

"The Faith that was in Her":
Senda Berenson and the Creation of
Women's Basketball
in the late Nineteenth Century

Yuko Kataiwa

Today, there are 268 million women involved in sports in the United States (Struna, np). At the Sydney Olympics in 2000, 4069 of the 10651 athletes (38.20%) were women. At the Athens Olympics this number rose to 40% (Yuki, np). Women are involved in all levels of the sporting world. They are coaches, managers and athletes. However, women's involvement in sports has always been a contentious issue. Throughout history, women have played games but when modern sports emerged in the 1860s, it was mainly organized by men for men. Women have had to try to fight to enter this traditionally male domain. In the late 19th century, female educational institutions realized the value of sports and exercise and hired female physical education teachers to teach exercise and organize team sports. Women's basketball, for example, was first played for physical exercise, not as a competitive sport. Female physical education teachers at women's colleges helped to lay the foundations for the success of

female athletes in the 1920s and 30s. Senda Berenson played an important role in women's sports. In 1893 she introduced basketball for women. Although Berenson was an advocate of women's sports, her ideas about women's involvement in sports were very conservative and are reflected both in her writings on sports and in the rules for women's basketball that she created in 1893.

According to Nancy Struna, the history of women and sports is complex. Women's involvement not only depended on "social, economic, and political experiences" but also varied according to a women's class race or where they lived. Women's history was more "episodic than evolutionary" (Struna, np). For example, native women in the pre-colonial era had more freedom to be involved in sports and recreational activities because it was part of every day life. In the colonial- era, there were few European women but those that settled in America participated in recreations like sailing and dancing. African American women and slaves in the 18th century spent what little free time they had participating in simple games, dances and races while white women in rural areas took part in games and contests at festivals and family occasions. Middle class and upper class women, especially those who lived in urban areas had a wide variety of sports and games to choose from. "Race walking", "acrobatics", and "equestrian" displays were common (Struna, np).

The 19th century brought restrictions on women's participation in sports and recreation. The "doctrine of separate spheres" argued that a women's place was in the home and justified keeping women out of the "public" or "male sphere" by emphasizing

biological differences (Struna, np). In this period, women were considered "physical inferior" but "morally superior". Middle and upper class women who lived in towns and cities were the most restricted by the ideology of separate spheres. They were involved in sports and recreation but increasingly as spectators rather than as active participants. In the early 19th century, a concern for declining female health resulted in more calls by educators and doctors for physical activity and games for women. Women reformers also argued for physical education for women but their arguments were grounded in conservative ideology. Healthy women would ensure healthy families and thus a healthy nation. People believed competitions and strenuous sports prevented the social and physical development of young women. By the middle 19th century, feminists were arguing for the increased activity of women in the public space and women began to challenge the separate spheres ideology by organizing sports clubs and competing in organizing sports in colleges and universities (Struna, np). Gradually, the connection between physical activity and women's health were established and sports participation for females increased.

In the 1880s and 1890s, universities became one site that encouraged women's physical activity and female students organized sports clubs and sports teams. Before 1848, North American women did not have higher educational opportunities. A few women attended female seminaries and academies. However, women were not allowed to enter universities and colleges. In 1848, the Seneca Falls Convention, which was the first public

gathering to debate the issue of women's rights, took place in Seneca Falls, N.Y. One of the issues agreed to by the feminist movement was the demand for higher educational opportunities for women. Universities began accepting female students in the 1880s and 90s. Some women's colleges were also established. However, not everyone agreed with higher education for women, especially those in the medical community who were worried that "brainwork" and "intellectual work" would have a negative effect on women's bodies (Struna, np). In order to answer these critics, many universities created physical education programs and sports teams (Struna, np).

According to Nancy Struna, "College administrators and faculty responded to the influx of women and their own fears about the negative impact of intellectual work on women students, with requirements for medical examinations, exercise and gymnastics regimens, and the gradual absorption of women's sports clubs" (Struna, np).

Smith College, one of the first American women's colleges, did not ignore the critics and tried to ensure that the college was a safe place for women's bodies. They hired Dr. Samuel A. Fiske, a local physician, and Lucy D. Hunt, a teacher of gymnastics as lecturer on Physiology and Hygiene and to be on the faculty. Also, Smith College had courses in hygiene and physiology and taught gymnastics. Lucy D. Hunt said "regular exercises in lighter gymnastic ... [would] not merely ... secure health, but also a graceful carriage, and well- formed bodies" (Neilson, 22-23). Also, they required students to get at least four hours a day

of physical exercise.

Smith College was the first all women's college in the United States. It was established in 1871 by bequest of Sophia Smith. It opened in 1875 with 14 students and six faculties. Smith discussed her views about women's higher education in her last will. She wrote in her will that she established the college in order to "furnish for ... [her] own sex means and facilities for the education equal to those which ... [were] afforded ... to young men" (Smith, 3). Smith College not only opened a higher educational door for women, but also tried to give equal advantages for female teachers. According to Sophia's will, "in order to have the School afford equal advantages to both sexes, the number of female teachers must equal that of the males, and that female teachers must have a voice in the management of the School" (Smith, 3). However, Smith also had conservative views about women. She thought that women were suited to education but she believed that education for women served a different purpose. Smith College classes included English language and Literature, Ancient and Modern languages, in the Mathematical and Physical sciences, Arts, Intellectual, Moral and Aesthetic Philosophy, and Gymnastics and Physical activity. However, Smith held the belief that education would lead to more intelligent womanhood and motherhood and be best for "the progress of the race" (Smith, 4).

In the early years of Smith College, physical education was not emphasized because faculties were poor. Physical education classes had to take place in the open in the late afternoon and

evening hours, because cultural subjects filled the day time hours. Also, many female students hardly exercised because they were excused from physical education by doctors who thought physical activity had a bad impact on women's bodies. In 1891, Smith College opened the Alumnae Gymnasium, one of the largest and best equipment of any of



Fig. 1. Senda Berenson.
(Five, "Senda", np)

the gymnasia built for women. By the beginning of the century, Smith had expanded its sports program to include aesthetic gymnastics, swimming, rowing, and tennis (1902), basketball (1903), hockey (1906), archery, volleyball (1907), and cricket (1908). The building of the gymnasium and the hiring of qualified physical education teachers demonstrates the commitment of Smith College to women's physical education. Although, they believed that physical education was important, their program and the people they hired reflected their belief that sports for men and women should be different (Neilson, 1).

At Smith College, entering students had to participate in four and half hours of gymnastics a week and all students had to take regular exercise. They had to have a female instructor because, at that time, it was thought that a male instructor might not pay enough attention to the student's gender and would encourage rough, unsuitable, and unladylike play (Lannin, 32, 40).

Smith College hired Senda Berenson because she fit their

criteria. She was a good example of a woman who overcame weakness (see Fig. 1). According to Edith Naomi Hill, "'the faith that was in her' had a special significance when applied to Senda Berenson" because if ever a person went into teaching as a missionary it was she" (Hill, 2). She assisted and led Smith College's Gymnasium and physical activity in 1892-1911. Berenson constantly insisted on the importance of a routine of simple exercises to maintaining a strong body. In 1893, Berenson introduced the "basketball" game. As Hill points out, "[until] this time women had never played anything that required teamwork". But Berenson warned students against imitating their brothers; men's behavior and activity were not suited for women (Hill, 5). Although, basketball attracted female students, she insisted that the game be played differently by women. "'Equal" did not mean "the same" for Berenson" (Hill, 5).

The history of women's basketball began shortly after the invention of men's basketball to encourage the improvement of women's health. Senda Berenson, a physical educating instructor at Smith College, modified men's basketball to make it more suitable for women. Known as the "Mother of Women's Basketball", Senda Berenson was born in Butryrmantsy, in the Russian Empire (now Vilnius, Lithuania), in 1868. Berenson didn't have much interest in athletics as a child; rather she liked music, literature, and art. However, she had to give up the piano because of a disease on her back. After entering the Boston Normal School of Gymnastics, she gradually strengthened her body. After two years at the school, she entered Smith College,

which is the largest private college for women in the U.S., as a teacher of physical training. At Smith College, she contributed to women's physical education; especially devising a women's basketball game and making the rules of women's basketball (Lannin, 11-12). Basketball was invented as an indoor sport for men by James Naismith at the Massachusetts Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) School in 1891. In 1893, after reading about Naismith's game, Berenson, who thought "basket ball" could be good for women's health, introduced the game at Smith College and held the first women's basketball game. However, she didn't adopt it totally the same as Naismith's basketball game. In the 1890s, a commonly held belief was that women's bodies were smaller and weaker than men's. Even people who supported an improved social position for women in politics and education, believed that women were "the weaker sex." For example, Lucille Eaton Hill of Wellesley College in Massachusetts warned that,

Basketball could do permanent harm to young girls' beauty and health at a critical time in their development. She called the excitement of the game an 'evil influence upon the emotional and nervous feminine nature.' (Lannin, 30)

Therefore, Berenson made the rules easier for women because she thought that if women played like men, they might exert themselves too much and would not appear "ladylike." At Smith and other women's Colleges, basketball was not a competitive



(Berenson "Basket", 52).

sports but part of the physical activity students were involved in. Berenson encouraged all of the students to participate rather than teaching how they might improve their individual skill. So, she emphasized the activity as "exercise", not as a "competitive game", and she advocated the game to encourage "individual pla[y] and ... a spirit of clean sport and fair play" (Berenson "Basket", 3).

"The spring game between classes at Smith College became a huge social event at the college" (Lannin, 15)

By 1895, the game had spread to girl's schools and athletic clubs in the whole country. Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA's) throughout America. The University of California (UC) Berkeley and Miss Head's School, located on the West Coast, played an early form of basketball in 1892. Another

physical educational teacher, Clara Gregory Baer, of Newcomb College, introduced basketball to students at Sophie Newcomb College, New Orleans.

Clara Gregory Baer published her own rules in 1895. But like Berenson, she was concerned about too much roughness in basketball and therefore changed the original rules in order to decrease the games physicality and roughness. Baer's rules were created to cut down on running which meant less physical exertion. She also banned guarding of an opponent to discourage rough contact between players. Since her version of the game was very different from the original, Baer was forced to give it a new name. She called it "Basquette" (bahs KETT). Her rules were more restrictive than Senda Berenson's rules. Baer didn't realize that players were allowed to move around the whole court. So, in basquette, "any movement was forbidden unless the ball in the air" in order that participants not lose their "woman like grace" (Steen, 20-21, Lannin, 16-19).

Senda Berenson had conservative views of women and women's physical activity, though she created new opportunities for women to play team sports. Berenson, Luther Gulick Jr., and Alice Bertha Foster, a professor of physical education at Bryn Mawr College, formed a Basketball Committee in order to discuss the growing concerns over basketball's roughness and the many versions of the games. In 1901, Berenson and her committee members published a book, "Basket Ball for Women", which discussed the rules changes to basketball in order to introduce it to her female students (Lannin, 27. Steen, 23). Also, Berenson

continued to edit "Spalding's Basketball for Women," based on "Basket Ball for Women," until 1916-1917 (Hill, 5). Berenson wanted to put restrictions on women playing basketball to maintain women's grace even in sports because she was afraid that basketball was becoming too physical. She also worried that basketball was becoming too competitive as it became more popular among women in the country. Social critics and doctors, who believed that running tasked women's hearts too much, also complained that basketball, drew out the negative aspects of "competitiveness" which they believed, "would develop dangerous tendencies in women resulting in a loss of grace, dignity, poise, and charm" (Lannin, 32).

Berenson believed that "the great desire to win and the excitement of the game [would] make ... women do sadly unwomanly things" (Lannin, 28, 31-32). She argued that roughness in sports was acceptable for men but not for women.

A certain amount of roughness is deemed necessary to bring out manliness in our young men. Surely, rough play can have no possible excuse in our young women. (Lannin. 28)

Berenson and committee members edited these guidelines in order to eliminate the certain aspects of the game which they believed encouraged roughness, excessive competition and too much exertion. Berenson enforced certain conditions to avoid the negative effects of competition; "(1) No interschool games if possible (2) No fees (3) Limited audience (4) Something social after

games for the players." She wanted the players to be feminine even as they played the game and therefore had other rules not related to actual play: "(1) No chewing gum (2) Tidy appearance (3) Hair in ribbons and braids" (Stillman, 2). Other rules encouraged "team work" over individual play: "(1) No stealing ball, (2) No holding the ball for more than three seconds, (3) No bouncing the ball more than three consecutive times, (4) Divide the court into three equal areas, (5) Personal foul given if a player leaves her assigned area, (6) Minimum of 6 players; maximum of 9" (Steen, 21-22).

The biggest differences between men's and women's basketball was the division of the court into three areas. Berenson made this change to take out the unnecessary "harmful" running. Each player was tied to her own division and consequently moving in a smaller space than in the men's game. The changes made to the activities of dribbling and guarding within the game also reflected gender specific ideas. The Basketball Committee worried that "dribbling ... might create a 'star' player who held the ball constantly" (Steen, 25). The Women's Basketball Committee thought it would be "unladylike" and completely forbade dribbling in 1910. Then in 1913, knee-high dribbling was again allowed to make the game faster. In discussions about women's basketball and its rules, the committee members focused on "women's health", "poise", and "emotions". Berenson never wanted to develop the "athletic type" of young women but always stressed exercise for health and education (Lannin, 32, Steen, 25-26).

The rules were created so that women's basketball would be a calmer game. Women basketball players were not required to run around so much. Moreover, she made it less competitive by not allowing the athletes to steal the ball from one another. She wanted to remove the intensity from the women's game, so that it would be suitable for women (Lannin, 12-13, 27).

Further changes to Women's basketball gradually came about as the number of people who played women's basketball increased. By 1906, "Spalding's Basketball for Women" changed the number of players to a minimum of 5 instead of 6. Also, it added "the five-second out- of- bounds rule, which meant a player had five seconds to throw the ball into play" (Steen, 25). According to Steen, more rules concerning fouls were added to the list in 1908:

- A player had to release the ball within three seconds or receive a foul.
- Two players could not guard an opponent who was shooting.
- A foul would be called if a player placed her hand on the ball when it was in an opponent's possession.
- If a player stepped over a boundary line, she was given a foul.
- A team earned one point if their opponents fouled three times. (In the past, a team had been awarded one point every time an opponent fouled.)
- If a player committed three fouls, she was warned. After a

fourth foul, that player sat on the bench for the rest of the game.

- The bounce pass was eliminated. (Steen, 25)

The length of the game also changed to "8 minute quarters with a 10 minute halftime", although the games basically had two 15 minute halves with a 10 minute halftime. In addition, "the length of time-outs increased from 2 minutes to 5 minute" and changed back to 2 minute again. The number of time-outs decreased from 3 to 2. These changes were made because it was believed that too much activity would cause women to get tired and that it was a strain on the heart. Shorter playing time would make sure this did not happen. Female athletes and how they played sports was influenced by gender concepts held at the time. As mentioned earlier, Berenson argued that men and women were different even as they were becoming more and more equal in society (Steen, 25- 27).

In the 19th century, "women's athletics became an important part of American life, although they were ruled by more or less Victorian standards until the feminist movement ... [of the] 1960s and early 1970s (Jews, np). Throughout history, women's sports expanded in popularity. Colleges and universities and female physical education teachers like Senda Berenson were especially important to the growth of women's sports. They laid the groundwork for the "Golden Age" of sports in the 1920s and 30s. Women continually fought against the common view that women's biology, especially their ability to reproduce, meant

their involvement in sports had to be limited. Women's team sports history began in the late 19th and early 20th century. Women were encouraged to play team sports, such as basketball, to improve their health. Berenson was an innovator in women's sports and played a large role in making sport an important part of university life. However, she also believed that biologically, women's bodies were inferior to men's. Her passion and dedication was proven over a 12-year period as Chairperson of the Women's Basketball Committee and continuous editing of the rules guidebook.

Works Cited

- Berenson, Senda Abbott. "Basket Ball at Smith College". Spalding's Athletic Library, 1914. Senda Berenson Papers, Series 5: Publications, 1903- 1915. Five College Digital Access Project. Five College Incorporated, 1999. 29 October 2006.
 <http://clio.fivecolleges.edu/smith/berenson/5pubs/bball_smith/>
- , "Spalding's Official Basket Ball Guide for Women Revised 1915". Senda Berenson Papers, Series 5: Publications, 1903- 1915. Five College Digital Access Project. Five College, Incorporated, 1915. 29 October 2006. <<http://clio.fivecolleges.edu/smith/berenson/5pubs/spaldings/index.shtml?page=1>>
- Figler, Stephen K and Gail Whitaker. *Sports & Play in American Life*. United States of America: Wm. C. Brown Publishers, 1991.
- Five College Archives Digital Access Project. 7.October. 1999. the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. 18 November 2005.
 <<http://clio.fivecolleges.edu/smith/berenson/>>
- , Senda Berenson Papers, Series 4: Photographs, ca. 1890-1953. the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. 9 December 2006.

- <<http://clio.fivecolleges.edu/smith/berenson/4photos/studio/>>
- Hill, Edith Naomi. "Senda Berenson the Director of Physical Education at Smith College 1892-1911". Senda Berenson Papers Series 1: Biographical Material, Supplement to *The Research Quarterly*. 1941. Five College Digital Access Project. Five Colleges Incorporated, 1999. 29 October 2006. <<http://clio.fivecolleges.edu/smith/berenson/1biog/19411000/>>
- Jews in Sports Online, Jews in Sports. 4 December 2006.
< <http://www.jewsinsports.org/profile.asp?sport=basketball&ID=279>>
- Lannin, Joanne. *A History of Basketball for Girls and Women*. Minneapolis: First Avenue Edition (a division of learner Publishing Group), 2000.
- Neilson, William Allan. "Smith College: Physical Education, Hygiene, Bacteriology page". The First Seventy Years (unpublished typescript)". Five College Archives Digital Access Project. Five Colleges Incorporated, 1999. 29 October 2006. <http://clio.fivecolleges.edu/smith/pres-neilson/ch_8/index.shtml?page=22>
- Paine, Elizabeth. "Physical Training in Women's Colleges-Smith". The Illustrated Sporting News, 1904 Jun 4. Senda Berenson Papers, Series 1: Biographical Materials, Folder 3. Five College Digital Access Project. Five Colleges Incorporated, 1999. 20 November 2006.
< <http://clio.fivecolleges.edu/smith/berenson/1biog/19040604/>>
- Smith, Sophia. "Last Will and Testament of Miss Sophia Smith, Late of Hatfield, Mass". Sophia Smith wills. Five College Digital Access Project. Five Colleges Incorporated, 1998. 10 October 2006.
<<http://clio.fivecolleges.edu/smith/ss-wills/1870/transcript.htm>>
- Steen, Sandra and Susan Steen. *Take It to the Hoop: 100 Years of Women's Basketball*. Brookfield, Connecticut: Twenty-First Century Books, 2003.
- Stillman, Agnes. "Notes made by Agnes Stillman, graduate student, Smith College, on Senda Berenson Abbott". Spalding's Athletic Library. 1914. Senda Berenson Papers, Series 1: Biographical Materials January 1971. Five College Digital Access Project. Five

- Colleges Incorporated, 1999. 29 October 2006. <<http://clio.fivecolleges.edu/smith/berenson/1biog/19710100/index.shtml?page=2>>
- Struna, Nancy. "Women's Pre-Title IX Sports History in the United States". Women's Sports Foundation Org. 2005. 3 July 2006. <<http://www.womenssportsfoundation.org/cgi-bin/iowa/issues/history/article.html?record=769>>
- Yuki, Wakako. "Orin-Pikku-Monogatari, Dai-Yonnbu-Jyosei-no-Tatakai", Attene 2004. *Yomiuri Online*. 2004. 14 October 2006. <<http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/athe2004/special/monogatari/mo2003121001.htm>>