

GAME CHANGER

Women's Basketball and Equal Opportunity

Tedd Levy

Imagine being a student in a class and getting an assignment to create a new game. The requirements for the game were that it had to be vigorous, suitable for a gymnasium, use no expensive equipment, and be simple enough for young people of ordinary size, strength, and skill to play.

That was the task that Dr. Luther Halsey Gulick assigned to his philosophy of physical training class in 1891. James Naismith's proposal for a game seemed so exciting that his fellow students tried it out at the YMCA Training School in Springfield, Massachusetts. The game caught on quickly and became popular. This, of course, was the beginning of basketball.

Why Not Women Too?

A few miles north of Springfield at Smith College in Northampton, Senda Berenson (1868–1954), a young female physical education instructor, decided to use the game with her female students to develop sportsmanship, moral and physical courage.

It was a risk for Berenson to have her young women exert themselves in such a vigorous and aggressive activity. She worried that they might become fatigued and develop “dangerous nervous tendencies” and reduce their feminine qualities.

To account for this, she changed the rules by dividing the court into three zones with each zone having three players for a total on each team of nine players. To further control the physical activity, no player could leave her zone, they could hold the ball for only three seconds, and dribble it no more than three times before passing it to someone else.

The first game of women's basketball was played by Smith College freshman and sophomores on March 21, 1893. The doors were locked and men were not allowed to watch the competition. Each basket was one point, and the freshmen won by a score of 5 to 4.

An “Indecent Pastime”?

The game spread quickly and the first intercollegiate women's game was played in San Francisco between Stanford and UC Berkeley in April, 1896. Stanford overwhelmed Berkeley by a score of 2 to 1.

As with earlier games, men were barred from watching the event. Women often wore floor length dresses, until Clara Gregory Baer (1863–1938), who was also a physical education instructor and women's sports pioneer, had players wear bloomers during games at Sophie Newcomb College, New Orleans.

There were a variety of protests about the indecency of women playing basketball. It seemed unladylike and rather scandalous for young women to be so competitive and aggressive. It was, in the words of the day, eroding sacred concepts of womanhood. For a time, women's basketball fell out of favor in some places. In fact, in 1901 both Stanford and the University of California banned women's basketball from intercollegiate competition.

Publication and Persistence

In 1914 the Amateur Athletic Union stated that women should not play basketball in public. And in 1920 the American Olympic Committee declared its opposition to the participation of women in the Olympics competition. Although the opposition continued through the years, women's involvement in sports was here to stay.

Senda Berenson, as well as Clara Gregory Baer, published rules and wrote journal articles promoting the benefits of basketball. In 1895 Baer wrote rules for the game she called “Basquette.” A.G. Spalding asked Berenson to edit his first *Women's Basketball Guide*, which was published in 1904. As with his other rulebooks, Spalding's guide to women's basketball had a profound influence on widening the game's popular appeal, and Berenson remained as editor for several years.

In 1911, Miss Berenson married Herbert Vaughn Abbott, a professor of English, and retired from coaching. In 1985, Senda Berenson Abbott, along with the player and coach Margaret Wade (1912–1985), were the first two women elected to the Basketball Hall of Fame.

Top of the Game

So Dr. Gluck's assignment in 1891 led to the invention of a major team sport—and eventually contributed to a wave of social change. Basketball is a game of judgment, self-control, cooperation, teamwork, speed, and physical fitness. Those are characteristics that can be found and developed in both women and men. It just took a while for some people to realize that. 🏀

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Classroom Activities about Women's Basketball

1. In small groups discuss and develop a game that meets the same criteria as were used to create basketball—vigorous, suitable for a gymnasium, no expensive equipment, and simple enough for young people of ordinary size, strength and skill to play.
2. The question “Did you have an opportunity to participate in sports?” is a great conversation starter for oral history projects. Students can ask their mothers, grandmothers, or an elderly female friend.
3. Senda Berenson wanted women to play basketball, but she also thought that parts of the game might be too strenuous for them. For example, “No girl may play more than twice a week,” and “Avoid high balls, and too high passes.”* What did such rules say about her views of women? Did she advance or hinder the idea of women's equality?
4. Without reading the captions, small groups of students can examine two of the early postcards (**HANDOUT A, part 1, page 13**) and discuss when the photo might have been taken and at what sort of institution (Public school? College? YWCA?). The group can list the evidence supporting its guesses.
5. Let students read the captions on **HANDOUT A, part 2, page 14** and examine the more recent postcards. Then compare the earlier photos (ca. 1900) with the later ones (ca. 1927 and 1960). How did the appearance of the young women on the teams change over those decades? How are the descriptions in the captions different? Did the photographers make different choices about how to frame an image of a group of women? The first women's basketball game between two high schools was played between Chicago Austin High School and Oak Park High School in 1899. What changes had happened in American society and public policy between 1899 and 1960, and are some of those changes reflected in the differences in the photos?
6. Possible topics for further classroom discussion or writing assignments:
 - a. In what ways did society in 1900 see sports for women differently than sports for men? Do any of these differences still exist? Should there be different rules and expectations for women and men in sports? Write historical fiction: compose a letter to the editor of a newspaper in the voice of a supporter or opponent of women's sports in 1900.
 - b. What sports today are separated into male and female teams? What sports have combined male and female teams? Are separate male and female teams fair to women?
 - c. Should an equal amount of money be provided for sponsoring male and female sports in schools? For example, football is a very expensive sport for schools and it is an almost 100 percent male activity. Should an equal amount of funds be provided for mostly women's sports (field hockey)?
 - d. Would you favor or oppose co-ed basketball teams? Should there be separate or combined athletic teams or contests for male and female students in any of these sports— football, baseball, track and field, field hockey, tennis, golf, or wrestling? Explain in a few words the reasons for your opinion and create a catchy, short op-ed headline for your work.
 - e. Should there be different rules for male and female sports? If so, which sports and how would the rules be different? Is this discriminatory? 

Notes

* Senda Berenson Abbott, *Basket Ball at Smith College* (Spalding's Athletic Library, 1913), 71, 75 at clio.fivecolleges.edu/smith/berenson/5pubs/bball_smith/index.shtml?page=1.

Resources about the History of Women's Basketball

Beran, Janice A., *From Six-on-Six to Full Court Press: A Century of Iowa Girls' Basketball*. Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2008.

Grundy, Pamela and Susan Shackelford. *Shattering the Glass: The Dazzling History of Women's Basketball from the Turn of the Century to the Present*. New York: The New Press, 2005.

Lannin, Joanne. *A History of Basketball for Girls and Women: From Bloomers to Big Leagues*. New York: Lerner's Sports Legacy Series, 2000. (For adolescent readers.)

Melnick, Ralph. *Senda Berenson: The Unlikely Founder of Women's Basketball*. Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007.

Women's Basketball Museum, www.womensbasketballmuseum.com.

Handout A, part 1



Handout A, part 2

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Captions

A. This postcard provides no date or place. Long skirts were replaced with so-called bloomers on many teams soon after 1896, when the team at Sophie Newcomb College in New Orleans first wore them.

B. This postcard provides no date or place. Early rules called for a jump ball after each score, as seen here. The basket changed over time, but some had a bottom that released the ball when a string or chain was pulled. The final result for many of these early games remained in the single digits.

C. Can you detect any clues about this team? The initials of a high school (RHS) and academic year (1926–27) appear on the ball. The number of players on women's basketball teams began with nine and was slowly reduced to six. Today there are five players on a team.

D. The caption on this postcard reads, "Girls athletics—Vigorous and exciting; Camp Chrestwood, Southington, Conn." By the time this photo was taken (ca. 1955–60) women's basketball had spread through industrial and church leagues and summer camps,



E. Spalding's guidebook, edited by Senda Berenson Abbott, helped spread the game to all corners of the country.

Postcards are from the personal collection of Tedd Levy.

Women's Sports? Thank the Civil Rights Act of 1964

Steven S. Lapham

Title IX (“Title Nine”) is the federal law of 1972 that requires gender equity for boys and girls in every educational program that receives federal funding. It’s also known as the Patsy T. Mink Equal Opportunity in Education Act.¹ Many people who have heard of Title IX think it applies only to sports, but athletics is only one of ten key areas addressed by the law:

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|-------------------------------|--|
| 1. Access to Higher Education | 6. Athletics |
| 2. Career Education | 7. Education for Pregnant and Parenting Students |
| 3. Employment | 8. Learning Environment |
| 4. Math and Science | 9. Sexual Harassment |
| 5. Standardized Testing | 10. Technology |

Title IX has been the subject of over 20 proposed amendments, reviews, Supreme Court cases, and other political actions. The 40-year anniversary of the law arrives in 2012, yet thousands of schools across the country still are not in compliance with the law.²

The Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) focused national attention on the importance of educational opportunity. In fact, Title IX is based on Title VI (“Title Six”) of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin in federally assisted programs.³

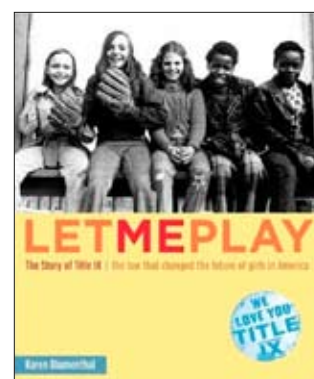
Timeline of Educational Opportunity



Suggestions for Discussion

Ask students to silently read the text above, and then ask one student to read it aloud. Lead a class discussion.

- Have students heard of “Title Nine”? And did they realize it grew out of the Civil Rights Act of 1964?
- How does your school today recognize “gender equity for boys and girls in every educational program?”
- Would some students like to plan an oral history interview with their mothers or grandmothers about their participation in high school or college sports?⁴
- What other groups in our society have had their educational opportunities boosted by federal laws? (People with disabilities; children of non-citizen migrant workers; parenting students.)



Notes

1. Patsy T. Mink, the first woman of color elected to Congress, participated in the passage of much of the 1960s Great Society legislation during the first phase of her congressional career. See womenincongress.house.gov.
2. “History of title IX,” at www.titleix.info. This website explains the regulations in easy-to-understand language and uses real case studies as examples. It also provides ways to find out about Title IX in your local community.
3. “Sex Discrimination in Education: Overview of Title IX,” note 3, at www.policyarchive.org/handle/10207/bitstreams/489.pdf.
4. Further reading for students: Karen Blumenthal, *Let Me Play: The Story of Title IX: The Law That Changed the Future of Girls in America* (New York: Atheneum, 2005). For teachers: Susan Ware, *Title IX: A Brief History with Documents* (The Bedford Series in History and Culture) (New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s Press, 2006).

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