great organization for men to govern, regulate, and promote men’s roller derby. But with WFTDA’s membership limited to female skater-owned and operated leagues and MRDA, a men’s derby governing body, some women’s teams fall through the cracks. Because of their association with men, these teams cannot join WFTDA and because of their sex, they cannot join MRDA.

Pioneer Valley’s own women’s traveling team, the Western Mass Destruction, is isolated in that respect. There’s no easy solution to this conundrum, only to mention that once upon a time, in a sports world largely segregated by sex (not to mention race), men and women used to skate side by side, as teammates in one league. It remains to be seen if modern roller derby will head in the direction of a more equal past or if it will evolve into a modern, sex-segregated future.

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Aside from the complexities of how to govern the sport of Roller Derby, gender politics have influenced women’s roller derby in other, incredibly interesting ways, both positive and negative. Contemporary observers, many who have taken to the blogosphere, have commented on the sexualization of the modern Roller Derby skater. Over the past decade, fishnet stockings, booty shorts, red lipstick, and sex-themed derby names have become a staple part of the “national punk rock derby renaissance.” But the skaters have not only embraced this culture, and their own sexuality, but have been the promoters of it as well. In 2009, the Gotham Girls Roller Derby described each of their skaters as “an amalgam of athlete, pin-up girl, rocker and brute rolled into one badass derby girl.” What were their skaters really like, one might ask: “Pretty? Hell, yeah! Tough? Of course! Badass? Always! These ladies are taking all the action and excitement of the roller derby you remember and doing it with a modern twist to keep you on your toes.”

This modern sexuality or expression of a type of sexuality falls into the larger national conversation about feminism, sexual liberation, sexual identity, and what writer Ariel Levy dubs “raunch feminism.” Are women who play a full contact sport on their own terms by their own rules promoting a modern feminist agenda? Or does the fact that many of them do it while wearing short skirts mark their efforts as merely “a garbled attempt at continuing the work of the women’s movement”? Or are women

1430 Levy, 75.
simply playing a sport which has nothing to do with feminism? Is this modern sexualization merely a continuation of the emphasis on femininity that has plagued women’s sports since the late 19th century?

There are no clear-cut answers to these questions. I imagine the answer is something of an amalgam of all of the above. There has been progress in that thousands of women play a full-contact sport. Many skaters embrace their own sexuality and legitimately enjoy wearing skimpy clothes and justify these decisions with “post-feminist” rhetoric that insists it is their choice to wear such items and they do it for their own benefit. As one skater expressed in an article published in an Austin, Texas newspaper in 2008, “From the very beginning, the skaters embraced the attitude that we realize that we’re dressing in skimpy outfits and playing up the sexiness, but we’re in charge of that and we’re comfortable with it. We exploit ideas about women that aren’t exactly PC…we wear these costumes because we look good in them. This is feminist-based, and it’s never about exploitation.”¹⁴³¹ These skimpy and revealing outfits also are not mandatory. Most skaters, in fact, see their clothing as liberating—as a personal expression that they embrace. And in my experiences with the modern game, I have seen a large amount of average length mesh gym shorts on female skaters, but, realistically, it is generally easier to skate and play roller derby wearing only spandex, if one is comfortable doing so. And many skaters promote women’s strength and empowerment within Roller Derby and their regular lives. However, most skaters join Roller Derby leagues because the sport is fun—not to make a political statement.¹⁴³²

¹⁴³¹ As cited in Storms, 80.
¹⁴³² While no official nationwide polls exist concerning the topics in this paragraph, my own experiences with the sport, my professional discussions with current players, my
Yet Roller Derby does make a political statement, as do skaters when they
publicly bout. It is hard to say what exactly that statement is because every time roller
derby is placed in a box or defined in some way, roller derby changes. For instance,
Gotham Girls Roller Derby skaters, who used to consider themselves “an amalgam of
athlete, pin-up girl, rocker and brute rolled into one badass derby girl” now define
themselves as “strong, diverse, and independent women from the world’s biggest, baddest
city.”1433 The Gotham Girls are no longer a part of a hip, underground subculture that
simultaneously promotes female sexuality and toughness but rather a premier national
amateur league “committed to fostering serious competition on a national and
international level, developing amateur athletes for competition, and promoting the
physical and mental strength and independent spirit of amateur female athletes.”1434 The
novelty of strong women hitting each other while wearing provocative clothes, if this was
ever what the novelty was about, has passed. Roller Derby is a national sport that
continues to grow and evolve. It is impossible to say what it will become and what it will
look like. Will it remain more of a cultural-driven amateur sport or will it, like
basketball, evolve to a paid, professional level?1435

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1435 Roller Derby skaters themselves do not seem to be on the same page as to where the
sport should go. According to the first president of WFTDA Jennifer Wilson, aka Hydra,
surveys and member meetings “show that people’s ideas are all over the map.” She
explained, “One group wants the WFTDA to drop the “W” (Women) and “FT” (Flat-
Track) parts of our name and be an all-inclusive organization, while another group wants
the WFTDA to be even stricter on our membership policies. It’s the same situation in
almost every sector of the association and impossible to find a direction that satisfies
everyone.” As cited in Barbee and Cohen, 66.
Regardless of its eventual outcome, motherhood will continue to raise issues within the sport, as it has since 1935. Despite often being touted as T&A, modern roller derby leagues have worked hard to cultivate a family atmosphere within their leagues and particularly at their bouts. While the sport itself is not conducive to pregnancy (so few really are), most leagues encourage mothers to join. Youngsters are common fixtures in roller derby practice facilities and can be spotted playing in the stands or around the edges of the track during practice times. Most leagues also discount kids’ tickets or allow children’s admission for free in an attempt to appeal to all, particularly families.\footnote{1437}

Although no official statistics have been compiled, almost all women’s leagues have mothers among their ranks. Like the Roller Derby of the past, modern derby continues to offer an athletic space for mothers in much higher numbers than other women’s sports. Despite the physical barriers that roller derby poses for pregnant women, the derby community encourages mothers to return to skating as soon as possible. Some women even return to the track while they are still breastfeeding. In 2011, Kate Hansen, an artist and roller derby skater, posted photographs on her art blog under the title “Breastfeeding and Roller Derby.” Each picture featured a roller derby skater in full derby gear breastfeeding their babies—on the team bench, in the locker room, at home, and on the edge of the track. She thoughtfully posed the question, “What

\footnote{1436} Yes, that “Tits and Ass.”
\footnote{1437} Mabe, 65.
is it that we find so riveting about roller derby girls breastfeeding?”¹⁴³⁸ She answered her own question with the following:

Perhaps it’s the contrast. The idea of roller derby, the fact it’s a contact sport and a little bad-ass, combined with the soft, nurturing role of breastfeeding mother…It’s slightly subversive to combine the image of a full contact sport with the role of motherhood, especially breastfeeding. Even the visual contrast of the hard equipment with the softness of breastfeeding is interesting. It’s wonderful because it questions our notions of what women are, and what it means to be female.¹⁴³⁹

Hansen’s last line not only highlights the contradictions of the athlete-mother, but it also unknowingly articulates the relationship of roller derby to the larger society. Roller derby pushes society to reassess its ideas on women’s identities and physical capabilities. They are forced to confront the fact that women, even mothers, are capable of competing in a full-contact sport. Like breastfeeding, nothing could be more natural for these skaters.

**Conclusion**

Women’s sports have made significant strides in the 21st century, and women have most definitely left their mark on the sporting world in recent years. The fact that Sports Illustrated put out a “Title IX” issue in June 2012 to celebrate and discuss the legacy of the legislation on women’s sports speaks volumes. But if you browse through the pages of any regular issue of Sports Illustrated, minus the swimsuit issue,¹⁴⁴⁰ women are conspicuously absent. You will see a feature story here or there, but men largely dominate the hallowed pages of SI. Male sports similarly dominate television coverage as well. On every Sunday, Monday, Thursday, and Saturday during the fall, there is


¹⁴⁴⁰ A discussion of SI’s swimsuit issue merits another completely separate dissertation on its own.
always at least one football game on the major TV networks, while women’s sports receive no regular coverage. Many factors determine what sports get featured in magazines and on television, including but not limited to fan base, financial backing, network sponsors, and viewership numbers. But the mere fact that women’s sports still do not even come close to receiving the same coverage as men’s sports indicate that women still do not have full equality in athletics. The work of Title IX has not been completed.

The sports of basketball and roller derby have made many gains and advances since the 1930s. Basketball developed separately from the men’s game while Roller Derby was founded as a truly equal, co-ed sport from its outset and remained so throughout its existence. But both sports proved exceptionally popular among women, providing them with the opportunity and space to compete in organized sports. Women basketball players and Roller Derby skaters challenged outside social forces and critics who discredited and disparaged their supposedly lower class morals, motives, and behaviors. They insisted that they too were “ladies” despite their athletic pursuits. They challenged conventions about female behavior in public and claimed their right to space in the gym and on the track. These women then showcased their athletic talent, proving that the female body was capable of intense competition.

Basketball and Roller Derby carved a new space for women among the ranks of team sports as well. No longer were women relegated to individual sports such as tennis, golf, and swimming. Basketball players and Roller Derby skaters highlighted the benefits of teamwork and sportsmanship for the advancement of their own sex in society, and these skills helped women in the diverse career paths that they chose. These sports
also paved the way for women to pursue careers as educators, coaches, trainers, or professional athletes. As both sports became more publicly visible over the course of the twentieth century, more girls, young women, and even older women found women athlete role models where few had existed before. These women helped redefine femininity to their own benefit, but also to the benefit of all American women, as they pushed towards a more equal gender agenda. They forwarded a feminist cause both intentionally and unintentionally and ultimately opened doors in the sporting landscape for all women.

Despite these tremendous gains, neither women basketballers nor roller derby skaters have gained full acceptance in society or in the male-dominated sports world. Women of both sports continually engaged in a measure of apologetic behavior either because of their identity as a woman athlete or because of the existing social expectations emphasizing women’s beauty as a primary identity marker. While these sporting pioneers pushed their way into the public limelight, they continually fought the sexualization of the female body and worked to prove that athleticism could in fact be a part of the female identity. However, because of society’s emphasis on women as mothers first and foremost, sportswomen failed to erase the contradictions between athlete and mother. Historically, society has tried to discredit women athletes by calling them lesbians (and therefore manly and not “real” women). As long as homosexuals continue to be seen as second-class citizens, the association between the two will continue.

In the current sporting landscape, basketball remains a traditional sport with roots in all levels of competition for all classes of society. School teams, community and
church leagues, the AAU, college teams, barnstorming teams, and professional leagues all offer women the opportunity to compete. Any young girl can grow up playing in her driveway or at the local playground, join elementary, middle, and then high school teams, earn a full-ride college scholarship, and then be drafted into the WNBA for a career as a professional basketball player. But even if she does this, she will not earn the same respect as a professional male player. She will not be paid the same and will not receive the same coverage as her male peers. She will earn hundreds of thousands of dollars less (more likely millions less), few Americans will know her by name, and she will be relegated to ESPN 2 if she makes it on television at all.1441

Professional women basketball players are still trying to prove themselves and earn the respect of the sporting world. They are still fighting the media and a society that relegates them to the sidelines of “true” sport: male sports. Reminiscent of comments made by sexists male journalists in the early to mid-twentieth century, Jeff Pearlman, an online columnist for Sports Illustrated, wrote in 2010 that “the WNBA’s emergence is a mathematical, sociological impossibility. It has not happened. It will not happen. It cannot happen.”1442 Pearlman explained his reasoning: “No matter how many women dunk, no matter how incredible the playoff action might seem, no matter if the league expands to Las Vegas and Cancun and hires the cast members of Glee to hand out $100 bills to every customer, well, the WNBA is what it is—a fringe entity.”1443 Pearlman insisted that the American public does not have an interest because “sports fans simply

1443 Pearlman.
don’t crave women’s professional basketball.”1444 And apparently they do not crave it because, “as blessed as women like [Candace] Parker and Lauren Jackson and Diana Taurasi are at basketball, their skills are not in visual demand. Basketball fans want to see LeBron James dunk and Josh Smith soar through the air and Ron Artest lock down on an opposing scorer. They want to see Ray Allen launch a three from the middle of nowhere and Dwight Howard hit the rim with his forehead.”1445 Pearlman claimed that no solution exists to this problem, stating, “Sue Bird will never be Deron Williams and Tamika Catchings will never be Carmelo Anthony. If the NBA feels larger than life, the WNBA feels like, well, life. Nice, solid, pedestrian life. Yawn.”1446 Women, according to this line of thought, can never be equal to men, at least in the sports world.

Sadly, Pearlman is not the only journalist that refuses to acknowledge that women’s inequality in sport is a direct reflection of the historical and current social inequality of women. Conservative political commentator, columnist, and blogger Debbie Schlussel has repeatedly lambasted the WNBA as an “affirmative action…butch-chick basketball league.”1447 She describes the women’s professional league as “the same old thing every year: women (or so their doctors claim) who look like men play basketball worse than girls in a pro sports league that is the equivalent of ants urinating on a sidewalk. No-one notices. And no-one cares.”1448 Schlussel maintains that the

1444 Pearlman.
1445 Pearlman.
1446 Pearlman.
1447 Debbie Schlussel, “Lipstick on an Ant: The WNBA Joke Continues,” 16 August 2010, http://www.debbieschlussel.com/25923/wnba-the-joke-continues/. While I would like to dismiss Schlussel’s rants as a part of the polarized political media, especially since this article appeared on her ultra-conservative blog, the fact remains that she has also published in accredited news sources like the New York Post.
1448 Schlussel.
women in the WNBA are ugly, masculine, talentless lesbians who have nothing to offer society. “That’s why the WNBA was a huge mistake,” she insisted. “They have no product: either in the looks or skill category. They play worse than women and look like guys. And they have no customer base...unless you count the NBA fans and sponsors forced to pay for their free ride.” With such scathing attacks on the best-of-the best women basketball players coming not only from men but also women, it is clear that women’s basketball has not yet gained acceptance, and its critics continue to fall back on the same tired arguments that they have been pushing for decades.

Regardless of such offensive and inane critics, at least basketball provides professional opportunities. Modern roller derby, despite its eighty year history, is still a relatively new sport and only exists on the amateur level. It has experienced tremendous growth in the past decade, prompting some to describe it as a “revolution” sweeping the nation. However, the skaters are still trying to figure out where Roller Derby belongs in relation to the mainstream sports world. This exploration has deep historical roots in the Seltzer Roller Derby, which always found itself on the fringes of the national sporting scene. Today, roller derby skaters are still trying to prove themselves as legitimate athletes. Some want to remain a part of the DIY subculture that challenges “restrictive standards of hegemonic male culture” while others want to see their sport break into the mainstream sports world and secure its inclusion in the Olympics. But their own gender politics complicate these ambitious goals. For a sport to be included in the Olympics, both men and women must be able to compete. This thwarts the derby

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1449 Schlussel.
1451 Storms, 84.
revival’s emphasis on being a woman-owned, woman-operated sport.\textsuperscript{3452} Roller derby skaters refuse to let their sport be defined by outsiders, but until they decide where they want to be, their wheels will keep rolling around the same track.

This dissertation details the importance of women’s participation in and influence on basketball and Roller Derby. I show that women participated from the onset of both basketball and Roller Derby, demonstrated passionate interest in their sports, helped popularize each sport, and ultimately influenced the trajectory of both sports. When playing basketball or Roller Derby, women often engaged in apologetic behavior to counter popular stereotypes about women athletes but at the same time a segment of women athletes insist that they felt no tension between their athletic identity and their identity as women. Playing sports did not negate their femininity in their or their community’s eyes. Women have been able to combine sports and motherhood, but as the Seltzer-run Roller Derby demonstrated, we must value women as competitors first and foremost and not simply as mothers. This social reassessment calls for a cultural emphasis on fatherhood as well as motherhood or at the very least an emphasis on parenthood.

My work challenges the dominant sports narrative that has consistently relegated women to the side lines and labeled their participation as secondary. Despite the advances made in women’s sports, this stubborn narrative refuses to fade away, perhaps

\textsuperscript{3452} Junior roller derby training programs would also have to exist. While there are a few in existence currently, their numbers would have to increase exponentially to be considered in the Olympics. Bennar interview; “Evaluation Criteria for Sports and Disciplines-2012,” http://www.olympic.org/Documents/Commissions_PDF/files/Programme_commission/2012-06-12-IOC-evaluation-criteria-for-sports-and-disciplines.docx.pdf, Accessed 19 March 2013.
because the sports world keeps feeding it. In June 2013, “beautiful athletic women” will
have a new space in which to showcase their skills and bodies: The Bikini Basketball
Association (BBA), a “Basketball League for Sexy Athletic Ladies.” The BBA,
composed of the Atlanta Peaches, Miami Spice, Orlando Lady Cats, Minnesota Mist,
Illinois Heart, and Philadelphia Diamonds, has “selected [its players] based on
athleticism [and] personality, as well as beauty.” Since history demonstrates that
women’s athleticism is never enough to stand on its own, “the combination of these traits
will help the BBA athletes to stand out in their respective communities.” This is what
the future holds for aspiring female athletes. Until American society is ready to accept
women as viable athletes, until they realize that athleticism can be a feminine and
masculine quality, and until they allow women to juggle multiple roles, women will
continue to sweat their femininity—in bikinis or not.

Bikini Basketball League is a real thing, and it will be here before the end of the year,”
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