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# From Weak Woman to New Woman and Back: The Long Struggle to Legitimize Women Athletes in the U.S.

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From Weak Woman to New Woman and Back: The Long Struggle to Legitimize Women  
Athletes in the U.S.

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Long Analytical Essay

“The triumph cannot be had without the struggle. And I know what struggle is. I have spent a lifetime trying to share what it has meant to be a woman first in the world of sports so that other young women have a chance to reach their dreams.” ---Wilma Rudolph, Three-Time Track and Field Olympic Gold Medalist in 1960

Struggle. In term of women’s sports history, struggle is an understatement. From the early stages of boxing in the 1860s New York streets to a professional all-girls baseball league in the 1940s and 1950s, this paper details the complicated history of women in sport by looking at the changing popular image of women athletes from the late 19th century to today. Viridiana Lieberman, author of *Sports Heroines on Film: A Critical Study of Cinematic Women Athletes, Coaches and Owners*, contributes an analysis of the problematic, but eventually empowering, cinematic representations of female athletes. Lieberman argues that women’s sports have been slowly progressing. Women are breaking the long-standing patriarchal system that undermines female athletics. Despite her claims, women’s sports aren’t progressing. According to scholars N. Jeremi Duru and Elizabeth Reinbrecht, women are still facing inequalities today. It’s evident that women’s sports history is one of highs and lows. Looking back at inspiring events in women’s history such as the “Golden Age of Sport” of the 1910s and 1920s, the professional baseball leagues of the 1940s and 1950s, and various films throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is clear that women had their fair share of historical victories and defining moments, but most have been short-lived. In reality, there’s sexism that is never-ending in the world of sports. I argue that despite attempts to empower women and their sports throughout history, work still needs to be done to legitimize women in a patriarchal sports society.

## **The Pre-Golden Age of Women's Sport: From Physical Restraints on Women to Bloody Boxing Matches**

According to scholars and doctors of medicine in the nineteenth century, "education should...be tailored to their physiological functions, specifically to the biological requirements of menstruation and reproduction"<sup>1</sup> Men believed that women weren't made for physical and rough activities because it was dangerous to their bodies, especially their ability to reproduce.<sup>2</sup>

The idea of women not being able to participate in physical activities stemmed from the medical professions view on women and their mental and physical ability to exercise and participate in sports. By the turn of the nineteenth century, the medical profession was a patriarchal hegemony in North American society.<sup>3</sup> Doctors were not only involved in community health issues, but were increasing their influence by questioning women's general health and reproduction, as well as their place within society. Various doctors attempted to find a solution for female frailty, concluding that "intellectual or physical activities were seen as draining the reproductive function of vital energy."<sup>4</sup> Many believed "what was appropriate for boys and men in education, or sport, was by definition, inappropriate, unnatural or dangerous for female bodies and minds" what an unchallenged and widely accepted viewpoint.<sup>5</sup> The anatomy of masculinity was superior, while the distinguishable factors in females, such as menstruation, pregnancy, and lactation ultimately defined them as weak and frail because they weren't as physically stable as men were. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the male-dominated medical

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<sup>1</sup> Janet Sayers. *Biological Politics: Feminist and Anti-Feminist Perspectives* (New York: Tavistock Publications, 1982), 9-10.

<sup>2</sup> Dayna B Daniels, "You Throw Ball Like a Girl: Sport and Misogyny on the Silver Screen." *Film and History* 35, no. 1 (May 2005), 30.

<sup>3</sup> Helen Lenskyj, "Common sense and physiology: North American medical views on women and sport, 1890-1930." *Canadian Journal Of History Of Sport* 21, no. 1 (May 1990): 49-64.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 49.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 49.

field set the moral and physical standards for females. These professionals believed that the female reproductive system was the controlling force in the lives of women and they argued that vigorous physical activity threatened the common reproductive function in women, thus being a “threat to their femininity.”<sup>6</sup> It was difficult for women to show-off their intellectual and physical abilities to men because of the many years of physical and social restraints on women had decreased opportunities to exercise.

Even though doctors claimed rough sports were harmful to women, many women still decided to participate in these “harmful” sports, including boxing. Despite boxing being known as a male sport throughout history, many females participated in these fist fights. In the early eighteenth century, many female boxers even became well-known. The majority of these women were extremely poor and willing to provide entertainment to the marveled masses for the money. William Hickey described one fight in eighteenth century England as bloody, with “the clothes nearly torn from their bodies.” Bloody boxing matches continued between working-class English women throughout the nineteenth century, women’s boxing then reached the United States in the 1860s.<sup>7</sup>

Boxing became extremely popular in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century. Men were praised as heroes for their participation. Women, on the other hand, were scorned for “offended Victorian norms of the middle and upper classes.”<sup>8</sup> Women’s vicious fights rivaled that of men though, and eventually some women found places where they could box and make money. Some women even challenged men to sparring bouts. Lansing Rowan was a professional

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 50-51, 59.

<sup>7</sup> Gerald Gems and Gertrud Pfister, “Women Boxers: Actresses to Athletes – The Role of Vaudeville in Early Women's Boxing in the USA”, *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, (2014), 1909.

<sup>8</sup> Gems and Pfister, 1913.

female boxer who became one of the first females to challenge a man. She wanted to spar with the man who won the heavyweight title in 1892. Even though heavyweight champion James Corbett refused to spar with Rowan, she still challenged male boxers throughout the years. Despite Rowan being a beautiful girl, her feminine looks and eagerness to fight male pugilists became a symbolic challenge to the dominant gender and a reversal of the feminine image that was widely expected in mainstream society.<sup>9</sup> Things turned for the worse when Rowan's father committed suicide. This tragic event produced headlines that her father killed himself "grieving over a daughter who publicly transgressed the gender norms and the etiquette of her social class."<sup>10</sup> Even though women boxers "violated" the rules of society by dressing half-naked and participating in a "masculine" sport, they challenged the norms of femininity and had a chance to possibly gain some respect for what they were doing.<sup>11</sup>

### **1910s and 1920s: The 'Golden Age' of Sport for Women**

The 1910s and 1920s were the golden age of sport and many women athletes were popular during this period. The idea came around about the "new woman", or a woman who was energetic, independent, and strong. These so-called social rebels intrigued and fascinated the public. Film series' such as *What Happened to Mary?* (1912) and *The Perils of Pauline* (1914) featured exciting episodes that left viewers at the edge of their seat. What made *The Perils of Pauline* so special was that it featured a female, Pearl White (1889-1938), as its star. This show was about a woman trying to become a successful writer, but when her stepfather dies mysteriously, she must try to escape his killer. In each episode, White barely escapes death. The most interesting thing about White is that she performed her own stunts. White was always in

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<sup>9</sup> Gems and Pfister, 1918.

<sup>10</sup> *Kansas City Daily Gazette*, June 29, 1896, 1. Found in Gems and Pfister, 1917.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 1917-1918.

danger by being hung upside down, tightly bound, and abused physically by the villains. French critique and cinematographer Louis Delluc argued that Pearl White was the textbook example of a modern woman.<sup>12</sup> Delluc believed that “her movement, her gestures, her lack of expression (which was not from inability), and her athletic attributes (boxing, horsemanship, automobile racing, etc.), all made her quite simply perfect for the screen.”<sup>13</sup> Delluc argued that White’s character also made spectators want to actually get up and do something physical. White’s influence lasted throughout the 1910s and 20s with women being more open and daring to show off their athletic and sporty abilities. Actresses, swimmers, daredevils amazed the world with their athletic showcase.

The 1910s and 1920s were really a time of experiment for women athletes. Medical experts were curious at looking into how exercise and physical activity had an effect on their ‘weak’ and ‘different’ bodies. As spectacular and entertaining as female athletes were for society, being athletic was unhealthy for a woman expected to spend most of her time doing domestic work and protecting her reproductive system. After World War I, the direction of women’s athletics was uncertain. Some people wanted to make women’s sports an exact replica of men’s, while others wanted to feminize women’s athletics. The National Amateur Athletic Federation, which supported the idea to take women’s athletics in a more feminine direction.<sup>14</sup> Before the war, women participated in team games, such as basketball, tennis, field hockey, and rowing. These team games replaced gym exercise as the primary focus for women’s physical

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<sup>12</sup> David Chapman, “Amazons, Vampires and Daredevils: Athletic Women in Silent Films,” *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 31, no. 13 (2004): 1577-1597.

<sup>13</sup> Louis Delluc, “Pearl White,” 78. Quoted in Dall’Asta, *Trame Spezzate*, 146. Seen in David Chapman, “Amazons, Vampires and Daredevils: Athletic Women in Silent Films,” *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 31, no. 13 (2004): 1577-1597.

<sup>14</sup> Nancy Theriot, “Towards a New Sporting Ideal: The Women’s Division of the National Amateur Athletic Federation.” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 3, no. 1 (1978): 1-7.

education mostly because they supposedly provided character building, like courage and sportsmanship, and stressed as important life skills not only for men, but for women as well. By 1920, most states had some sort of physical activity for women, resulting from the induction of sports into physical education programs. Twenty-two percent of universities had some intercollegiate sport for women, despite intramurals still dominating for the women.<sup>15</sup> The most popular game for women was basketball. Women dominated the sport so much that few men would play it.<sup>16</sup> Many small towns actually centered their community advertisements around the high school girls' basketball teams because they were so successful and entertaining.<sup>17</sup> Women's teams weren't only being pushed in schools, but industries and companies also created female teams in order to boost their publicity. Coached by men, women who worked for these companies played by more masculine rules of basketball, which were faster and more dangerous than the more feminine version of the game.

Women played by more modified rules of basketball that were officially established in 1899 by Smith College teacher, Senda Berenson. Berenson wanted to get rid of the roughness of the game, so Berenson established that the court should be divided into three regions, and she prohibited players from leaving their assigned region. Players could not dribble more than three times, could not hold the ball for more than three seconds, or snatch the ball away from an

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>16</sup>On physical education in women's colleges see Persis Harlow McCurdy, "History of Physical Training at Mount Holyoke College," *American Physical Education Review*, 14 (March, 1909), 138-50; "Festivals in American Colleges for Women," *Century* 27 (January, 1895); Doris Paige Watts, "Changing Conceptions of Competitive Sports for Girls and Women in the United States from 1880 to 1960," Diss. University of California 1960, pp.11-15.

<sup>17</sup> For information on girls' high school athletics see "Report on the Advisory Committee on Athletics for High School Girls," *American Physical Education Review* 33 (April, 1928), 254-60; R. Tunis, "Women and the Sports Business," *Harpers*, 159 (July, 1929), 211-21.

opponent.<sup>18</sup> Wearing the company name on the back of their jersey, women basketball players became so popular that many games had an admission fee. It was claimed that the audience wanted to see the women's outfits instead of their basketball skills, probably because critics believed the audience focused more on the femininity of the players rather than their athletic ability.<sup>19</sup>

Support for women's athletics continued to gain momentum throughout the 1920s with the emergence of magazines such as *The Sportswoman*. *The Sportswoman* gave women a sense of belonging within the athletic community. *The Sportswoman*, which lasted from 1924-1936, represented the "first wave of athletic feminism" for women. The magazine was successful in covering women's sports across the nation and in promoting gender equality; however, it didn't take the chance to discuss the racial tensions that plagued the country. White women wrote *The Sportswoman* for middle-and upper-class white women and it missed the chance to bring together women of different backgrounds and races.<sup>20</sup> Despite the magazine's lack of diversity, *The Sportswoman* pleased people by essentially keeping women "feminine." The magazine promoted sports that were more appropriate for women instead "masculine" team sports. New sports, like lacrosse and field hockey, didn't provoke fears of women becoming masculine but rather reinforced the femininity of the women participating. Lacrosse and field hockey were considered proper for women because they were never associated with men's games. Photos in *The Sportswomen* showed women playing field hockey in blouses and all other parts of the

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<sup>18</sup>On the history of women's basketball see Ralph Melnick, *Senda Berenson: The Unlikely Founder of Women's Basketball* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), 2-3; David L. Porter, ed., *Basketball: A Biographical Dictionary* (Greenwood Press, 2005), 1; Joan S. Hult and Marianna Trekkell, *A Century of Women's Basketball: From Frailty to Final Four* (1991), 24.

<sup>19</sup> Theriot, 3.

<sup>20</sup> Lynn E. Couturier, "Considering The Sportswoman, 1924 to 1936: A Content Analysis," *Sport History Review* 41 (2010): 111-13.

uniforms made sure women were distinctly feminine. Basketball was a “manly” sport but women could play it in a more “domesticated” way with the rules modified.<sup>21</sup>

Films of the 1920s promoted femininity in women’s sports as well. The 1927 silent film *The Fair Co-Ed*, a comedy starring Marion Davies, provides a closer look into film depictions of women athletes. *The Fair Co-Ed* follows Marion as she goes off to college. Marion initially doesn’t want to attend college, but when she becomes interested in a guy named Bob (Johnny Mack Brown), who she realizes works at the college as a women’s basketball coach, she decides to attend the school. To gain his attention, she tries out for the team and becomes the star player. Because of a disagreement with Bob and her hatred for teammate Betty (Jane Winston), she quits the team. Marion eventually rejoins the team after the students scorn her for quitting the team at a prep-rally right before the big game. She gives an apology to her teammates, even including Betty, at halftime. They win the game and Marion wins Bob.<sup>22</sup> Marion Davies’s character successfully keeps a feminine look despite being an athlete. Even though Marion Davies’s character is arrogant and more aggressive than a “proper” 1920s women should have been, she and the basketball team were feminine because they wore feminine uniforms such as turtlenecks. Marion was also very popular at college and her relationship to the man overrides her success. Her female attributes hence overrode her “masculine” urges to become a star athlete.

### **1930s: The Fall of the ‘Golden Age’**

When the 1930s emerged, and economic crisis emerged, women in society and in film were expected to go back to their feminine roles and act like the medical professionals believed they should; in a womanly manner. By the 1930s, popular support for female “muscularity and

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 122.

<sup>22</sup> *The Fair Co-Ed*, directed by Sam Wood (1927; Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios), YouTube.

physical empowerment” seemed to be diminishing. Powerful women showed up less and less in film and audiences were again introduced to the helpless female role who had to rely on men to save them from dangerous situations. As the Depression came, audiences didn’t want energetic and fearless women heroine athletes anymore. They preferred that females played the traditional ‘feminine’ role and so the boyish, sporty flapper who challenged gender roles that was extremely popular for years was washed away.<sup>23</sup>

The 1930s therefore resulted in a lack of athletic women in films. Due to the reemergence of the ‘feminine’ role, women were no longer being portrayed as athletic themselves, but rather as the love interests of athletic men. “No woman athlete is beautiful!” a well-known Hollywood columnist wrote in 1931. “Female strength and muscularity”, she warned, “are fatal to a career in the movies.”<sup>24</sup> Films like *Local Boy Makes Good* (1931), in which a shy librarian joins a college track team to impress a girl, and *Ten Laps to Go* (1938), when a rival drivers compete for a championship and a girl, are two examples of women playing a role girlfriend or wife, not an athlete.<sup>25</sup> The 1930 film *Hot Curves* also paints a picture of the shift to a weak or wicked female. This story follows Jim Dolan (Rex Lease), a pitcher who makes the Pittsburgh baseball team and becomes a star. He in love with the manager’s daughter, Elaine (Alice Day). However, Mazie (Natalie Moorhead), a gold-digging girl, takes advantage of Jim and completely flatters him. Jim begins to disregard the manager’s orders because of Mazie, who leads him to rebel. Jim becomes disfavored by the whole team, and ends up suspended from the team. However, Jim is forgiven when Elaine catches Mazie and helps to win the World Series game.<sup>26</sup> *Hot Curves* sadly starts a

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<sup>23</sup> Chapman, 1577-1594.

<sup>24</sup> Sylvia of Hollywood in *Photoplay Magazine*, quoted in Addison, *Hollywood and the Rise of Physical Culture*, 108. Found in Chapman, 1577.

<sup>25</sup> *Local Boy Makes Good*, directed by Mervyn LeRoy (1931; First National Pictures, Inc.); *Ten Laps to Go*, directed by Elmer Clifton (1938; Fanchon Royer Features, Inc.), DVD.

<sup>26</sup> *Hot Curves*, directed by Norman Taurog (1930; Tiffany Productions), DVD.

trend of women, as with the case of the character Mazie, who are only infatuated with a man because he's rich and successful. Mazie's lust makes Jim unfavorable with his teammates, thus symbolizing the damage women could do to men. However, Jim's former girlfriend and the manager's daughter, Elaine, forgives him in the end. The audience that saw this movie therefore were reminded of how women should submit to their man no matter the consequences. This view continued throughout the rest of the decade.

### **1940s and 1950s: AAGPBL and Negro League**

As the 1940s came, however, more hope appeared for the reemergence of a positive popular image of athletic females in society, not only for white women, but for African-American women as well. Between 1940 and 1943, over three million women in the United States entered the workforce especially once another war became reality in December of 1941<sup>27</sup>. Women now accepted the responsibility of aiding and supporting the war effort.<sup>28</sup> The United States encouraged women to work outside of the home to support their men abroad. Women gained employment in areas that men usually did before the war. Essentially, as author Merrie Fidler put it, "the placement of women in traditionally male occupations was an unintentional consequence of the war, and so women soon 'worked as jockeys, umpires, bowling pin setters, caddies, horse trainers and even football coaches.'"<sup>29</sup>

As World War II effected the men's professional teams, Chicago Cubs owner Philip K. Wrigley came up with the idea of forming a women's softball league to make up for the

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<sup>27</sup> Sue Macy, *A Whole New Ball Game: The Story of the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1993), 2.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Merrie A. Fidler, *The Development and Decline of the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League, 1943-1954*. (Master of Science Thesis, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Department of Physical Education, 1976), 38.

economic downturn of Major League Baseball because many of the players fought in the war. Softball was very popular in the Midwest by the 1940s, and it was even proving to be more favorable by having 10 million more people attend softball games than baseball games in 1939.<sup>30</sup> Half way through the first season, however, Wrigley realized that Americans longed for the traditional game of baseball, so he set out to make sure the women in his league were playing by the rules of baseball and not softball.<sup>31</sup> For Wrigley, the drawback of softball was not its popularity, it was the stereotypes. People like Wrigley looked at softball players as lesbians, masculine, or freaks.<sup>32</sup> Wrigley's goal was to take advantage of the popularity that both softball and baseball provided, but emphasize the fact that his players had to look and act like ladies.<sup>33</sup> His All American Girls Professional Baseball League (AAGPBL) was founded in the 1940s. The AAGPBL lasted from 1943 until 1954, and Wrigley said that one of his main goals was to present a player viewed as an ". . . attractive, feminine lady who just happened to possess masculine athletic skills."<sup>34</sup> One of the most popular teams in the AAGPBL were the Peoria Redwings, a team which officially formed on May 6, 1946.<sup>35</sup> With their flashy expertise and passion for the game, these ladies "sold" women's baseball.

Despite all the women of the All American Girls Professional Baseball League showcasing their talent and passion for the game of baseball, it was to no one's surprise that Wrigley kept pushing the femininity of the women's players. Even though these women were praised for their athletic and tough plays, league officials wanted to differentiate them as much as possible from women in the softball league. Wrigley's wife designed skirted uniforms that were

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<sup>30</sup> Gai Ingham Berlage, *Women in Baseball: The Forgotten History* (Westport, CT; Praeger, 1994), 136.

<sup>31</sup> Macy, 10.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* 136.

<sup>33</sup> Berlage, 125.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* 138.

<sup>35</sup> *Peoria Redwings Official Yearbook*, (Peoria, IL: Brochure, 1947), quoted in

similar to ones of field hockey and figure skating and these uniforms proved as a reminder that these athletes had to stay feminine.<sup>36</sup> Makeup artists taught AAGPBL athletes how to properly put on makeup to ensure that these women had great appearances to go along with their great athletic talents. Essentially, Wrigley wanted his female athletes to look like women, but perform like men.<sup>37</sup> The AAGPBL continued into the 1950s; however, as Major League Baseball came back in full swing during the 1952 season, the MLB banned women from signing contracts and the future support of a women's baseball league quickly diminished. After the war, American audiences now shifted their attention back to men's baseball and other men's sports, while women were again expected to assume the role of the housewife once again.<sup>38</sup> While women's participation in the AAGPBL was a successful period in women's sports history, it failed to legitimize women in sports.

Despite the impact of the AAGPBL in the 1940s and 1950s, few films represented women athletes during the period. *Blonde Comet*, a 1941 film starring Virginia Vale, highlights a woman that "looks like a female, but performs like a man," which is exactly how the AAGPBL catered to its audience. *Blonde Comet* follows Beverly Blake (Vale) as she speeds her way to success in the European racing league. With all that success, she decides to return to America to race. She then meets Jim Flynn (Robert Kent), another racecar driver, and a rivalry begins to form. With *Blonde Comet* being a typical romance movie, it's to no surprise that they eventually fall in love. When the big race finally comes around, Beverly Blake proves she's a great driver by leading the race. In spite of Blake's great racing though, the 'Blonde Comet' ends up dropping out of the race because she's not strong enough to finish. After Beverly Blake gives up

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<sup>36</sup> Macy, 12.

<sup>37</sup> Fidler., 90.

<sup>38</sup> Bill Adams, *Yester days* (Vbl I), (Peoria, IL: Peoria Journal Star Publishing, 1992).

her chances to win, Jim Flynn takes her car, since the one he has is too beat up, and wins the race. The final scene of the film is the last blow to the ‘Blonde Comet’s’ career. With the romance heating up, Flynn easily convinces her to stop racing, to fulfill her womanly duty, and marry him.<sup>39</sup>

The problem with this film is it again undermines the liberation of women. Like the AAGPBL, *Blonde Comet* represents a short period when women had the chance to prove they could be as competitive, entertaining, and above all, socially, mentally, and physically equal to men. The transient dream of gender equality fell short. The underlying message was clear; as talented as women could be, the common woman, no matter how gifted, really could not compete with men because they didn’t have the strength and stamina to keep up. It was best for women to use their talents as wives and mothers instead.

The 1950s proved even harder for women to gain notoriety in sports. The All American Girls Professional Baseball League ended in 1954. African American women, who had been turned away from the AAGPBL, though, found success in the Negro Leagues. Toni Stone, Connie Morgan, and Mamie Johnson were black women excluded from Philip Wrigley’s baseball league.<sup>40</sup> But they helped to challenge and redefine black femininity. All three females participated in sports in their childhood years. It was black middle-class educators that kept encouraging Stone, Johnson, and Morgan to participate in organized sports. E.B. Henderson, a well-known black educator, believed that the skills of black women should be “displayed . . . to a wider extent,” and “the race of man needs the inspiration of strong virile womanhood.”<sup>41</sup> Even

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<sup>39</sup> *Blonde Comet*, directed by William Beaudine (1941; Producers Releasing Corporation (PRC)). YouTube.

<sup>40</sup> Amira Rose Davis, “No League of Their Own: Baseball, Black Women, and the Politics of Representation”, *Radical History Review* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 74-75.

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Elizabeth Dunham, “Physical Education of Women at Hampton Institute,” *Southern Workman* 53 (1924): 167.

though black female athletes were “less feminine,” the chance to participate in sports gave them the opportunity to show off the “strength and health of the race.”<sup>42</sup>

As more black baseball stars transitioned to Major League Baseball in the mid-1940s, the Negro League, had been seven different professional leagues throughout the 1920s to 1960s, was on the verge of collapse. In order to stop the bleeding, Negro League owners searched for players that could not only help their teams, but also help sell tickets. After scavenging through the Negro minor leagues, the owners finally signed Toni Stone. Fully aware of the previous success of the AAGPBL during wartime years, Syd Pollock, owner of the Clowns in the Negro League, didn't want an all-women's baseball team, but rather, wanted women to play in a man's league.<sup>43</sup> Pollock, famous for his “sensational headlines and promotional tactics” believed that the best way to fill stadium seats was “through showmanship and comedy.”<sup>44</sup> Pollock nicknamed Stone the “Gal Guardian of Second Base,” and used the press to discuss her athleticism, her contract, and, to no surprise, her feminine qualities.<sup>45</sup> The news of Stone's arrival in the Negro League made its way throughout the black community. In the opening game in 1953, the crowd at the Clowns' Blues Stadium in Kansas City brought in approximately 18,205 spectators, in which Stone went 0-for-2 in three innings. Despite her average performance, Stone's presence re-sparked an interest in the Negro League.<sup>46</sup>

As the 1953 season went on, an astounding number of women became interested in joining the men's baseball league. However, Pollock wasn't interested in employing a lot of women because he believed it would “would lessen the spectacle of a female athlete playing

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<sup>42</sup> Davis, 77.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. 78.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. 79.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. 79.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 80.

among men.” Rather, Pollock wanted only a few marketable women, to drive up attendance.<sup>47</sup> Soon after, Connie Morgan and Mamie Johnson unhesitatingly joined the league. Morgan, who impressed the Clowns’ management, had “her good arm, as well as her appearance.”<sup>48</sup> In Pollock’s view, Morgan was more marketable than Stone. Morgan was younger, had light skin, a curvy figure, and curly hair in comparison to the darker, more muscular build of Stone. Pollock tried to capitalize on Morgan’s “feminine appearance.” The Clowns were in Baltimore to play Jackie Robinson’s Major League Baseball All Star team. So Pollock staged a photo with Robinson and Morgan. The photo made Morgan a legitimate baseball star, showcasing her feminine appeal.<sup>49</sup>

Even though fans greatly enjoyed seeing “feminine stars” in the Negro League, many players and sportswriters disapproved of females in the league. Black sportswriters, some of who were critics of the Negro League and advocates for integrating the MLB, believed that adding females to the league proved that it was washed-up.<sup>50</sup> Even men on the team that Stone, Morgan, and Johnson played on were critical of females playing in a “man’s game.” According to various accounts, male players verbally and physically humiliated Stone and Johnson, and probably Morgan too, despite Morgan never mentioning any specific events. These women were subject to catcalls, crude jokes, and, occasionally, physical and sexual harassment. On the field, male players told women to “go home and make your husband some biscuits” or had balls thrown

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid. 81.

<sup>48</sup> Pollock, *Barnstorming to Heaven*, 255 – 56; Lynn Ford, “Send in the Clowns, er, Indians,” *Indianapolis Star*, June 3, 1995.

<sup>49</sup> Davis, 82.

<sup>50</sup> Davis, 83.

intentionally hard at them (one which knocked Stone unconscious). Off-the-field things didn't get any better as women were ridiculed and male players made sexual advances on them.<sup>51</sup>

These women, however, did as much as possible to get back at the men who tried to mentally and/or physically harm them. Stone fought back. When a teammate of hers was trying to sexually harass her on the bus, team management told Stone that she had to take care of it herself. The next time Stone saw him, she started swinging the bat at his head and "I didn't have no problems after that," said Stone in a 1991 interview.<sup>52</sup> Black, as well as white, women's "femininity" was therefore used to profit men such as Wrigley and Pollock. Their bodies, clothing, and looks helped start the AAGPBL and to rejuvenate the Negro League, the postwar era promoted women's labor through the praise of women athletes.<sup>53</sup> Women athletes, however, only were good for their fine-looks and femininity. The true reason for the acceptance of women athletes during this period was because the flourishing of men's sports declined as a result of the men going to war. After Major League Baseball and other men's sports came back into favor with American audiences, women again faced inequalities in athletics and the legitimization of women's sports again fell short.

### **1960s-Present: Title IX, WNBA, and the Struggle for Identity**

Some scholars argue that the 1960s came with a change in beliefs regarding female athletes and society's growing "acceptance" of women's ability to participate in sports. Anne Enke, a professor of history and women's studies, believes that the "modesty" expected of

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<sup>51</sup> Bill Kruissink, "First Woman in Pro Baseball Remembers," *Alameda Journal*, April 2, 1996.

<sup>52</sup> Toni Stone, taped oral history, 1991, Archive and Collection, National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum. Found in Amira Rose Davis, "No League of Their Own: Baseball, Black Women, and the Politics of Representation", *Radical History Review* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 74-75.

<sup>53</sup> Davis, 91.

women was diminishing and society encouraged women to take part in aggressive sports.<sup>54</sup> While most white, middle-class people were in favor of women playing hard on the field, they still wanted the toughest athletes to be appropriate women off the field.<sup>55</sup> Despite this, things didn't get better for women. Women found that they couldn't as easily separate their athletic and personal lives. For athletes, being "just like other women" was hard to come by.<sup>56</sup> Films about female athletes in the 1960s start a trend throughout the next few decades to tell female athletes' "struggle to fulfill a female gender-constructed role such as a girlfriend, daughter, or niece", as filmmaker, writer, and activist Viridiana Lieberman puts it.<sup>57</sup> These familial duties of the 1960s made it hard for women to be professional athletes. Not only is this true, but women throughout the next few decades, despite more acceptance and opportunities in sports, faced gender inequalities in sports. With the introduction of Title IX in the 1970s and the WNBA in the 1990s, we will continue to see the inequalities and struggles of the legitimization of women's sports.

As we look at the hardships for women athletes in the 1960s, the struggle of lead characters over their familial obligations can be seen in the 1965 film *Billie* starring Patty Duke, which was based on the 1952 play *Time Out For Ginger*. Billie wasn't the "typical" 15-year-old girl. She had a bobbed haircut and acted in a "tomboyish" manner, but, most importantly, she had a passion for track and field. Distancing herself from fellow female classmates, she befriends a new student named Mike and teaches him the art of how to run faster. Bewildered at first by Billie's advice, Mike finally listens to her after he notices that she's very talented at running. The high school track coach eventually sees her talent and allows her to be on the team. Billie's

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<sup>54</sup> Anne Enke, "Pioneers, Players, and Politicos: Women's Softball in Minnesota," *Minnesota History*, 58, No. 4 (2003), 216.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Viridiana Lieberman, *Sports Heroines on Film: A Critical Study of Cinematic Women Athletes, Coaches and Owners* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers), 13.

actions outrage the town, since the majority of citizens didn't believe that it was appropriate for women to compete in athletics with men. Billie becomes subject to jokes and criticism at school. She becomes most worried about her father, who was running for mayor and didn't want him to be hurt by the negative publicity. At first, her father stands by her side, but as the negativity continued to stir and elections coming near, he advises her to quit the track team. Billie continues to run for the team as "one of the guys" but the question of her true identity grew.<sup>58</sup>

As Billie grows closer to Mike, the discussion of Billie acting more "like a lady" increases and the problem with the "struggle to fulfilling a female gender-constructed role" deepens. Because Billie is a tremendous athlete who can outrace any male, Mike struggles with seeing her as anything more than a friend because of these "masculine" qualities. Billie herself struggles with her masculine qualities as well. In the majority of the film she wants to be considered an "equal" more than she wants to be recognized as a girl. Billie's father sees Jean, Billie's older sister, as his "little girl"—one who he thinks is the perfect daughter because she holds true to the femininity expected by young female adults. Billie, on the other hand, is the son that he never had and treats her as so. As the relationship between Billie and Mike heat up, Mike wants her to quit the track team and act more like a girl and Billie even states that she actually "felt like a girl" when Mike held her hand.

At the end of the film, Billie quits the track team, knowing that becoming Mike's girlfriend and competing are incompatible.<sup>59</sup> The ending of *Billie* is similar to the one in *Blonde Comet*, where the female protagonists quit their respected sports to be with men, but there are obvious differences in how men see these female characters. In *Blonde Comet*, fiercely

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<sup>58</sup> *Billie*, directed by Don Weis (1965, United Artists). YouTube.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

competitive Beverly Blake never loses her “feminine looks” even when on the racing track. Men still drool over her. However, men saw Billie as a hugely talented teen with a “lost” identity. Everyone knew she was female, but, at the same time, her association with a man’s sport, competing and winning against men, identified her as more of boy to her classmates and her father. In the 1960s, it still seemed appropriate for Patty Duke’s character to “come back to reality” and finally be a woman again.

The 1970s saw a huge change in sporting equality for women, however, it didn’t have lasting effects. Title IX arrived in 1972, which was energized during the rejuvenated women’s rights movement. Title IX was also a response to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which didn’t include any prohibition on gender discrimination in public or federally funded programs.<sup>60</sup> Title IX states “No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subject to discrimination under any educational program or activity receiving federal financial assistance”.<sup>61</sup> Title IX pushed for the unequal opportunities for women in sport by ensured federal funded programs like high schools and universities provided equal opportunities for women and men athletic programs. Since the addition of Title IX, around 41% of females now play in high school and the number of women’s college sports teams have doubled.<sup>62</sup> However, there is still inequality for female athletes. Only 43% of collegiate student athletes are women, despite women making up of over 57% of all undergraduate students. Women’s sports rarely make money and colleges spend a lot more money on men athletes than women athletes.<sup>63</sup> Also, women have over 60,000 fewer

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<sup>60</sup> 401(b) and 601, Civil Rights Act of 1964, Pub. L. No. 88-352, 78 Stat. 241, 246 and 252 (July 2, 1964).

<sup>61</sup> Public Law 92-318 sec. 901 (June 23, 1972). U.S. Department of Education.

<sup>62</sup> National Coalition for Women and Girls in Education (NCWGE). *Title IX at 40: Working to Ensure Gender Equity in Education*. Washington, DC: NCWGE, 2012. <http://ncwge.org/PDF/TitleIXat40>.

<sup>63</sup> Dusenbery, *supra* note 57. According to Title IX policy interpretations, the amount of money spent on sports is not a factor for compliance with Title IX. Therefore, a school can spend more money on male sports than female

opportunities to participate in collegiate athletics than male athletes.<sup>64</sup> The salaries of head coaches and assistant coaches for female teams are also a lot lower.<sup>65</sup> Women's sports are also highly underrepresented in media coverage. Male athletes receive the majority of the spotlight coverage and headlines, while female sports only receive 2-4% of news coverage. The coverage of women's athletics have also been on a decline over the last 20 years. As of 2009, the media coverage of women's sports was 1.6%.<sup>66</sup> As influential and inspiring as Title IX was at providing an equal opportunity for women in sports, women still faced major inequalities today. Despite inequalities, women's sports are progressing, however, they are still far away from being legitimized in a society that still heralds men's sports as superior.

With the inaction of Title IX, though, the 1970s brought films that included female athletes. However, films still had a problem promoting feminine athletes. Some movies about underdog misfit boy's teams who can't compete with the athletic ones, include females in the talentless team to "enhance the outsider mark placed on the second-tier team," as Viridiana Lieberman, author of *Sports Heroines on Film: A Critical Study of Cinematic Women Athletes, Coaches and Owners*, puts it. As talented as each female is, her conflict is the intertwining of her talent with her need to reassure her audience that she is feminine. In other words, "she can't just

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sports without violating Title IX. Policy Interpretation, *supra* note 31, at 71,414. Seen in Elizabeth Reinbrecht, "Northwestern University and Title IX: One Step Forward for Football Players, Two Steps Back for Female Student Athletes," *University of Toledo Law Review* (2015), 262, 276.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.* 262.

<sup>65</sup> James K. Gentry and Raquel Meyer Alexander, "Pay for Women's Basketball Coaches Lags Far Behind that of Men's Coaches," *N.Y. Times* (Apr. 2, 2012). Seen in Elizabeth Reinbrecht, "Northwestern University and Title IX: One Step Forward for Football Players, Two Steps Back for Female Student Athletes," *University of Toledo Law Review* (2015), 263.

<sup>66</sup> Michael A. Messner et al., *Gender in Televised Sports: News and Highlights Shows 1989-2009* (2010). This is the lowest media coverage ever recorded of women's athletics over a twenty-year period. Even the ticker-time coverage of women's athletics on ESPN Sports Center is severely limited to 2.7%. Seen in Elizabeth Reinbrecht, "Northwestern University and Title IX: One Step Forward for Football Players, Two Steps Back for Female Student Athletes," *University of Toledo Law Review* (2015), 263.

be an athlete; she must be a non-threatening female too.”<sup>67</sup> The 1976 film *Bad News Bears* perfectly highlights this relationship. *Bad News Bears* follows a Little League team comprised of the worst players in the league. With the team looking hopeless, Morris Buttermaker (Walter Matthau) recruits the “smart-talking and snarky” 11-year-old pitcher Amanda (Tatum O’Neal), who is Buttermaker’s daughter with an ex-girlfriend. When Buttermaker tries to recruit Amanda, she refuses, and “through with all that tomboy stuff” and that she’s saving up for ballet lessons. Her father makes her a deal; he’ll pay for the lessons as long as she plays for the team.<sup>68</sup> Amanda proves herself a worthy teammate and her teammates don’t tease Amanda for her gender after her successful play. However, her role as the best player on the team quickly evaporates when a rebel boy named Kelly joins the team.

In a way, Kelly created a balance so a female wouldn’t end up the best player in the league.<sup>69</sup> Author Viridiana Lieberman suggests that in adding a talented male figure, Amanda’s power vanished. Amanda’s romantic interest in Kelly restored her “proper” feminism. Her cocky attitude changes and she “becomes a woman” in the end. Amanda’s changed attitude helps Buttermaker to become a better father and her intimacy with Kelly helps to establish herself as more feminine.<sup>70</sup> *Bad News Bears* and other 1970s films suggest that women’s inclusion into sport is good, but women still faced inequalities and struggles in the real world. The notion that women have to remain feminine underlines the never-changing attitudes in society that women aren’t able to compete with men and will never have an equal chance in the sports world.

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<sup>67</sup> Lieberman, 57-58.

<sup>68</sup> *Bad News Bears*, directed by Michael Ritchie (1976; Paramount Pictures), DVD; Lieberman, *Sports Heroines on Film*, 59-60.

<sup>69</sup> *Bad News Bears*; Lieberman, 60.

<sup>70</sup> Lieberman, 62.

Even with the growing progression in women's sports, there was a struggle of identity for women athletes. Women athletes had a hard time fitting into a male-dominated sports world and we see that in film. Based on true events, the 1983 made-for-television film *Quarterback Princess* follows Tami Maida (Helen Hunt), a girl whose family moves to Oregon from Canada, she tries out to be quarterback of the high school football team. Everyone, from the coach to the next door neighbor, believes that Tami is out of her mind for even considering playing football. However, she proves that she can play football and her talents are too good for the coach not to play her.<sup>71</sup> Tami was so good that she leads her team to a state championship. The most important part of this film, however, lies with the issue of sexism and identity confusion for Tami. Throughout the film, Tami is seen as weak and she is targeted by the male players in practice and games because the boys didn't want a girl playing with them. Although Tami starts gaining favor with her teammates, she continues to struggle with what gender she identifies with on the field. Tami is well aware that she's a female off the field, but once she starts playing football, an array of confusion stuns her. In one scene, Tami, in a conversation with her teammates, identifies herself as "other" when she's playing football, just as Billie does when she's running track. However, she accepts this identity and keeps playing.<sup>72</sup> While there's no deep explanation for Tami's feelings, I believe that it could be because of social constructs. Society tells them that, as women, they can't compete with men physically, so they should stick to their traditional roles. But as female athletes competing against males at their "own sports," Tami and Billie could possibly believe that their athletic ability must be a part of some "otherness", or not quite male or female, or the notion that normal females can't do what they do. As we can see with these film, women struggled for an identity, and it was difficult for them to

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<sup>71</sup> *Quarterback Princess*, directed by Noel Black (1983; CBS Entertainment Production). YouTube.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

be legitimized because of the inequalities they were always facing in the sports world and being judged by society because they weren't particularly feminine.

The fight for an identity in women's sports continued throughout the next decades. The success of the United States' female athletes in the 1996 Olympics spawned immense public enthusiasm for women's sports in America.<sup>73</sup> The National Basketball Association seized this huge opportunity and launched a women's league. The Women's National Basketball Association secured huge sponsorships and the league became official in 1997.<sup>74</sup> As good as it is to have an equal league alongside the NBA, there is a huge discrepancy in salaries and attendance rating. In the NBA, a first draft pick will receive slightly under \$5 million in his first season. While in the WNBA, you'll make around \$40-50,000.<sup>75</sup> The same goes for attendance ratings. The average NBA has around 18,000 fans.<sup>76</sup> The WNBA has around 7,000 and the rate continues to worsen ever since its creation in 1997.<sup>77</sup> What's even worse about the lack of equality in men's and women's basketball, is college eligibility and the chances of making it to the NBA draft versus the WNBA draft. For male collegiate basketball players, they are able to declare for the NBA draft after their freshman year or after they are one year removed from high school. As for women collegiate athletes, they must wait until after their senior seasons to

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<sup>73</sup> Ashley D. Furrow, "A Struggle for Identity The Rise and Fall of Sports Illustrated Women," *Journalism History* (Fall 2012), 156.

<sup>74</sup> Jeanne Tang, "The WNBA: A League of Their Own," *The Official NBA Encyclopedia* (2000), 306-07.

<sup>75</sup> National Basketball Association CBA 101: Highlights of the 2011 Collective Bargaining Agreement Between the National Basketball Association (NBA) and the National Basketball Players Association (NBPA) 29 (2012) [hereinafter HIGHLIGHTS OF 2011 CBA], available at [http://www.nba.com/media/CBA101\\_9.12.pdf](http://www.nba.com/media/CBA101_9.12.pdf), archived at <http://pemia.ee/SL6H-RRNP>. WNBA CBA, *supra* note 7, exhibit 5 (WNBA Rookie Scale), at 277. Seen in N. Jeremi Duru, "Hoop Dreams Deferred: The WNBA, the NBA, and the Long-Standing Gender Inequity at the Game's Highest Level," *Utah Law Review* (2015), 578, 582.

<sup>76</sup> ESPN. "NBA Attendance Report – 2017." <http://www.espn.com/nba/attendance>.

<sup>77</sup> "2015 WNBA season sees lowest fan attendance in league history," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, 2015. <http://www.reviewjournal.com/sports/sideline/2015-wnba-season-sees-lowest-fan-attendance-league-history>.

declare for the WNBA draft.<sup>78</sup> For a female collegiate player such as Brittany Griner, who was talented enough to play in the WNBA after her freshman year, she's losing out on over \$150,000 in WNBA salary.<sup>79</sup> Even today, women's sports fail to be legitimized and held to an equal standard as men. Despite the fact that women's sports are progressing and they have a chance to participate in sports more than ever before, women's sports still aren't financially or socially equal to men's sports.

Throughout history, women have succeeded and struggled to establish themselves as worthy to men. From the mid-1800s to the modern day, women athletes have fought to legitimize their hunger and passion for men's sports. Throughout the popular images in history like media and films, we see constant backlash of society's view of women athletes. For the longest time, men wanted women to "stay women" and not participate in "aggressive" and "masculine" activities. Even after enforced gender equality in athletics, society didn't seem to be ready to take women's sports very seriously. Even today with women's college sports and the WNBA, they are still struggling to find an identity. They are underfunded and not represented as much as men in the media and more needs to be done to take seriously and celebrate the achievements of women. They do work hard and deserve a fair shot at an equal chance. As we can see here and throughout the whole narrative, women athletes have had their victories and defining moments, but more work needs to be done to legitimize women's sports and I hope to

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<sup>78</sup> The WNBA's age eligibility rule is housed in Article XIII of the WNBA Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) and reads, in relevant part, as follows:

(b) A player is eligible to be selected in the WNBA Draft if she: (i) will be at least twenty-two (22) years old during the calendar year in which such Draft is held and she . . . has no remaining intercollegiate eligibility ... (ii) has graduated from a four-year college or university prior to such Draft, or "is to graduate" from such college or university within the three (3)-month period following such Draft... or (iii) attended a four-year college or university, her original class in such college or university has already been graduated or "is to graduate" within the three (3)-month period following such Draft....Seen in N. Jeremi Duru, "Hoop Dreams Deferred: The WNBA, the NBA, and the Long-Standing Gender Inequity at the Game's Highest Level," *Utah Law Review* (2015), 561.

<sup>79</sup> WNBA CBA, *supra* note 7, art. V § 8(a), at 34. Seen in N. Jeremi Duru, "Hoop Dreams Deferred: The WNBA, the NBA, and the Long-Standing Gender Inequity at the Game's Highest Level," *Utah Law Review* (2015), 582.

see that more in the future. Yes, there is a lot more equality in sports than there even has been, but the level of respect for women's sport seems the same year after year. Maybe one day, the level of investment in female sports will come.