From Amazons to Glamazons:
The Rise and Fall of North Carolina
Women’s Basketball, 1920–1960

Pamela Grundy

In the spring of 1949, the twelve members of the Highland High School Ramlette basketball team packed themselves into an assortment of supporters’ vehicles and embarked upon the long and bumpy journey from Gastonia, North Carolina, east to Durham. The Ramlettes had played a stellar season, had won the district tournament held in neighboring Bessemer City, and thus had gained the right to compete for the state championship, 150 miles away at North Carolina College. Before they left, the students from the close-knit school had packed the gym to cheer them on. “Go Thompson!” they had yelled. “Go Davis!” “Go Adams!” “We were pumped up,” recalled Gladys Thompson, the Ramlettes’ tallest player and top scorer. “We were going to win this.”

The Ramlettes met those expectations, bringing home the North Carolina Athletic Conference crown. Gladys Thompson found the victory particularly sweet. She had been a tall, clumsy girl, often called “Stringbean” or “Pole,” who lacked the grace of a natural athlete. “When I started playing I was afraid and awkward,” she recounted. “They would tell me ‘You’re awkward,’ and I wanted to give it up.” But she loved basketball, and she worked hard on her skills, challenging the equally determined players who starred for schools all across the region. When the Ramlettes took the court in Durham she was ready, scoring twenty-three points in the championship game and winning Most Valuable Player honors. “I always think about that,” she explained. “Because I scored the twenty-three points, more points than any girl on the team had ever scored. . . . And they wrote an article about me in the paper. I

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think that would highlight everything. There were good times and bad times, but this one sticks in my mind more than any of them. When we won that championship. And then the article written about me—and that came back to the school, it was on the bulletin boards and everything. I felt pretty proud of myself, doing that.”

With her performance, Gladys Thompson reached a goal dreamed of by thousands of her peers around North Carolina. As interest in school sports spread across the nation, varsity athletic competition had become an integral part of life in the Tar Heel State, drawing larger crowds than any school event but graduation and offering students perhaps their major opportunity to win respect among their peers and within their communities. Throughout North Carolina, high school and college students envisioned starrign for beloved institutions, playing before cheering fans, cradling championship trophies, and seeing their accomplishments acknowledged in the authority of newspaper type. Basketball had become by far the most popular American women’s sport, and for the many young women who played the game it held particular appeal, carrying them past many of the restrictions that still circumscribed women’s activities. “Just little things about it, you know,” Gladys Thompson explained. “Getting to go places. Girls didn’t get to go many places. I had a strict mom. She was strict. And to get to go to Durham, North Carolina. Or even Bessemer City. That was a long way for us. Girls now they have boyfriends that just drive. But see they didn’t have cars to take us places then. As a matter of fact, when I played basketball, I wasn’t courting. My mama didn’t allow me to court until I graduated from high school. She did not. You had a friend to take you to the prom, but that’s it.”

Today, the Ramlettes’ accomplishments draw periodic notice largely because Gladys Thompson was eventually allowed to court, chose to marry classmate Ervin Worthy, and then had a son named James, who grew into one of the greatest basketball players North Carolinians had ever seen. Since Ervin Worthy never played the game, attempts to trace James Worthy’s athletic background point straight back to 1949, to Gladys Thompson’s record-setting efforts, and to the vibrant popularity that women’s basketball attained throughout much of the nation during the middle of the twentieth century. From the 1920s into the 1950s, women’s basketball was one of the most popular spectator sports in small towns and rural communities across the country, and the cheers that urged on Gladys Thompson and her teammates echoed around North Carolina as communities gathered to watch young women dribble, shoot, and strive to win. “The gym was always full,” recalled Mildred Little Bauguess, who starred for Catawba County’s Claremont High School from 1947 to 1951. “Here in this town, sports was a big thing. That was about the only entertainment they had in Claremont. They had a ball game on Tuesday night, and one on Friday night. And everybody’d bring the whole family. I think it cost


3 Ibid., p. 4.
kids about a dime, to get in. . . . The girls played just right before the boys. They’d come in to one, and they’d stay all the way through."

A few years later, though, the world that nurtured the athletic talents of Mildred Bauguess, Gladys Worthy, and so many of their peers had vastly changed. Even as North Carolina men’s college basketball began its rise to national renown, reaching toward the heights that would make such players as James Worthy and his college teammate Michael Jordan into household names, women’s basketball went into sharp decline. During the late 1950s and early 1960s, in a pattern that had become familiar throughout much of the country, high school women were barred from competing in statewide tournaments, some schools cut their women’s varsities entirely, and many teams that remained had their games relegated to weekday afternoons, contests that drew only scatterings of friends and family members. By the time James Worthy led the University of North Carolina to a national college championship, the experiences of Mildred Bauguess and Gladys Worthy and the thousands of other young women who competed with such zeal, had faded out of view.

The history of North Carolina women’s basketball and of its links to a broad-based reconfiguration of American athletic life helps to illuminate the cross-cutting cultural influences with which a wide range of Americans wrestled as the nation underwent the economic, political, and social transformations that marked the twentieth century. As organized athletics developed close connections to the ideals and practices of American capitalism, athletic contests became particularly prominent arenas for displaying and debating fundamental questions of national society, among them the roles of men and women, the meanings of racial difference, and the contours of accepted social conduct. The depth of these associations helped build school athletics into one of the central rituals of life in many American communities and into a major focus of the national popular culture that began to develop in the early decades of the century. The school athletic model that crystallized throughout the country during the 1950s—a ritual in which young men competed and young women cheered them on—thus took on enormous force, coming to seem for many a timeless reflection of gender roles and expectations, a physical embodiment of a supposedly natural order.

The history of North Carolina women’s basketball suggests a far more complex tale. For much of the twentieth century, the middle-class consensus that dominated American national culture did indeed cast athletics as a masculine endeavor, treating skilled female athletes with suspicion or amusement—an attitude that would not

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4 Mildred Little Bauguess interview by Grundy, May 14, 1993, transcript book, p. 4, “Most Democratic Sport” Collection. One of the complications of writing a history that centers in part on women’s recollections of their youth involves deciding whether to use maiden or married names. Where possible, and with an occasional exception required for style or clarity, I have used both names on first reference and married name afterwards.

shift until the women’s movement of the 1970s. But during the same era, small towns, rural areas, and African American communities—particularly in the Midwest and South—turned out in great numbers to support their women’s teams. Considering these activities as they unfolded at such local levels brings added definition to the multiple ideas of womanhood shaped within communities in the South and nationwide. At the same time, examining the rise and fall of women’s sport in one specific state helps illuminate some of the ways in which national cultural discourses played out in individual locales, highlighting the extent to which an influential cultural institution was fashioned amid competing arrays of experience, ideals, and strategic calculation.⁶

In the fall of 1920, a few short weeks after the Nineteenth Amendment wrote woman suffrage into the United States Constitution, a group of young women at Central High School in Charlotte, North Carolina, banded together and headed toward the principal’s office to proclaim their basketball ambitions. Central High offered several sports for boys but none for girls, a situation the students were determined to transform. “We elected ourselves to be the team,” player Mary Dalton explained years later. “We didn’t have a team. We had played together; we were friends. So we just decided we wanted to have a basketball team and we said: ‘We’ll be it.’” The Central High players took to the court, joining thousands of their peers, both male and female, who started playing basketball in earnest just after World War I. The postwar era saw a major expansion of secondary education, one that gave many young Americans access to high school for the first time. Between 1905 and 1930, North Carolina alone built almost four hundred new high schools and enrolled large numbers of new students. In 1910, less than 10 percent of the state’s eligible students were enrolled in high school classes; by 1933 just over half attended. As well as growing in numbers, North Carolina schools also began to lay new stress on physical activity, responding to wartime concerns about Americans’ health and to growing interest in educational philosophies that argued play and games were as significant as academic work in influencing young people’s development.⁷

This athletic expansion came amid circumstances that proved nearly ideal for women’s participation. Wartime rhetoric and increasing public activism had given women across the country a new sense of their importance in American society, a perspective dramatically heightened by the advent of woman suffrage. As newly built high schools began to form boys’ basketball teams, eager young women clam-

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⁶Two major studies that offer thought-provoking insights into the relationships between women’s athletics and concepts of gender and sexuality are Susan K. Cahn, *Coming On Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Women’s Sport* (New York, 1994); and Mary Jo Festle, *Playing Nice: Politics and Apologies in Women’s Sports* (New York, 1996).

⁷Mary Dalton and Mildred McMillan interview by Peter Fellner and Grundy, Dec. 7, 1992, transcript book, p. 1, “Most Democratic Sport” Collection. High school attendance figures were 20,291 in 1910 and 149,006 in 1933. As was typical for the South, ill-funded facilities and economic hardships meant that blacks attended high school in far lower numbers than whites—black high school attendance in 1933 was 26 percent, as compared to 61 percent for whites. James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860–1935* (Chapel Hill, 1988), 190–91, 236.
ored for a place in the athletic spotlight. “The boys team was organized and we thought we had a pretty good season even though we lost every game,” recalled Jane Kuykendall, who attended high school in the mountain community of Mocksville, North Carolina, in the late 1920s. “Then the girls began to be interested in playing basketball and the interest grew until we felt we would die unless we could play! Miss Winnie More, who taught biology, was asked to organize a team and she graciously consented.” At Central High School, beneath their 1921 yearbook picture, members of the newly formed women’s team directly linked their efforts to women’s expanding role in other areas of public life, announcing, “Man’s age has been heretofore, but now woman’s age is coming in, not only in politics but in athletics.”

Two decades earlier, when women’s basketball began to make inroads in women’s colleges around the nation, it had sparked considerable controversy, as Victorian-minded critics questioned the effects competitive athletics would have on women’s physical health, mental balance, and sexual morality. But the round of efforts in the 1920s met with far greater acceptance. The spread of basketball to high schools brought the sport to many new arenas—rural areas, textile mill towns, African American communities—in which women were thoroughly acquainted with the physical and emotional demands of heavy labor and marketplace competition. At the same time, shifts in national popular culture promoted a dramatically altered conception of femininity, shifting from a Victorian-era focus on female moral propriety to a more open celebration of physical and sexual appeal.

Suspicious still lingered about female frailty—in February 1929, when Derita High School star Nell Fincher hit her head in practice and slipped into a ten-day coma, a number of Charlotte-area parents determined to pull their daughters off school teams. Some communities harbored concerns about the sexual implications of women’s uniforms, fretting first over the bloomers favored by early women’s teams and later over shorts. Vada Setzer Hewins, who played for rural Catawba High School, recalled the whispered disapproval that made the rounds of her community when the girls’ basketball team abandoned their “great big blowsy bloomers” for uniforms with shorts. “I would just hear rumors, you know,” she explained. “They didn’t just come right up to me and say it. Of course I know the principal heard it, the coach and all.” Still others were troubled by basketball uniforms less because of the flesh that they revealed than for the way they seemed to blur distinctions between men and women, a perspective from which even bloomers could seem beyond the pale. “Mama and Daddy wouldn’t allow me to play on the team,” Charlotte resident Frances Bullard longingly explained, “for the girls wore blue serge bloomers, navy blue and beautifully pleated. Wearing britches was a sin.”


9 For an account of nationwide shifts in female sexuality and athletic participation, see Cahn, Coming On Strong, 19–23, 33–44.

Still, in worlds where women regularly performed demanding farm or factory labor and in which movies, magazines, and other popular media had begun to regale a broad-based public with scores of bathing beauties and bare-kneed flappers, such critiques had limited effect. Despite Nell Fincher’s injury, her father did not see her as a frail maiden requiring protection from athletic excesses. Soon after she began to recover, he stopped by the Charlotte Observer to make clear his views. The resulting article, headlined “Of Course She’ll Play Again,” explained that Nell would be...
returning to the court. “I heard today some folks say that they think they’ll stop their daughters from playing basketball,” Fincher declared. “Well, I don’t see why. It was a pure accident and the game had nothing to do with Nell’s getting hurt.” The disapproving rumors sparked by Catawba High’s new uniforms remained simply rumors, Vada Hewins recalled, as school officials “just went right on with it.” A few particularly conservative parents, such as Frances Bullard’s, held out against the new activity. But many more supported their daughters’ efforts with enthusiasm, sewing uniforms, dispensing with household chores on big game nights, and traveling considerable distances to cheer on young women’s teams.11

Basketball players thus took their place amid a newly visible generation of North Carolina’s female citizens, alongside women taking prominent roles in strikes, in protests against racial injustice, and in new forms of entertainment such as automobile rides and roadhouse dancing. Like many of these eager activists, Elizabeth Stratford Newitt, who managed the Central High School team in 1923, worked hard to bring her team into the colorful tumult of promotion, profit, and energetic action taking shape around her. “I had a lot of ambition for us to grow and to be active and to be very much like the boys,” she explained. “So I set out to have a lot of games, give it a lot of publicity, make a lot of money. Which we did. We had headlines in the paper, big headlines when we would have a game. We drew a big crowd. And we made a lot of money. . . . I had bought the uniforms for the girls. Had enough money to buy uniforms for the boys on the football team. And I had just made money right and left.”12

The short-sleeved shirts and abbreviated bloomers that Elizabeth Newitt so proudly purchased embodied not only her business skills but also the confident independence that players found in their new activities. In the powerfully symbolic realm of women’s garb, less fabric meant not only fewer physical restrictions but also increased self-confidence, a willingness to confront the world without the shielding protection of heavy material. Along with her account of games won, skills developed, and money made, she stressed that her team’s players had the assurance to roll their stockings down below their knees. “We rolled out,” she explained, pointing to a team photograph. “We wore hose, and if you see this picture, we’ve got our hose rolled down. You see how we did it.”13

Buoyed by such social shifts and by building community enthusiasm, a thriving network of women’s competition developed in North Carolina. Although the exuberant

11 Charlotte Observer; Feb. 20, 1929, sec. 2, p. 1; Hewins, Hewins, and Edwards interview, p. 3.
Members of the Charlotte Central High School's 1923 squad took pride not only in their play but also in their rolled-down hose, a daring new female style.

Elizabeth Newitt is third from right.

*Courtesy Robinson-Spangler Carolina Room, Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County.*

Prosperity that accompanied the rise of high school basketball came to a crashing end with the onset of the Great Depression, basketball thrived even in those difficult times, in part because more costly forms of entertainment moved beyond many residents' reach. In high schools, teams initially run by students gave way to coached and focused squads, which prepared with intensity for play in newly formed athletic leagues. Basketball tournaments became both popular and profitable, and a variety of privately sponsored high school competitions, most including both men's and women's teams, became fixtures on athletic calendars around the state. Post-high school opportunities also sprang up, suggesting basketball was not a sport young women were expected to outgrow. Competitive basketball became a particularly popular institution at the state's African American colleges. During the 1930s virtually every black college in the state fielded a women's team, and the schools engaged in heated rivalries that received warm support from school administrators and fellow students. The state's textile mills also sponsored high-profile employee teams, who competed in textile leagues, in regional contests, and in the national tournament.
This 1934 team from Livingstone College was one of dozens of competitive squads from North Carolina's African American colleges during the 1920s and 1930s, embodying a confident, assertive African American womanhood. Courtesy College Archives, Carnegie Library, Livingstone College.

held by the Amateur Athletic Union, whose champion was considered the best women's team in the nation.14

Descriptions of women's play, which frequently attained the rhetorical excess that marked accounts of men's athletics, underlined community support for vigorous female competition. In 1928, the Wilmington Morning Star likened the young women who competed for Wilmington High School to ancient warriors. "Leonidas' stand in grim Thermopolae pass called for no more courage than was exhibited by the Wilmington girls," one article ran, "and while their rally fell short of a tie by one lone field goal they had proved to a crowded gallery that fear is not theirs." A few years later, a writer for the Baltimore Afro-American, which frequently covered North Carolina black women's sports, invoked a different war in describing a trip taken by "the brilliant and versatile girl basketeers of Fayetteville State Teachers' College" through South Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama. "Beginning with Allen University of Columbia, S.C. . . . and ending with Talladega College, Talladega, Ala.," the reporter wrote, "the fighting femmes from Fayetteville laid a path of hardwood destruction through the South reminiscent of Sherman's march through Atlanta."15


15 Wilmington Morning Star, March 31, 1928, p. 6; Baltimore Afro-American, Feb. 28, 1942, quoted in Liberti, "We Were Ladies, We Just Played Basketball like Boys," 165.
World War II curtailed women’s competition, an effect that contrasted with the expanding opportunities the departure of male soldiers created for women in many other fields. Although High Point College followed the lead of wartime industry, gaining national publicity when it bolstered its depleted men’s squad by recruiting top-notch Stanly County player Nancy Isenhour, shortages of gas and tires cut into high school play around the state. After the war, however, women’s basketball returned with a vengeance. Shifts in rules and strategy led to a huge jump in scoring, increasing the game’s popularity and prompting Allen Stafford, principal of Pender County’s Long-Creek-Grady High School, to comment that “In double-headers, as most schools now play, the girls’ game will draw the crowd.”

By 1950, high school players could aspire toward two new tournaments. The Twin States Tournament, founded by West Charlotte High School coach Alma Blake, brought together thirty-two of the best black women’s teams from North and South Carolina. The Girls’ Invitational State Basketball Tournament, started by Southern Pines High principal A. C. Dawson and Aberdeen coach Robert E. “Bob” Lee, billed itself as the first state championship for white women’s high school teams. North Carolina women’s basketball also made marks beyond the state, as the team representing Winston-Salem’s Hanes Hosiery plant, backed by generous company contributions, captured the national Amateur Athletic Union crown three years in a row from 1951 to 1953, prompting the local paper to proclaim, “Hanes Team Turns Twin City into ‘New Women’s Cage Capital.’”

As top women’s teams became emblems of pride for entire communities, frequently eclipsing the efforts of less spectacularly successful male squads, aspiring players began to hone their skills in elementary grades, dreaming of future stardom. “It was our whole lives,” recalled Ramona Ballard Hinkle, who grew up in Lincoln County during the 1930s and 1940s. “I can remember when I was in grade school, we walked two miles to school, and we got there early enough to play ball. And when the older ones came, we had to quit. So you got there early enough so you could play a little while before the older ones came.” Young players reveled in the many lessons their game taught them, as well as in the thrills of victory and defeat. “I liked the physical attributes of it,” recalled West Charlotte High School player Mary Alyce Alexander Clemmons. “I liked the mental part—you had to think. You couldn’t just get out there and move without thinking. You had to know plays. You had to develop certain senses. Extra peripheral vision. And you had to know your teammates and what their moves were. You had to know that Roberta’s going to be there. Even though I don’t see her now, she will be

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16 Allen Stafford quoted in Edward Lamar Cloyd Jr., “A Study of Girls’ Interscholastic Basketball in North Carolina” (M.A. thesis, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1951), 17. In the Winston-Salem Journal-Sentinel Tournament, for example, before World War II the winning team generally scored in the 10s or 20s in the championship game. From 1946 to 1951, the winning scores were generally in the 40s, at a time when the winning boys’ team generally scored in the 30s. See Shyle Edwards, Championship Basketball of Catawba County High Schools (Claremont, N.C.), (1992), 47. For an account of Nancy Isenhour’s High Point College career, see Bishop, “Amateur Athletic Union Women’s Basketball,” 13.

Two North Carolina textile teams, the Hanes Hosiery Girls and the Chatham Mills Blanketeers, meet in a hotly disputed match during the Amateur Athletic Union national tournament in the late 1940s.

*Courtesy* Eckie Jordan.

there. And the anticipation. And I like to win. I liked the winning. The winning was the best part."  

By the 1950s, women's basketball supporters were riding high, sparking telling if somewhat simplified comparisons with gains in other fields. “Women won the right to vote back in 1919 and now A. C. Dawson and his comrades here are campaigning to liberate the gals in North Carolina's high school athletic program,” Greensboro Daily News columnist George Webb wrote of the Girls' Invitational State Tournament in 1951. “The proposition is paying off like A. T. and T. stock,” Webb continued. “Except for Wednesday night's preliminary round tussling, this beautiful new Southern Pines High gym has been crammed to capacity rivaling a sardine can.”

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Charlotte’s Alma Blake (with ball) poses with one of the many teams she coached during the 1940s and early 1950s, when North Carolina women’s basketball was at its height. Mary Alyce Alexander Clemmons is number 7. *Courtesy Robinson-Spangler Carolina Room, Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County.*

Unlike A. T. and T., however, North Carolina women’s basketball would soon fall on hard times. Most of North Carolina’s young female players, enmeshed in supportive community networks, took basketball for granted. But while the ideals embodied in Elizabeth Newitt’s rolled-down hose, Nell Fincher’s physical resilience, or Fayetteville State’s defensive heroics reflected growing community support for a new version of womanhood, they also clashed with a set of well-entrenched views that held sway among a different group of North Carolinians. Even as women’s basketball competition expanded, these skeptics had begun an elaborate, long-term campaign to rein it in.

In February 1936, the organizers of North Carolina’s Gold Medal Amateur Independent Basketball Championships for Girls received a letter from Mary Channing Coleman, a faculty member at the North Carolina College for Women in Greens-
Boro. “You will perhaps allow us as possible participants to ask for some details as to the objectives of the tournament,” Coleman began, and then continued in a manner that made clear that she was less interested in learning about the event than in influencing it. “You are, of course, familiar with the National Amateur Athletic Federation, the standard organization concerned with the promotion of women’s sports in the United States,” she wrote. “The platform of this organization states explicitly their position on the commercialization and exploitation of women’s sports through competition concerned with gate receipts as a primary objective. We shall greatly appreciate your acquainting us with the objectives in the minds of the promoters of the tournament.”

The letter went on for two pages, recommending a restricted schedule (“our standard sports organizations prohibit more than one game per day”), stressing a preference for female officials (“May we ask you to assure the public that this standard will be observed”), and questioning the trophies and medals that sponsors planned to award (“Recognition and not reward is the accepted procedure in modern sports”). “The topics we have brought up have no doubt been cared for by the members of your committee,” Coleman concluded, “but they are so fundamental in matters of promotion and protection that you will understand our asking to be assured of our agreement regarding them.” She ended the letter with a formidable array of personal credentials, signing: “Mary Channing Coleman, Charter Member, National Amateur Athletic Federation; Member, National Committee for Women’s Sports; State Committee, Amateur Athletic Union; Immediate Past President, American Physical Education Association.”

As the letter made clear, Mary Coleman’s vision of women’s athletics departed sharply from that of the Gold Medal tournament organizers. Coleman, a Virginia native who had arrived in Greensboro in 1920, had become the state’s most prominent advocate of a philosophy known as “physical education.” Physical education had taken shape in the late nineteenth century amid Progressive Era visions of efficient, orderly, and harmonious development, and its adherents frequently defined themselves in explicit opposition to varsity competition. By the early twentieth century, physical educators’ carefully designed regimens of exercise and athletic development had gained influence among both men and women, becoming a firmly established part of college curricula around the country. But the philosophy took on particular significance for women’s sports, particularly in those institutions dedicated to the visions of feminine refinement nurtured within the nation’s middle class. By the mid-1920s, physical education dominated women’s athletic activities at most white colleges and a number of African American ones, and energetic advocates such as Mary Coleman and Howard University’s Maryrose Reeves Allen were working diligently to spread its influence.


21 Ibid.

22 An account of the development and aspirations of the national physical education establishment can be found in Cahn, Coming On Strong, 55–82.
While competitive athletics developed growing links to the Darwinian tumult of market-oriented commerce, physical educators sought to use sports to promote alternative ideals, emphasizing harmony and order rather than competitive zeal. Although women’s basketball found its first home in lively intramural bouts at the women’s colleges where physical educators were establishing their strongest hold, they placed cautious curbs on student participation. Physical educators fashioned “girls’ rules” for the game, confining each young woman to a designated section of the court, limiting the number of times she could dribble, and forbidding any physical contact between players (most competitive women’s teams would use these “girls’ rules” as well). They championed intramural competition, which encouraged as many students as possible to participate and which limited spectators to members of a college’s own community. In the 1920s, as they began to reach outside college walls, they created state-administered scoring systems through which high school students could earn the equivalent of varsity letters by amassing points for achievements that included good posture, class attendance, and schoolwork as well as athletic activity. Finally, they sought to replace varsity matches with “play days,” or “sports days,” in which young women combined games of various kinds with social activities.23

“We invited the entire basketball group from Chapel Hill to be our guests at a party and game,” Mary Coleman explained in a 1940s radio talk touting the virtues of a play day that involved students from Greensboro’s Curry High School and Chapel Hill High. “You understand that I put the PARTY first and the game second as that is the way we wanted it. We played a game and instead of playing six girls from each school we played twenty. . . . Each girl who had come out for basketball in each school had an opportunity to play at some time in the game. After the game, the Curry High School boys and girls held a reception with refreshments and dancing in honor of the guests from Chapel Hill. The game lasted three quarters of an hour and the dance lasted two hours. We hardly remember what the score was—because it was by far not our first interest. Everyone had a good time.” Writing for the Women’s Sports Day Association, which sponsored similar gatherings among African American colleges, Maryrose Reeves Allen described specific goals for such events, aiming to “develop in women the qualities of poise, beauty, and femininity by affording each individual who participates an opportunity to play in an atmosphere of dignity, courtesy and refinement.”24

23 Prior to the 1930s, the most commonly used rules divided the court into three sections and allowed a player to dribble the ball just once before passing. That year the official rules were changed to half-court play, with a team fielding three defending guards on one half of the court and three scoring forwards on the other. Two dribbles were allowed. Subsequent modifications, most notably the institution of one or two designated “rovers” who could traverse the entire court, allowed for greater movement, but the full-court, five-player game customary for men’s teams was not officially approved for women’s play until the 1970s. For a description of the creation of these rules, see Festle, Playing Nice, 31–32. For a description of the North Carolina point system, see Mary C. Coleman and Guy B. Phillips, Athletics for High School Girls: The North Carolina College for Women Extension Bulletin III (Nov. 1925), 56–58. A copy is located in the North Carolina Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, N.C.

As their words suggest, physical educators held a view of womanhood that diverged from the one that energetic young women were fashioning on North Carolina courts. In espousing decorous games played largely in private, they harked back to the Victorian philosophy of separate spheres, invoking visions of women who held themselves apart from the ills of an emerging industrial society and who thus gained moral influence over a world too often tainted by a brutish struggle for superiority. At the same time, however, physical educators also shaped their programs according to a developing critique of twentieth-century American culture. As athletics gained an increasingly public role in American life, physical educators cautioned against its dangers, linking the excitement of public competitive strife to an expanding national culture that focused on monetary gain and that all too frequently encouraged excesses in behavior and emotion, overemphasizing the twin goals of triumphing over others and gaining the approval of a crowd. Mary Coleman frequently condemned the mass emotions associated with spectator sports, pointedly attacking the “rallies before and after games, yell leaders to tell us when to applaud, hysterics after victory, or melancholia after defeat, excursion trains, banners, broken school days because of games, expensive cups and sweaters, large stadia, over exertion and extensive publicity.”25

Such critiques took on particular meaning for young women. Shifts in American popular culture promised women greater freedom and self-expression, suggesting that they could refashion both themselves and their destinies through creative engagement with new fashions and new activities. But they came with costs as well. The movies, magazines, and popular fiction that brought mass culture to such places as North Carolina rarely portrayed a broad spectrum of American womanhood. Instead, their focus on images of youthful exuberance, urban sophistication, and sexual appeal encouraged young women to judge themselves largely through the reactions they produced in others, emphasizing “popularity” and attractiveness to men. The highly visual nature of this new cultural realm laid particular stress on physical appearance, creating a new set of concerns for young women. Less confining clothing, for example, could reflect a new sense of self-assurance. It could also spark greater self-consciousness—concerns heightened by a rush of advertising that presented sensationalized accounts of the social consequences of physical “defects” and offered solutions in the form of makeup, toothpaste, hair straighteners, skin creams, nylon hose, brassieres, and a wide range of diet plans.26

In contrast to this focus on appearance and approval, physical educators urged

young women to turn inward, developing a more independent sense of their own worth. Maryrose Reeves Allen had her own interest in feminine attractiveness. But she rooted her philosophy of beauty in a wide-ranging program of physical, mental, and moral endeavors and urged her students to turn away from popular culture notions of femininity, which she associated not only with sexualized superficiality but with narrowly Anglo-Saxon standards of appearance. Her ideal woman, her writings made clear, inspired not popularity, but hushed respect. “I would like to mould every one of my girls into a mould,” she wrote, “so that wherever they go the world will whisper, ‘I can always tell a Howard woman when I see one because she walks in such beauty.’” Mary Coleman was particularly critical of the vagaries of fashion, which she associated not with reasoned inner decisions, but with attempts to conform to the judgment of others. In one of her many public lectures, she disdainfully described a letter she once received from “an anxious mother asking me not to require Mary to wear gym shoes, as it would make her feet big and lessen her chances at being supported in the style to which she was not accustomed.” In contrast, Coleman noted, the discipline and energy drawn from physical education would teach Mary to support herself.27

As Mary Coleman’s letter to the Gold Medal tournament organizers made clear, physical educators were not content with building programs at their own institutions. Rather, they sought to expand their influence, with women’s varsity basketball one of their main targets. They would prove formidable opponents. True to their credo, most physical educators were energetic, independent, highly organized women, and they went about their work with missionary zeal. Mary Coleman, for example, began promotional work as soon as she arrived in Greensboro, meeting with representatives of local high schools and beginning to give the speeches for which she would become famous—in one two-year stint she delivered almost sixty addresses, speaking to fellow educators, Parent–Teacher Association meetings, local recreation councils, high school students, and radio audiences. She created a comprehensive and demanding physical education program at Greensboro, which turned out dozens of future high school and college physical education instructors. She helped to form the first statewide organization for women’s high school sports, the North Carolina Girls’ High School Athletic Association. She worked tirelessly for physical education requirements in public schools, successfully lobbied for the creation of an official State Coordinator of Girls High School Athletics, and secured the appointment of one of her protégées, Margaret Greene, to the influential position.28

Within North Carolina, physical educators’ efforts bore some of their first fruit at African American colleges, shifting the balance the state’s black female students had

struck between competing visions of womanly behavior and offering a particularly telling example of the issues at stake in female athletic debates. During the 1920s and 1930s, North Carolina’s black college women had bridged many of the boundaries between the energetic public action embodied in competitive basketball and the controlled refinement championed by physical educators, mirroring the activities they pursued in other realms of life. The legacy of slavery and the limited range of occupations available to black women meant that African Americans at all levels of society held an abiding respect for women who performed demanding physical labor. Black women turned the biblical messages of racial equality into calls for female rights, justifying an expanded range of public activity. The economic straits in which many black families found themselves, the innumerable needs of communities where poverty was compounded by segregation and neglect, and the perils that awaited black men who ventured into public life helped bolster women’s arguments that they could and should embark upon paid work, business enterprises, reform movements, community organizing, and dealings with white elected officials.29

Competitive basketball programs both reflected and promoted the self-confidence that such activities encouraged in young women, allowing them another venue in which to demonstrate female competence and encouraging an expansive sense of ability and accomplishment. Black college officials were cautious about physical appearance, taking pains to counter stereotypes about black female promiscuity, and early in the century black college teams were particularly conservative regarding athletic uniforms. But players proudly set aside restrictive “girls’ rules” in favor of the more strenuous, full-court “boys’ rules,” and they made few apologies for their abilities. “While our sterner brothers are concentrating over the pigskin on these bright October afternoons, tackling the dummy and learning to run in a broken field,” proclaimed a player in the Barber-Scotia College newspaper, “we find ourselves working just as hard, or perhaps harder, with a spherical member of the same pigskin family.”30

Still, support for a broad range of black women’s activities did not necessarily mean support for intercollegiate basketball. Even as North Carolina’s African American colleges had embraced women’s competition, some of the country’s most prestigious black institutions, among them Howard, Spelman, and Fisk, had turned to physical education instead. The gospel of refined moderation preached by black physical educators—many of whom had earned degrees at the same northeastern schools that trained their white counterparts—also struck sympathetic chords


30 Barber-Scotia Index, Nov. 5, 1934, 3. For an account of the ways in which black communities nurtured young women’s confidence, see Stephanie Shaw, What a Woman Ought to Be and to Do: Black Professional Women Workers during the Jim Crow Era (Chicago, 1996), 13–16.
among many black women’s organizations, which often had their own roots in Progressive Era reforms and whose members were equally committed to the idea of female moral influence and to the ends to which it could be put.  

While ideas about a distinctive female nature had frequently been used to circumscribe women’s activities, advocates of women’s rights had found the claim could be bent to other uses, serving to bolster claims to female authority, to mask activities that otherwise might threaten male status or identity, and to defend the autonomy of women’s institutions. African American women, who frequently assumed particularly wide-ranging community roles and whose claims to the privileges of womanhood were constantly challenged by the racial assumptions of mainstream American culture, had a particular interest in such strategies. Even as black women educators pressed for greater female participation in student government and academic affairs, as well as in the broader realms of business and politics, they also stressed female distinctiveness. Such rhetoric intensified as female students became a more prominent presence on black college campuses, rising from only 20 percent of enrollment in 1920 to more than half in 1940. Howard Dean of Women Lucy Diggs Slowe served as a prominent example of this dual philosophy. Although Slowe held expansive ideas about women’s capabilities and about the role women should play in African American communities, she also held up a distinctive set of female standards, cautioning one audience: “Our women should be taught that in spite of their new found freedom that modesty, refinement, reserve and integrity are still worthwhile.”

By the late 1930s, championing physical education over varsity athletics spoke to all these issues. The decade saw a wave of attempts to reform men’s college athletics go down largely to defeat, amid troubling revelations about athletes who avoided study, disregarded rules of sportsmanship, and accepted money from alumni. In such an atmosphere, eschewing varsity competition altogether allowed black women to both set themselves off from men and seize the higher moral ground. The language of the period’s anti-competition resolutions suggests such a resolve. In the spring of 1940, for example, the Association of Deans of Women and Advisers to Girls in Negro Schools voted to “use our efforts as an organization to eliminate from our schools intercollegiate athletics for women, urging the substitution of a more constructive program of intra-mural contests and intercollegiate non-competitive play activities.” A year earlier, in her response to an internal investigation designed to help reform Howard’s athletic programs, Maryrose Reeves Allen had mounted a spirited defense of her department’s autonomy and her focus on nonvarsity activities. Pointing to a long list of concerns about the well-documented drawbacks of


52 Lucy D. Slowe, “What Shall We Teach Our Youth,” delivered to Baltimore YMCA, Feb. 1, 1925, folder 150, box 90-6, Lucy Diggs Slowe papers (Moorland-Spingarn Research Center). For figures on black women’s enrollment and employment, as well as an assessment of tensions that sometimes accompanied those achievements, see Giddings, When and Where I Enter, 196, 245–48.
male varsity competition, she adopted a sort of condescending tone as she explained that the members of her department “most heartily agree with leading women educators elsewhere that once intercollegiate athletics for women gain a foothold, college women might become involved in the same athletic predicament as their brothers.”

Despite the popularity that women’s basketball had attained at North Carolina’s African American colleges, the state’s educators were far from immune from physical education’s multifaceted appeal, particularly as they strengthened their ties with national organizations and as expanding female enrollment led them to install more comprehensive physical education programs. In 1937, for example, the North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College (North Carolina A. & T.) in Greensboro hired University of Illinois graduate Ordie Roberts to direct the athletic activities of female students. Roberts, a robust woman with a fondness for dancing and tennis, went at her new job with the energy that typified physical educators’ efforts. She expanded the school’s meager physical education offerings, adding classes in physical education instruction, folk dancing, and modern dance, as well as a “Correctives” class for those women unable to keep up with regular instruction. She organized a Women’s Athletic Association, designed “to encourage athletics of all types, to be appreciated and participated in by all women students.” She took over the school’s annual May Day celebration, expanding the festivities and turning the event into a forum for displaying physical education activities. And she moved forcefully against varsity basketball. In the spring of 1938, she laid out her position before the school’s athletic committee. Her argument touched on long-standing issues of female health, contending that “intercollegiate athletics produce a harmful physical effect upon the woman participants.” But she also appealed to the committee’s sense of prestige, arguing, “All of the leading colleges and universities in the country have taken the same steps in regard to the matter.” Persuaded by her presentation, committee members “voted unanimously to discontinue intercollegiate athletic competition for women students of the College.”

Although other state colleges maintained their varsity teams for several more years, black women’s college basketball was clearly on the wane. The year after Ordie Roberts won her victory at A. & T., basketball powerhouse Bennett College became the first North Carolina college to join the Women’s Sports Day Association. Bennett hosted its first “Sports Day” in 1940, inviting women from several schools and then dividing them into temporary teams that engaged in friendly competition over tennis, volleyball, and darts. Soon afterwards, Bennett dropped its support for varsity basketball. Other schools followed suit. By the 1950s, the games that had cre-

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34 Bulletin of the Agricultural and Technical College of North Carolina, 30 (July 1939), 13, 113–15; Register, Dec. 1938, p. 5; ibid., May 1940, p. 1; ibid., March 1938, p. 6. Copies of the Register are located in the University Archives (Ferdinand D. Bluford Library, North Carolina Agricultural and Technical University, Greensboro, N.C.).
ated so much excitement during the 1920s and 1930s had been almost entirely replaced by sports days, gymnastics exhibitions, and intramural play.35

In many ways, black colleges were a ready target for physical educators’ efforts. The young women at North Carolina’s African American schools had a foot in each of two worlds, and thus in two visions of womanhood. Although most of them came from modest backgrounds, the kinds of communities where women were accustomed to engaging the rough-and-tumble demands of daily life, their education sought to usher them into the middle-class realm of refined uplift, creating a balance that proved relatively easy to tip in physical education’s favor. Physical educators would find their task more difficult in North Carolina’s high schools, which remained more tightly tied to the standards of their surrounding communities. Until the 1950s, physical education influence remained largely confined to white schools in urban areas, while rural districts, textile towns, and African American communities continued strong support for women’s varsity competition. In 1950, a majority of high schools still sponsored varsity teams for women, black women’s high school teams competed on the same basis as men’s teams, and coaches of some white teams had begun to petition the North Carolina High School Athletic Association, which regulated boys’ competition among white schools, to oversee young women’s play as well, requesting that they be “directed in the same manner as boy’s schools are directed.” In 1951, a poll of more than four hundred of the state’s white high schools showed an almost even split over support for regional and state championship tournaments for women.36

These diverging concepts of women’s sports—one stressing competition and popular acclaim, the other focusing on cooperation and private decorum—had existed alongside each other for more than three decades, with the decision on which to endorse left up to individual institutions. In 1952, however, the two sides came into open conflict. At issue was the Girls’ Invitational State Tournament, the white state championship, which had hosted its first contest in 1950, and which was growing in popularity every year. The organizers, A. C. Dawson and Bob Lee, had designed the tournament to usher women’s basketball into the statewide spotlight, moving beyond locally based competition and giving the sport new prominence throughout North Carolina society. For physical educators, however, the competition represented precisely the sort of development that they thought should be discouraged. While the ongoing popularity of women’s basketball had led some physical educators to begin cautiously encouraging some forms of varsity competition, they remained steadfast in their resolve that women’s sports should remain separate from men’s, and they maintained staunch opposition to the kind of high-level, high-profile competition the state tournament represented.37

35 Liberti, “‘We Were Ladies, We Just Played Basketball like Boys,’” 157–60; Register, April 1942, p. 1.
36 Cloyd, “A Study of Girls’ Interscholastic Basketball in North Carolina,” 2, 10–12. The survey asked whether women’s teams should be allowed to play in tournaments beyond the level of a county tournament. It was sent to 700 schools and received 441 responses, a rate of 63 percent.
The simmering dispute over the tournament broke into public view when North Carolina’s state board of education moved to assert greater control over the state’s schools. In a postwar attempt to boost state public education, which lagged well behind national standards, state school officials restructured curricula, sought funding increases, and began a round of high school consolidation. They also decided to rein in high school athletics, which were seen as drawing money and attention from academic goals. In 1952, arguing that “the athletic activities in the public schools of the State are causing dissatisfaction and in many instances disruption in the successful execution of instructional services,” the state board of education adopted its first high school athletic code. The code covered a broad range of issues, ruling on matters of eligibility, grades, and financial support and placing specific limits on competition in all sports. But the measure dealing with women’s basketball was particularly harsh, clearly reflecting the influence physical educators had gained within state educational bureaucracy. Although male teams were permitted two postseason tournaments, which included state championship play, women’s teams were limited to only one such contest. And rather than acknowledging the successes of statewide tournaments such as the Girls’ Invitational, the code banned them altogether, specifying: “There shall be no regional or State championship games for girls.”

That provision touched off a statewide debate over the nature of women’s athletics, as supporters and opponents wrote letters, lobbied state officials, and aired their positions in the press. A public hearing held that April set out the battle lines. At the hearing, Bob Lee stressed the advantages that competitive basketball offered young women and argued for equal treatment, “saying that if it was good or bad for the boys then the same thing applied to the girls.” A group of college-based physical educators, among them Mary Coleman’s protégée Margaret Greene, countered that women should be treated differently, invoking long-standing arguments about the need to guard young women’s health and reputation. Although advocates of women’s competition received some support from state legislators representing rural districts, the board of education eventually sided with the physical educators. The provision remained intact, and women’s high school basketball would never be the same.

The advent of statewide standards governing school sports was one of several postwar developments in which the spreading influence of state and national institutions boded ill for women’s basketball. Women’s basketball had flourished in tight-knit communities where close family connections and a dearth of other social activities had made local institutions the center of community life. But after World War II, as improved roads and increased car ownership added to residents’ mobility, and as the growth of television broadcasting offered residents new forms of entertainment, such local institutions began to suffer. A variety of national sporting traditions, both male and female, fell on hard times as a result. Minor league baseball

38 Ibid., 76–77.
39 Greensboro Daily News, April 11, 1952, sec. 4, p. 4; Adams, “The Girls’ Invitational State Basketball Tournament,” 48. It was assumed that most women’s teams would choose their county championship as their designated tournament, except in the case of very sparsely populated counties, which had traditionally held championships involving schools from three or four counties.
struggled to maintain its audiences, and industries around the country began to eliminate their support for company squads. The management of Hanes Hosiery, citing a drop in game attendance, disbanded its celebrated women’s team at the end of 1954, marking the end of an era in industrial sports. “All of a sudden we had competition with television,” Hanes player Eunies Futch later explained. “Everybody had a car. . . . You could see it coming.”

In North Carolina, female basketball players also had to contend with pressures particular to their state. Men’s college basketball was proving one of the major beneficiaries of the postwar sporting realignment, and North Carolina school administrators were determined to make their mark on the increasingly popular game. School officials brought a series of highly talented coaches to state institutions, among them North Carolina College’s John McLendon, North Carolina State’s Everett Case, and the University of North Carolina’s Frank McGuire. Even as these ambitious coaches recruited star players from the basketball hotbeds of Kansas, Indiana, New Jersey, and New York, they also worked to nurture home-grown talent, boosting programs at high schools around the state. “We made talks at all the schools in the state trying to get them new gyms,” recalled North Carolina State assistant coach Carl Anderson. “We would go around to the Ruritan Clubs and the other groups trying to encourage people about building a facility where they could have town meetings and such. Really we just wanted them to build a gymnasium so we could get some boys from North Carolina. . . . Our idea was to get the gyms built and to let the game grow so we could recruit in the state.”

Women’s basketball received no such attention. Women’s sports had only rarely reached the top levels of national sporting life—aside from an occasional spectacular individual such as Helen Wills, Althea Gibson, or the multitalented Babe Didrickson Zaharias, American female athletes had almost no national reputations and received little publicity outside their immediate communities. At the same time, the dearth of women’s college basketball meant that women’s sports could not hold out the opportunities linked to men’s athletic scholarships. Young women such as Catherine Whitener Salmons had confronted those constraints in earlier decades—when Salmons told her parents she had been asked to join the Blanketeers of Chatham Mills, her mother responded, “You are not going to any mill and work. You’re going to get you some kind of education.” After the war, as a broader spectrum of Americans aspired to higher education, this difference encouraged parents and coaches to focus their efforts even more closely on young men, whose skills could bring them not simply community acclaim but also a coveted college degree.

Burrell Brown, who coached both boys and girls at Hickory’s Ridgeview High School, lavished attention on his male players specifically so they could win college


42 Wall, “‘We Always Loved to Play Basketball,’” 21.
scholarships. But despite his strong support for women's sports, he adopted a different approach with women, including his own daughter. "I had some discipline," he explained. "It was the type of discipline that if I wasn't coaching no coach would want. My daughter made first team. She was first team. And her grades fell. From A to B. And she had to get off the team. That was my discipline. At that time there was nowhere they could go to school on scholarship. And we wanted scholarship aid, and we got it because she became an A student again. It hurt her I imagine in that respect. It hurt me inside—I wouldn't let her know it. But she did graduate from college. And she's working—she's a teacher now."43

Not only did women's basketball receive little encouragement in this new sporting era, strong women's programs could even be seen as a liability. In 1951, as controversy raged over the Girls' Invitational State Tournament, Greensboro-based columnist George Webb made note of "the feeling expressed by one prominent college coach in the state who blamed girls basketball for causing a lack of interest around North Carolina in boys' play." As interest in men's college basketball grew, the women's high school game came under pressure from ambitious men's coaches, who coveted the gym time the women used to practice and who sought to turn the prestigious institution of Friday night basketball into an all-male affair, eliminating the women's game in favor of showcasing the boy's junior varsity. "When I first started coaching girls, they tried to do away with it," explained Catawba County coach Bill Bost, who started his coaching career in the late 1950s. "Boys' coaches especially. They wanted to have a J.V. boys, and a varsity boys. And they would say: 'Well, if you want to play a girls' game, play it on Wednesday afternoon.'" The accumulation of pressures and decisions throughout the state led to a drop in the number of women's varsity basketball teams as well as interest in women's sports. While women's teams maintained community support in some corners of the state, most had trouble generating the same excitement sparked by their male counterparts, who basked in the reflected glow of the state's high-powered college squads.44

The decline of women's basketball worked a dramatic transformation on local sporting culture, a shift suggested in the diverging experiences of Gladys Worthy and Mildred Bauguess. Worthy's sons grew up amid the heady men's college triumphs of the 1960s and 1970s, and even though the Worthys never built a basketball goal at their Gastonia home, the boys found plenty of places to play. Mildred Bauguess, who starred both for Claremont High and for Hanes Hosiery, saw her own athletic legacy persist within the small community of Claremont for decades. "Right now, I can walk downtown, and at least eight out of ten people will say: 'You're the one who played ball,'" she recalled in 1993. "This many years off, forty-some years ago. . . . 'You're the one that played ball.'" But like many of the women who had fashioned such athletic history, she found her daughters had little interest

in the game. Despite their parents’ efforts, their priorities lay elsewhere. “We had put the basketball goal up, and had it fixed to official height and everything else,” Bauguess explained. “And all the boys in the neighborhood played, but they never played. Neither one of them.”

On the surface, this widespread decline of women’s competition represented a significant victory for physical educators, who now had women’s sports almost to themselves. In reality, however, this triumph proved largely hollow. The women who so adamantly opposed competitive basketball had wagered that the demise of varsity women’s sports would increase interest in what they saw as the more substantive benefits of physical education classes. “As long as emphasis is placed upon the game of basketball for girls as a spectator sport . . . the development of a real girls’ physical education program in North Carolina will be retarded,” wrote one supporter of the state tournament ban. But that is not what happened.

Rather than sparking greater physical education participation, the decline of women’s varsity play instead opened the field for a third set of female sports-related activities, a shift highlighted in a decision made by the North Carolina High School Athletic Association in 1952. At the same time that many state educators were arguing that girls should not be permitted to compete in a state basketball championship, the Athletic Association promised to add “a note of color” to the boys’ state tournament by instituting both a cheerleading contest and a “Tournament Queen” beauty pageant. Cheerleaders deserved this honor, a Greensboro Daily News writer explained, because “Any athlete will tell you ‘Take away the cheerleaders from the hundreds of high school basketball games in the state and what do you have? Just a dull display of physical prowess.’” School officials, the article continued, “recognize the cheerleaders as a vital part of their athletic program, the part which puts ‘school spirit’ into the student body.” The prize would be awarded to the “best and most enthusiastic” squad, which then could “put its claim as ‘state champion’ in its own right.”

The new prominence accorded cheerleaders and beauty queens highlighted yet another facet of North Carolina’s developing sporting culture. In the 1920s and 1930s, as eager young female players were establishing basketball teams and as physical educators were seeking to solidify their hold over state institutions, growing numbers of cheerleaders, majorettes, and homecoming queens were making their own claims on the athletic world, with considerable success. In 1931, for example, the student newspaper at North Carolina A. & T. pointed out the many roles that the school’s newly admitted female students were beginning to play in college life. As well as noting that female students had come out in large numbers for the women’s basketball team, the Register explained that “Plans are under way for a Popularity Contest, under auspices of the Y.W.C.A. On this occasion the students’ choice for ‘Miss A. & T.’ will be made. It will be well for every student to return

45 Mildred Bauguess interview, p. 5. Several former Lincolnton players expressed similar dismay over their daughters’ lack of interest in the game. See Boulware, Carter, Hinkle, and Martin interview, p. 10.
after holidays with their favorite in mind, so that the contest may be carried out successfully and the most popular co-ed be elected.” A decade later, A. & T. no longer had a women’s basketball team. But the contest for Miss A. & T., who also served as the school’s homecoming queen, had become one of the most significant events on campus. “The selection of Miss A. and T. must be a wise one, for she is the official lady representative of the student body for the coming year,” the Register cautioned in 1942, adding that the title holder should “be a living example . . . of a lady with charm, mental ability and physical beauty.”

The Register’s insistence that Miss A. & T. be not only intelligent but also beautiful pointed toward a key feature of the developing cultural assumptions that helped shape women’s entrance into twentieth-century public life, as well as one of the major factors behind the acceptance of female cheerleaders. Cheerleading had its roots in the same men’s colleges that first instituted varsity sports and for the first decades of its existence was largely an all-male activity. Female cheerleading, which began to gather strength in coeducational high schools during the 1920s, sparked concerns similar to those prompted by women’s basketball. As well as questioning the propriety of public physical display, critics asked whether women would be able to perform the acrobatic stunts that male cheerleaders had developed and worried that loud chants and yells would damage female voices. Like women’s basketball, women’s cheerleading developed strong supporters who defended young women’s abilities. But advocates of female cheerleading could also draw on a different line of argument, one that resonated with the growing cultural emphasis on female appearance and that depended on defining cheerleaders’ accomplishments less through measurable skills than through their effect on an audience. While young women might not be up to the acrobatic challenges met by male cheerleaders, argued one midwestern advocate, they had advantages of their own: “Girls are more magnetic in appearance and will become the center of attention for the crowd and the leading of cheers will, therefore, be easy.”

This conclusion, which privileged appearance over skill, would be frequently invoked in North Carolina. The Greensboro publishers of a short-lived college basketball magazine, for example, opened their inaugural issue with a photograph of their designated “Queen of North Carolina Basketball,” a young woman named Norma Jean McMillan. “Miss McMillan is a freshman at Guilford College,” the description ran. “She is also a cheerleader, but she was chosen by PREVIEW because we think she is a very pretty young woman. No other reason.” Similarly, when editors at the Register designated the school’s majorettes “Students of the Month” in October 1950, the description that accompanied the women’s picture focused specifically on their looks. “Though the majorettes are vivacious and talented, they add beautification to our campus as well as the band,” the writer rhapsodized. “When

48 Register, Dec. 1931, p. 1; ibid., April 1942, p. 2. North Carolina A. & T. had been founded in the 1890s as a coeducational institution but admitted only male students from the turn of the century to the late 1920s.

49 Mary Ellen Hanson, Girl Fight! Win! Cheerleading in American Culture (Bowling Green, 1995), 21–22. Successful management of a crowd’s emotions was, in fact, quite a demanding task, but it was one that the most effective individuals accomplished without seeming to try very hard.
our majorette marches before an audience, an inspiring thought twirls in our minds that A. and T. has beauty as well as talent.”

Young women seized on cheerleading, as they had on basketball, because it offered them a prominent, public role in a major community activity. Cheerleading encompassed its own range of skills, requiring that young women work together, develop poise and coordination, and learn to handle the pressures of performing before large crowds. And just as the physical challenges of basketball had resonated with the broader experiences of its rural and working-class participants, so the emphasis on well-groomed female beauty that cheerleading embodied meshed neatly with notions of femininity taking shape in urban, middle-class communities. At Lincoln- tonic High School, one player recalled, the difference between young women who played basketball and those who cheered on the sidelines was particularly clear. Basketball players at the small-town school usually came from rural areas or textile mill communities, she explained. In contrast, “the city girls got to be the cheerleaders.”

As cheerleading was redefined to encompass female participation, it began to lose its appeal among young men. Although cheerleading squads often retained a handful of male members, by the 1940s young women had clearly begun to dominate the ranks in many North Carolina institutions. This shift dismayed some people who had been proud of male participation in this school-boosting activity, including A. & T. chaplain Cleo McCoy, who in 1947 “made many heads hang in shame” when he lamented, “A. and T. College used to be an all-boys school. What do you think the alumni will think when they come back here Saturday, and find twice as many girls on the cheering squad as boys?” Three years later, Reverend McCoy remained dissatisfied, complaining that “only one or two men” had gone out for cheerleading, even though men outnumbered women on the campus by almost four to one.

The shifting relationships among athletics, cheerleading, and female sexual appeal were highlighted in the changes that took place at Charlotte’s Central High School. Elizabeth Newitt, a star basketball player who sought “to be very much like the boys,” was voted the school’s most attractive student in 1923. The school’s 1939 annual, however, told a very different story. The most striking section of the annual featured full-page photographs of fourteen female students, described as the school’s most appealing examples of female beauty. The sexual overtones were unmistakable, as the women had been selected, “not by a beauty expert from photographs, but by a host of beauty experts, the boys of Central.” And while the chosen fourteen included two of the school’s three female cheerleaders, not one of the twenty-eight basketball players made the cut.

A growing separation between cheerleading and athletics meshed with the emphasis on gender distinction that emerged with renewed force in American popular culture after World War II. After the war, American women were bombarded with a new

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51 Boulware, Carter, Hinkle, and Martin interview, p. 6.


wave of movies, magazines, and television programs that cast feminine virtue in terms of visible physical allure, featuring women with large bosoms, tiny waists, elaborate hairdos, and generous applications of makeup. Such images also began to reach a broader swath of the United States population as advertisers targeted beneficiaries of postwar economic expansion. A newly discovered teenage market inspired numerous teen-oriented publications, such as Seventeen magazine, which rhapsodized at length about romantic love, and whose articles and advertisements once again focused largely on ways that readers could become more “popular” by purchasing products that fit fashion trends or corrected physical “defects.” African Americans also drew new attention, as suggested by the national successes of Ebony and Jet magazines, as well as by the pages of A. & T.’s Register, which began to sport a new crop of advertisements that portrayed classic 1950s images of attractive people having a good time while consuming name-brand products. In 1950, for example, a typical ad featured Sheila Guyse, a light-skinned, elegantly coiffed and evening-gowned “Glamorous singing star of motion pictures and Broadway.” Beneath the picture, ad copy touted the popularity of Chesterfield cigarettes in a set of phrases that posed significantly different aspirations for men and women. “They’re MINDER! They’re TOPS! In America’s Colleges. With the Top Men in Sports. With the Hollywood Stars.”

Relationships between such images and portraits of female students were evident in the Register’s pages as well. In the summer of 1934, for example, the paper featured Sammie Sellars, a South Carolina native who had been chosen “Miss A. & T.” for the coming school year. The picture showed a plainly dressed young woman with a serene look, a simple hairstyle, and no visible makeup, and the article focused on her membership in school organizations, which included the basketball team. In contrast, a 1950 description of “Student of the Month” Helen McWilliams showed a photograph that in many ways resembled that of Sheila Guyse. The accompanying description mentioned McWilliams’s suitability as a future “Miss A. & T.,” noting specifically that she was “keen featured and well proportioned,” and also listing her accomplishments in suggestive order: “Miss Co-ed” for the year 1949–1950, and ‘Sigma’s Sweetheart’ have been two of her most noteworthy positions held. She has also been or is Secretary of the Fellowship Council, President of the Y.W.C.A., Secretary to the Dean of Women, Member of the Business Club, Sunday School Teacher and Chairman of the Condolence Committee.” According to the writer, she also knew how to cook.

While women’s sports had the potential to encompass physical appeal as well, a growing polarization between “masculine” and “feminine” activities, which contributed to widespread associations between “mannish” female athletes and suspicions of lesbianism, made it increasingly difficult for female athletes to blend athletic skill

54 Register, March 1950, p. 10. The Register noted advertisers’ growing interest in African Americans in 1953, when editors optimistically announced, “With the closing of world markets to American manufacturers, resulting from the influence of Communism, many institutions now are taking a second look at the Negro market which never has been developed to its fullest potential. Almost every big national concern is searching for intelligent and trained young Negro men and women to represent their products and concerns.” Register, Jan. 1953, p. 1. For information on marketing to teenagers, see Grace Palladino, Teenagers: An American History (New York, 1996), 52–57, 97–115.

55 Register, July 6, 1934, p. 3; ibid., March 1950, pp. 3, 10.
into socially acceptable versions of femininity, particularly when they no longer defended a school’s honor in high-level varsity competition. And as teenagers began to fashion an independent culture, a growing adult uncertainty about how to handle frequently rebellious young people also complicated attempts by physical educators to promote their vision of restrained refinement. Advice to educators during the period frequently suggested that teachers adapt to what were seen as young people’s own priorities. In the case of women’s sports, such recommendations drew on prevailing assumptions about the importance of physical allure. “The mores of society decree that girls should not excel in physical skill after the early adolescent period,” stated the authors of an article in the Chapel Hill–based High School Journal, championing programs that would accommodate, rather than challenge, such concerns. Half a century before, physical educators had forcefully stressed health over fashion, as when Mary Coleman brushed off complaints that wearing gym shoes would enlarge a young woman’s feet, or when one of her predecessors, New Orleans’s legendary Clara Baer, forced students to “sweat off” their corsets. The High School Journal promoted a far different approach, at one point describing an effective gym teacher as someone who “will not insist on swimming which would ruin a $1.50 hairdress.”

As the High School Journal articles suggested, postwar physical education classes often became a forum not for the development of skills, but for the display of what was seen as charming awkwardness. At Charlotte’s Central High, which had eliminated women’s varsity competition in the 1930s, this tendency showed clearly as early as the 1940s. In 1946, Mickie Bradley scored 1,300 points on the physical education–inspired state point system, a considerable achievement (a mere 400 points were needed to win the state equivalent of a varsity letter). But in the school annual, mention of her feat was submerged in a comic depiction of physical education classes, which juxtaposed photographs of young women in ungainly poses with humorously condescending comments such as “Check those gams!” “Maybe she can’t get down,” and “Why would anyone want to do this?” Early in the century, members of one enthusiastic Charlotte team had dubbed themselves “the Amazons.” The description of the Central High School classes was titled “Our Glamazons.”

Elsewhere in the United States, women’s basketball generally met a similar fate, following a pattern that underscored the complexity of the balances that developed between local and national cultures, as well as among different conceptions of American womanhood. The many factors involved in the development or the dis-


57 Snips and Cuts, 1946, n.p. Descriptions of postwar thinking about gender and sexuality and of the accusatory atmosphere with which female physical educators had to contend during the period can be found in Festle, Playing Nice, 1–7, 22–27.
couraging of female competition meant that basketball support could differ from town to town and from state to state. In a handful of states, most notably Texas, Arkansas, and Iowa, statewide support for women's basketball persisted until the sport's revival in the 1970s and 1980s, clear testimony to the power local institutions could wield in the right circumstances. But most states offered only limited opportunities to the majority of their female residents. North Carolina had, in fact, held out relatively long. In several states, among them Indiana and Kentucky, most women's high school competition had ceased as early as the 1930s.58

The triumph of cheerleading over both varsity sports and physical education underscored the growing risks inherent in the strategy physical educators had adopted when they turned their backs on varsity athletics in favor of more privately focused character-building efforts. In their campaign against varsity sports, North Carolina's physical educators had set themselves a bold and ambitious task. Rather than meshing their athletic philosophy with the society taking shape around them, they sought to fashion games and sports that challenged some of the baseline assumptions of twentieth-century society—the significance of competition, financial success, popularity, and feminine appearance. In turn, they calculated that the young women shaped by their efforts would help to guide society in the direction of their alternate vision. As an essay in the basketball guide published in 1948 by the National Section for Girls and Women in Sports put it, “We women are different from boys so that everything that is good for a boy is not necessarily good for a girl. We must not lose those innately feminine qualities which men respect, for it is through those qualities that we, as women, can help raise the living standards of society.”59

As the quotation suggests, physical educators carved out their space largely by playing on prevailing assumptions about differences between men and women. Physical educators had fashioned what was in many ways a powerful critique of modern society, posing fundamental questions about intensive competition, passive spectatorship, and the superficiality of many of the values embodied in commercial popular culture. In theory, these ideas applied to young men as well as to young women. Mary Coleman directed some of her most pointed comments at college football programs. The state education officials who banned the girls’ state basketball championship would have liked to eliminate the boys’ event as well. But by the early twentieth century, popular support for organized male sports was strong enough to deflect most attempts to curb young men's competition. Physical educators thus gained outside support not through their more substantive critique of American society, but rather by working to refute assertions that what was good for boys was also good for girls, and creating a separate realm for women's sports. Avoiding the emotions and distractions of varsity sports could have definite advantages—many parents and educators would have been quick to applaud Burrell Brown's decision to end his daughter's basketball career in favor of academic work. But the

strategy had costs as well. In a world where image and mass communication were gaining greater sway over American society, abandoning the highly public realm of competitive athletics held particular perils. Limiting women’s role in such a significant cultural activity to that of attractive cheerleaders posed little challenge to popularly prevailing concepts of competition, sexuality, or commercialism. Rather, it relegated women to a tightly restricted position within that larger cultural complex.

The implications of this development could perhaps be most clearly seen at African American colleges. The athletic model that developed at black schools after World War II—in which men competed while women cheered or sat enthroned on the sidelines—formed a stark contrast to the roles filled by men and women in academic matters, student organizations, and almost every other college activity. But athletics garnered by far the greatest public notice, becoming a major advertisement of the “realities” of college life. Early in the century, black colleges had built their public images largely around their famed choral ensembles, coeducational groups that toured the nation to give concerts and raise funds. By midcentury, however, athletics had assumed much of that function at black as well as white institutions, serving as the focus not only for most media coverage of school activities but for large emotional gatherings of students and alumni.

Throughout much of the country, visions of virile male athletes cheered on by alluring female cheerleaders in fact became a key component of a postwar culture in which increasing numbers of women were held to narrowing standards of conduct and appearance and called upon to be cooperative, supportive, and sexually attractive. Such images provided ammunition for those who opposed women’s attempts to transcend conventional female roles and often imposed significant strains on those women who openly challenged this sharply gendered order. The compelling rituals that sports events created—the large public gatherings, the dramatic displays of male strength and daring, the roars of approval for highly feminine and often sexually suggestive cheering squads—could have profound psychological as well as intellectual repercussions and may well have played a particularly significant role in reinforcing such assumptions.\(^60\)

Such efforts stood in dramatic contrast to those of competitive basketball, which had allowed a substantial number of young women to transcend a range of limiting expectations during a crucial period in their lives, drawing strength from their own experiences and from the support of their immediate communities. The long-term effects that basketball worked on its adherents showed clearly decades later, as former players shared their memories of the game. Players discussed their experiences with enormous relish, laughing at memories of restrictions, stressing their accomplishments, and displaying the kind of self-assurance that physical educators had sought to inspire. Like Gladys Worthy, who described the privilege of long-distance travel, and Elizabeth Newitt, who proudly pointed out her rolled-down socks, they laid

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60 The psychological pressures such assumptions placed on athletic-minded women in particular is thoughtfully discussed in Festle, Playing Nice, 21–27. The added expectations and struggles faced by African American women during this era are analyzed in Giddings, When and Where I Enter, 241–58, 311–24.
particular stress on the ways that basketball encouraged them to step beyond a wide range of boundaries and on the sense of liberation such actions inspired.

When Lincolnton High player Nancy Boulware talked about girls’ rules, for example, she did not dwell on the implications of female weakness they contained. Rather she described the skills she used to get around such limitations, focusing with particular pride on the heightened awareness a limited dribble forced her to develop. “You could dribble, at first at least, only one time,” she recalled. “So you had to really cover a lot of court with that one dribble. And you had to know who you were going to pass it to, or where each other player was. Because there was no such thing as running towards the goal and shooting a goal—you couldn’t do that.”

Earlier in that interview, several of Boulware’s Lincolnton High teammates had erupted into laughter as they described the ways their love for the game inspired them to disregard the medical pronouncements—enforced by the august ruling of the American Medical Association—that young women should not engage in strenuous activity while menstruating. Players conspired to sidestep the dictates of team chaperone Hazel Smith, learning in the process that they were stronger than doctors claimed. As recounted in rapid-fire dialogue by Ramona Ballard Hinkle, Billie Dysart Martin, and Betty Langley Carter, the issue gave rise to a series of covert negotiations:

Ramona: [Hazel Smith] kept a diary of the girls’ monthly periods. You’d get your monthly, and you’d try your best to hide it from her. If you were in cramps and everything else, you didn’t want her to know it. And she’d look at you and she’d say: “You don’t have anything wrong with you today?” And you’d say: “No, I’m fine.”

Billie: Because you wanted to play. I never missed a game because of that.

Ramona: We would lie about our monthly, and I’d really get mine confused sometimes.

Billie: I always had mine on Friday night.

Billie: After the game.

Billie: She’d let you play after three days. So Tuesday was our next game.

Ramona: And I was so mad because Betty Snipes hadn’t started yet, in the eleventh grade.

Billie: She hadn’t even started having her monthly, so she didn’t have to lie about it.

The confidence that basketball helped to develop could take on other meanings when juxtaposed with the visions of white middle-class urbanity that dominated state as well as national institutions. Women’s basketball had flourished in precisely those areas that lay at the margins of this dominant public culture—in rural areas, in working-class and African American communities, in the South itself. Seen in historical terms, these patterns complicate persisting assumptions that cast urban areas in general and the Northeast in particular as the vanguard of cultural “progress”

61 Boulware, Carter, Hinkle, and Martin interview, p. 3.
62 Ibid., pp. 2–3. Hazel Smith probably knew what they were doing; it seems unlikely that she would not have noticed the convenient timing of the players’ cycles. The American Medical Association officially discouraged vigorous women’s competition until the 1960s. Century of Women’s Basketball, ed. Hult and Trekell, 214–15.
or of “modern” thought—particularly since it was precisely the expanding reach of urban middle-class influences that undermined such a significant, thoroughly modern, women’s institution. At the same time, basketball’s frequent subversion of conventional social hierarchies was not lost on players themselves.

Basketball could mitigate the influence of consumer culture, offering a powerful alternative to marks of status such as clothes, records, and $1.50 hairdos. In rural Catawba County, for example, Vada Setzer Hewins lived a life far removed from the leisured sophistication of popular culture fantasy. “We were always working on the farm, and outside,” she recalled. “We really worked the year round, unless it would just be pouring down rain. You know, cotton picking or working in the fields, hoeing and all that.” The work tanned her skin and roughened her hands, setting her apart from the alluring beauties that populated magazine covers and movie screens. But on the basketball court, a different set of standards ruled. “I really liked sports, like basketball and baseball,” she explained. “And the different games like you could play outside. The coach made the statement once, said: ‘Them Setzer girls plays like boys.’” Although those words flew in the face of developing views of femininity, she took them as a compliment. “I felt pretty good,” she explained.63

Basketball could also play into the politics of race. Black college players frequently cast their athletic prowess as a mark of strength, contrasting their abilities with the supposed frailities of the “little Southern ladies” who attended noncompetitive white schools. Missouri Arledge, who grew up in Durham, recalled that when her black college team arrived at a newly integrated national tournament, the players felt immediately confident of victory. “When we got there and we saw that all the teams were white, we just thought that for sure we’re going to win,” Arledge recalled. “I don’t know why, but we thought we were going to win the tournament because I guess we lived a sheltered life in college. We didn’t see too many—well I don’t remember seeing any—white girls playing basketball. All you saw were black girls playing basketball.” The privilege athletic stardom could confer, including exemption from some of the restrictive regulations that black colleges imposed on female students, could also carry players well beyond any notion of racial hierarchy. When Bennett College player Almaleta Moore explained how much she and her teammates enjoyed the team’s travel, a luxury rarely granted to black college women, she included a telling story of the confident exhilaration the experience inspired. “We would be riding along the highway and you’d meet some white fellows thumbing,” she explained, “and we’d hang our heads out the window and say: ‘Jim Crow car!”64

The contrasting experience of West Charlotte player Mary Alyce Clemmons suggests some of the pain involved in the decline of such a significant institution. Clemmons loved athletics and idolized Babe Didrickson. While she was in high school, reveling in her own sporting accomplishments, she was able to look past the

63 Hewins, Hewins, and Edwards interview, p. 2.
64 Missouri Arledge quoted in “Women’s Basketball: The Road to Respect,” prod. Elva Bishop, University of North Carolina Public Television (PBS, 1997); Almaleta Moore quoted in Liberti, “‘We Were Ladies, We Just Played Basketball like Boys,’” 167. For the comment about “little Southern ladies,” see ibid., 98. For a description of Arledge’s high school career, see Carolina Times, March 21, 1953, p. 5.
condescension that frequently marked reports of Didrickson's athletic feats, as well as racial difference, to find inspiration in the realities of her heroine's accomplishments. Her confidence, though, was shaken when her own athletic ambitions were thwarted by local institutions—specifically Johnson C. Smith University, which by the time Clemmons enrolled offered only intramural women's play. "I could see it coming," she explained. "I felt as if I were being betrayed. But what can you do? There weren't the organizations that could go speak. [We were] all black and had no voice. Nothing that could be said. I thought of myself as another Babe Didrickson Zaharias. I thought I could do anything athletically that I had the opportunity to do. But that was the missing thing, the opportunity. . . . I thought I would play basketball until I couldn't move anymore. But it didn't work out like that. Didn't work out that way at all."65

There were limits to the freedoms competitive basketball offered its female participants, the degree to which they could depart from community and social norms. While young lesbians, for example, might find the basketball court a socially acceptable arena for expressing actions and emotions that diverged from feminine conventions, most teams' public demeanor remained thoroughly heterosexual. Even as players competed with enormous zeal, many also sought to meet existing standards of both womanly decorum and overt femininity—the latter impulse clearly evident in the extent to which team pictures increasingly showcased cosmetics, elaborate hairstyles, and highly feminine outfits. "We were called the Ramlettes," Gladys Worthy recalled. "We had the Rams and the Ramlettes. And we'd always have to wear white bows in our hair. You'd have to wear a white bow in your hair, and white shoes, and make everything just nice." In many cases, such outward gestures reinforced conventional ideas of womanhood, even as the players' actions on the court defied them.66

Basketball players, in fact, raised few direct challenges to deep-seated notions about differences between men and women. North Carolina women's basketball reached its height between the era of woman suffrage and that of women's liberation, a time that encompassed few broad-based efforts explicitly to expand women's rights. Like many women of the period, basketball players pressed their cause more in deed than in word, frequently stepping beyond boundaries without attempting directly to break them down. The Lincolnton High players who competed while menstruating offer a case in point. Rather than openly challenging their chaperone's rule, the players simply ignored it, attaining their immediate goal of playing ball but leaving the restrictive institution in place. Such strategies gave women's basketball a somewhat precarious status, leaving it vulnerable to the social retrenchments of the 1950s. It would require the women's liberation movement, which pressed for changes

65 Clemmons interview, pp. 2–3.
66 Grundy, "Most Democratic Sport," 38. For perceptive accounts of the perils of such "apologetic" behavior, see Festle, Playing Nice, 289–90; and Cahn, Coming On Strong, 74–82. For an account of lesbian cultures that developed around athletics, see ibid., 185–206.
Lincoln High School team members pose with coach Jack Kiser and chaperone Hazel Smith to celebrate their 1951 state championship tournament victory. Billie Dysart Martin is at center (with ball). Ramona Ballard Hinkle (25) is to the left of Martin. *Courtesy Billie Dysart Martin.*

In fundamental concepts about women and which codified these shifts in the form of Title IX, to produce more firmly rooted institutions.67

In the short term, however, such strategies served individual women well. North Carolina's female players had been fortunate enough to inhabit an era of particularly open possibilities, a time in which Victorian-inspired conceptions of womanhood had begun to lose their force, but when commercially driven standards of feminine allure had yet wholly to take their place. While cheerleading offered a mirror of commercial culture, and physical education sought to promote a more private set of ethics, competitive basketball had allowed young women to mediate between these various realms, moving between their own interests, the priorities of their communities, and the values prevailing in the world outside. In so doing, they fashioned not single, fixed identities, but rather ones that encompassed a broad range of possibilities. In the complex world that North Carolinians had entered, individuals defined themselves by grappling with images, ideas, and experiences that came from many different sources—a milieu within which it was often difficult to hold one's

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67 For a description of interwar women's politics, see Peter G. Filene, *Him! Her! Self: Gender Identities in Modern America* (Baltimore, 1998), 123–44.
own. For three decades basketball helped many of the state’s young women create a satisfying balance, linking them to the many changes taking place around them, introducing them to the pleasures and perils of public performance, but also anchoring them in family and community and in a strong sense of themselves.68

For Gladys Worthy the excitement of tournament trips, the prestige of being featured in the press, and the pleasures of white hair ribbons blended with her connections to the community that sustained her and with the confidence she gained in her own skill. The Girls’ Invitational State Tournament was a glamorous affair, with spotlights and autograph requests and sardine-packed crowds. But when the game was on the line, Ramona Ballard listened not to the spectators’ roar, but to teammate Billie Dysart, and she drew not on newspaper accounts of national idols, but on her own experience of female strength. “I remember one night I was going to take a foul shot,” she recounted. “And Billie came up to me and said ‘Mona, if you miss, it’s all right.’ And I thought, ‘What makes you think I’m going to miss?’ And that was just all I needed. I had four older sisters that made me a fighter. We only won by one point. And the headlines were ‘Ballard Goal Good for Win.’”69

68 The concept of multiple female identities was in fact a familiar one in many North Carolina communities, where working women, both black and white, had long negotiated the disparate roles of wage earner, wife, and mother, as well as the diverging realms of weekday work and weekend leisure. For a discussion of one such group of women, see Hunter, To Joy My Freedom, 179–83.

69 Boulware, Carter, Hinkle, and Martin interview, p. 9.