

Eyes on the ball

Local women and basketball in the early 20th century

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The Title IX legislation enacted in 1972 brought attention to the need for equality in athletic opportunities for women in academic institutions. But long before that, females in our area had been on the basketball courts, both in school and for recreation and exercise.

As young women began to play basketball in the late 19th century, there were three main concerns: What could they wear that would be sufficiently modest? Would the game be too strenuous for a female's delicate health? And, would such a sports activity encourage the players to be rough and coarse?



Dickinson Seminary and Junior College

In the November 1907 issue of the Dickinson Seminary school newspaper, The Dickinson Union, Miss F.M. Raines wrote an opinion piece entitled "Athletics for Women." The article generally defends sports for females, stating that engaging in sports keeps them from being nervous, broken down, pale, sickly and without interest in life. Raines believed that basketball, in particular, extends the lungs, exercises all parts of the body, and gives women the courage to overcome the

feeling that they must dodge whenever they see something coming toward them. Another report in The Dickinson Union, in 1918, states that coeds realize that "to possess good health one must have athletics."

The school paper covered some of the girls intramural games. There were six players, three on offense and three on defense, and no player ran the full length of the court. In a report on a 1914 game between seniors and underclass women, it was said that the game resulted in an "annihilation" of the senior team. And the April 1915 issue of The Dickinson Union stated,

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SUN-GAZETTE FILES

The Williamsport District 4 Triple A champion girls' basketball team included Coach Jim Orr, front row left, Dina Zwisle, Lisa Maneval, Terri Bittner, Beth Hayes, Alice Kennedy; Michelle Scaife, second row left, Cyndy Carter, Tanya Hasselman, Lynnette Smith, Dana Gephart and Lynne Slingerland, in this picture published on March 14, 1979, at top. This was after the Title IX legislation was passed that allowed women equal athletic opportunities in academic institutions. Prior to this, females still had their eyes on the ball, as pictured at center, as the 1920 Williamsport High School girls team were known as champions throughout central Pennsylvania, courtesy of the Lycoming Historical Society. The Dickinson Seminary Girls Team in 1902. This picture is courtesy of Lycoming College Archives, at bottom left.



Women and basketball in the 20th century

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"Never will it ever be said that the girls of Old Sem can't play basketball."

The game between the seniors and the underclass women, played in the boys' gymnasium under girls' rules, was said to be so exciting that spectators cheered "voluminously." One of the students, Harriet Brokaw, even earned the nickname "Shooter."

In 1922, Margaret Hale wrote in the school newspaper that girls needed more athletics "in every phase of the word." Not until 1927 did a section devoted to "Girls' Basketball" appear in the college's yearbook. However, the yearbook mentions two games played with the local YWCA team.

At the end of the 1928 season, the female basketball team held a banquet at the Yellow Poppy Tea Room. And by 1929, games were being played with high schools from Hughesville and Montoursville, as well as a YWCA team.

In the 1932 yearbook, the section on girls' basketball is entitled "The Feminine Aspect on Basketball." The text talks about the "brilliant" Miss Eleanor J. Fitch, who coached the "fair Amazons of Dickinson" with their "beautifully ordered and agile bodies."

Some coverage of college games could be found in local newspapers. In 1934, The Grit reported on one of the girls' games, and afterwards the team was contacted by a "miserably lonely" man who wanted the players to write to him.

Williamsport High School

Girls were also playing basketball at Williamsport High School. The first team was organized in 1911. Four short years later, the Williamsport team had gained a reputation as champions in central Pennsylvania.

The 1920 yearbook pictures a team that followed many successful teams but did not score as well. The caption reads, "High had championship girls' teams, but the five girls on the regular team were the only ones who got any experience. The other girls either dropped out or were neglected."

Needless to say, when the accomplished girls graduated, the others had to learn the game while competing against Lock Haven, Susquehanna and Lewisburg.

An article in the Sun-Gazette on Sept. 12, 1914, reported on a game played at the armory between currently enrolled girls and ex-high girls who were "out of practice." It was a lively game, but the reporter bemoaned the fact that basketball played by girls' rules was not as interesting as basketball played by the boys.

The Williamsport YWCA

In the 1920s, the local YWCA was promoting the need for a permanent facility. During the building campaign, the board stressed that an adequate gymnasium was necessary. Women and girls should "work off a kind of superfluous energy which if not rightly directed, may prove disastrous."

Activities at the YW at this time always included basketball classes as well as basketball coaching instruction. Businesses sponsored basketball teams that played at the YW, and female employees of such companies as Pennsylvania Power and Light had their own teams. By 1928, 171 women were registered for basketball at the YW.

By 1929, the YW had formed the Girls' Sunday

School Basketball League, with Covenant-Central Presbyterian, St. John's Reformed and St. Boniface as the first teams playing.

Soon there were six teams, and the 75 girls who attended the banquet celebrating the end of the season were told by the guest speaker how to apply fair play and basketball training to everyday life. In the 1930s, there was a Community Girls Basketball League.

The teams competing had names such as Vallamont, Hi-Tri, Recreation Club, Industrial Girls and the South Side Girls Reserves.

Although the word "wellness" may not have been used in these early years, there was an awareness that women and girls needed physical exercise to remain healthy, and that they were fully capable of engaging in sports. The evolution of local girls' and women's basketball was part of the long journey to Title IX legislation

— *Lycoming County Women*, by Mary Sieminski and Janet Hurlbert, is a monthly column published on the second Sunday of each month in the Williamsport Sun-Gazette's Lifestyle section and is part of the Lycoming County Women's History Project. Sieminski is the former director of the Pennsylvania College of Technology Library. Hurlbert is Professor Emeritus of Library Services at Lycoming College. For more information, email life@sungazette.com.