



African American Women, Femininity and Their History in Physical Education and Sports in American Higher Education: From World War I Through the Mid-century

Linda M. Perkins

This chapter will discuss the issue of femininity and African American women and their participation in physical education and sports in both predominantly White and historically Black colleges from the period from World War I through the first half of the twentieth century. While this chapter will focus primarily on the rise in physical education and college sports for women and the notion of femininity during this time period, the issues of femininity and beauty can be traced back to slavery. Images and views of womanhood and femininity have always been impacted by race in the United States and a brief review of this history will provide context for what happened decades later. This chapter will discuss how Black women in the United States after Emancipation were forced to respond and conform to White society's issues of morality initially and later issues of beauty

L. M. Perkins (✉)
Claremont Graduate University, Claremont, CA, USA
e-mail: linda.perkins@cgu.edu

© The Author(s) 2021
T. Allender, S. Spencer (eds.), *'Femininity' and the History of
Women's Education*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-54233-7_3

and femininity. Notions of humanity, intellect and later feminine beauty were ingrained in the American fabric since the writing of the constitution. Black women were trapped in both worlds of racism and sexism. The feminist concept of intersectionality, which embraces the multiple systems of oppressions, addresses this dilemma.¹ While all “men” were declared to be considered equal under the law and the American Constitution, this did not include women or Black people who were enslaved. Indeed, in 1787 at the United States Constitutional Convention, it was voted to consider enslaved Blacks only 3/5th of a person to determine how many congressional representatives each state would have. Hence, enslaved Blacks were never viewed as fully human and because of their slave status had to fight for centuries to accomplish human and equal rights in the United States. From the beginning of higher education in the United States, Black people had to contend with academic racism. Studies were published that “proved” the inferiority of Black people proliferated.²

PRE-CIVIL WAR

Prior to the Civil War (1860–1865) and the Emancipation, most Black women were enslaved. During this period the notion of “true womanhood” was prevalent. This view of White womanhood was one of innocence, fragility, modesty, submissive and purity. These traits epitomized femininity and womanhood. The education available to these women reinforced these traits with the offering of needlepoint, painting, music, art, and French. Of course, these models of “femininity and womanhood” were based on upper- and middle-class White women.³

As early as the 1840s and 1850s, the renowned Black feminist abolitionist Sojourner Truth stood at a women’s rights convention in Akron, Ohio, in 1851 and responded to the sexist comments of a male minister. Stating his opposition to women’s rights, the minister noted that Jesus

¹See Kimberle Crenshaw and Sheila Thomas. 2004. Intersectionality: the double bind of race and gender. *Perspectives Magazine*; Patricia Hill Collins. 2002. *Black feminist thought: knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. New York and London; Routledge.

²See Charles Darwin. 1859. *On the origin of species of natural selection: or the preservation of favoured races in the struggle for life*. London: Oxford University Press.

³For more on this concept of race and femininity see Barbara Welter. 1966. The cult of true womanhood: 1820–1860. *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2: 151–174; Linda M Perkins. 1983. The impact of the cult of true womanhood on the education of Black women. *Journal of Social Issues* 39, no. 1: 17–28.

Christ was a man, and spoke of women's delicateness and how they had to be helped into carriages and carried over puddles of mud. Sojourner Truth gave her famous speech that cuts to the heart of notions of femininity and race. Truth noted that no one had ever helped her into a carriage or carried her over any mud-puddles but asked him the question: "aren't I a woman???" She continued saying that she had worked as a slave like a man and had been beaten by her slave master but asked again: "aren't I a woman"?"⁴

Most White women during this period lived primarily in what feminist historians called a "separate sphere" from men. Black women did not. As Sojourner Truth noted, enslaved Black women worked side by side with enslaved Black men and endured hardship and abuse. Hence, Black women, because of their enslaved past, were not afforded the opportunity to possess traits of innocence, fragility, purity, and modesty.⁵

As female seminaries for White women were established in New England and northern cities prior to Emancipation, free Black women in these areas who sought an education were barred from attending these schools with rare exceptions.⁶ One rare example was the attempt in 1832 by Prudence Crandall, a White Quaker to open a boarding and day school in Canterbury, Connecticut, for the "higher branches" of education that went beyond the rudimentary classes in public district schools. Black families were anxious for their daughters as well as their sons to get the best education available. As would be the case for many other Black families during this period, a Black farmer whose family name was Harris was enthusiastic for his seventeen-year-old daughter Sarah to enroll in the Canterbury School. According to abolitionist Samuel J. May, Sarah had excelled at the district school but was:

hungering and thirsting for more education. This she desired not only for her sake, but that she might go forth (*sic*) qualified to be a teacher of the colored people of our country, to whose wrongs and oppression she had become very sensitive. Her father encouraged her, and gladly offered to

⁴Nell Irvin Painter. 1997. *Sojourner Truth: A Life, a Symbol*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company; Margaret Washington. 2009. *Sojourner Truth's America*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois.

⁵Linda M. Perkins, 1983. The impact of the 'cult of true womanhood' on the education of Black women. *Journal of Social Issues* 39, no. 3: 17-28.

⁶Kabria Baumgartner. 2019. *In pursuit of knowledge: Black women and educational activism in antebellum America*. New York: New York University Press.

defray the expense of the advantages she might be able to obtain [by attending the Canterbury School].⁷

Black women and girls were viewed and discussed in a degrading manner throughout the nineteenth century. References to Black women as “nigger wenches” were commonplace.⁸ A case always had to be made that the Black woman or girl was “ladylike” and unlike the stereotypical assumption about her character.

May noted of Sarah:

She was a young lady of pleasing appearance and manners, well known to many of Miss Crandall’s pupils, having been their classmate in the district school. Moreover, she was accounted a virtuous, pious girl, and had been for some time a member of the church of Canterbury.⁹

Despite Sarah’s “excellent character and lady-like deportment” and the fact that she attended the same church as the White students, there was overwhelming opposition to Sarah Harris attending the school. May noted that the townspeople viewed Harris as a member of a “proscribed, despised class” and should not be admitted into this elite private school with their daughters. They would not have their daughters attend a school with a “nigger girl.” But May noted, “no objection could be made of her admission to the school, excepting only her dark (and not very dark) complexion.”¹⁰

Crandall was given the ultimatum that if she did not dismiss Sarah, the parents of the White students would withdraw their daughters. The recognition of Black women as “ladies” and women who sought advanced learning was offensive to many Whites. The struggle for Black girls and women to attend White female institutions was as difficult as it was for

⁷See p. 40 in Samuel May. 1869. *Some recollections of our antislavery conflict*. Boston: Fields, Osgood, and Company.

⁸Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham. *Righteous discontent: the women’s movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

⁹See p. 40 in May, Samuel J. 1869. *Some recollections of our antislavery conflict*. Boston: Fields, Osgood, and Company.

¹⁰Ibid.

Black men to enter all-male schools. The issue was White supremacy and refusal to acknowledge Blacks as humans.¹¹

Crandall closed her school in February 1833 and reopened it two months later as a school exclusively for “for young ladies and little misses of color.” Her subsequent posting of an advertisement for the school in the abolitionist newspaper, the *Liberator*, was a bold and radical act, and the reference to Black girls as “ladies and little misses” was highly inflammatory because the references were reserved for White women and girls only. Despite the opposition of the townspeople, Crandall opened her school to an initial cohort of between fifteen and twenty young Black women from Philadelphia, Boston, New York, and Providence.¹² Within a month, an obsolete vagrant law, which allowed the local councilman to order an inhabitant not of the State to leave, was executed on one of the students. The number of young women from these cities speaks to the importance Black parents placed on the advanced education of their daughters. By July, Crandall was arrested and placed in jail. Her trial in August 1833 resulted in a hung jury and was scheduled for a retrial months later. In the interim, vandalism to the school, the refusal of the townspeople to support Crandall, and violent threats to her and the students resulted in her abandoning the school with the girls leaving as well. While the names of the Black girls and the professions of their parents are not known, these young women braved the hostility of the protesters and showed up for the opportunity to advance their knowledge. Samuel J. May, who served as Crandall’s attorney lamented:

Twenty harmless, well-behaved girls, whose only offense against the peace of the Community was that they had come together there to obtain useful knowledge and moral culture, were to be told that they better go away, because forsooth, the house in which they dwelt would not be protected by the guardians of the town, the conservators of the peace, the officers of the justice, the men of influence in the village where it was situated. The words almost blistered my lips. My bosom glowed with indignation. I felt ashamed

¹¹ Again, this issue reflected the notion of “true womanhood” a concept that was not afforded to Black and enslaved women. See Linda M Perkins. The impact of “the cult of true womanhood” 1983.

¹² Ibid.

for Canterbury, ashamed for Connecticut, ashamed of my country, ashamed of my color.¹³

This one example of the extreme opposition to educating Black girls in the same school as White girls reinforces how impossible it was for society to accept Black women and girls as being the same as White women and girls. Again, the prevailing notion of White supremacy would not allow the American society to accept the notion that Black women and girls could be considered intelligent, feminine and “ladies.”

Because of the constant rejection of Black women and girls from female seminaries, free Black women organized for self-education through literary and educational societies. Free Black women in Philadelphia spear-headed such organizations. In 1831, a group of Black women organized the Female Literary Association of Philadelphia. The group viewed its efforts not only for self-improvement but also as race improvement. In the Preamble of the group’s constitution, the women stated that they believed it was their:

duty ... as daughters of a despised race, to use our utmost endeavors to enlighten the understanding, to cultivate the talents entrusted to our keeping, that by so doing, we may in a great measure, break down the strong barrier of prejudice, and raise ourselves to an equality with those of our fellow beings, who differ from us in complexion.¹⁴

Poems, essays, and short stories were submitted unsigned for members of the group to critique. The abolitionist newspaper the *Liberator* often published samples of these literary works to demonstrate the artistic and literary capabilities of Black women to the larger society. The women also noted in their statement their desire to prove that they were no different from women of the majority society. So, despite the views of the larger society towards the education of Black women, the women themselves took their development into their own hands. William Lloyd Garrison, the White editor of the *Liberator* commented on the high quality of the work of these women stating, “If the traducers of the colored race could be acquainted with the moral worth, just refinement and large intelligence of

¹³ Samuel J May. 1869. *Some recollections of our antislavery conflict*. Boston: Fields, Osgood, and Company, 72.

¹⁴ Female Literary Association. 1831. Preamble. *Liberator (1831–1865)*, December 03.

this association, their mouths would hereafter be dumb.”¹⁵ However, the education that these Black women advocated and proposed was in keeping with that which did not challenge notions of femininity—they were advocating literary studies and courses in the fine arts. Views of appropriate decorum, “lady-like” and feminine behavior were constantly instilled in Black girls.

After the Civil War, most Blacks regardless of whether they lived in the North or South experienced segregation and limited educational and professional opportunities. In 1835, Oberlin College in Ohio opened its doors to Black women and men students on an equal basis as White men and women. Although Black students were segregated in housing, they were able to obtain the same education as Whites. This provided Black women the opportunity to also advance their education. They began attending in the 1840s, the majority matriculated in the Ladies’ Department, also referred to as the Literary Department, because the curriculum was more in keeping with society’s notion of appropriate education for women and girls—literature and the fine arts and did not include advanced mathematics, Greek, and Latin which was thought to be the purview of men and beyond the grasp or utility for women. Furthermore, most Black females would not have access to such subjects. The Black women who matriculated and graduated from the Literary Department are important figures and should not be thought of as accomplishing less than those few who decided to pursue the “gentlemen’s” collegiate degree. According to the catalog of 1835, the literary department was the equivalent of the leading female seminaries of the period. Women in this department were also allowed to take courses in the collegiate department. The requirements as stated in the catalogue were:

Young ladies of good minds, unblemished morals, and respectable attainments, are received into this department, and placed under the superintendence of a judicious lady, whose duty it is to correct their habits and mold female character.¹⁶

Acknowledging that Black women and girls could have “unblemished morals and be respectable” shaped the behavior and became a guiding

¹⁵William Garrison. 1832. Ladies Department: Female Literary Association. *Liberator* (1831–1865), June 1903.

¹⁶*Bulletin of Oberlin College*. 1834, 4.

principle of virtually all their life's work. The "respectability" curse that always plagued Black women throughout their lives was one that resulted in their socialization throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to ensure that Black girls learn the necessity of how they should present and comport themselves in society.

POST EMANCIPATION

Missionary organizations and religious denominations both Black and White began the massive task of educating the recently enslaved Africans after Emancipation. W.E.B. Dubois noted in his 1901 study of the *Negro Common School*, that two years after Emancipation, nearly 100,000 Black students were in schools in the South.¹⁷ The American Missionary Association (AMA) was the largest group along with others who sent teachers by the thousands to the South. By 1870 they had 130 common schools in the South. Throughout slavery, enslaved Black women had been forced to serve as breeders to produce babies. Their slave-owners frequently sexually assaulted them. As a result, there was this widespread belief in society that Black women were sexually promiscuous.¹⁸

By the mid-1890s, charges of Black women's immorality escalated in society.

A letter from a White male editor of a Missouri newspaper from an article in 1895 stating that all Black women were "precocious" and had low morals ignited Black women to action. The highly educated Black women of the race, organized and established a national organization in 1896—the National Association of Colored Women to defend the women of their race and to prove and improve the morality of Black women. Through local clubs and schools, the women sought to assist young Black girls fit into the image of White femininity and respectability. The schools had stringent rules and emphasized religious tenets.¹⁹

An example of such a school is Hartshorn Memorial College, chartered in 1883, in Richmond, Virginia. It was a single sex school that stressed moral and religious development. It was founded with full collegiate status

¹⁷William Edward Burghardt Dubois. 1901. *The Negro Common School*. Atlanta University Publications, 6. Atlanta: Atlanta Univ. Press, Georgia.

¹⁸Deborah G. White. 1999. *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894–1994*. First ed. New York, New York: W.W. Norton and Company.

¹⁹Ibid.

“for the instruction of young women in science, literature and art in the normal, industrial and professional branches and especially in Biblical and Christian learning.” Founded by the White American Baptist Home Mission Society, the school had 185 students in 1908 with 12 teachers. In addition, these graduates were described as “educated, refined and Christian models for their husbands and children.”²⁰ More than anything else, educated Black women were expected to be moral examples and saviors of their families and communities. These beliefs coupled with the stringent rules and regulations Black women had to endure to obtain an education spilled over into the “respectability” emphasis as well as an overemphasis on femininity within the Black community. As noted earlier, White missionaries believed that slavery had debased Black women. Daily chapel was the norm at virtually all Black schools (even decades after they had been abolished or made optional at other colleges). Hartshorne established an organization for their students called the White Shield League. Members were to wear identical white dresses and pledged themselves to chastity and to abstain from sex until marriage. All students had to obey strict dress codes and were taught to dress for health and not for “show.”²¹ They were forbidden to wear “expensive” clothing and they could not wear “corsets” because these items were thought to result in ill health and were evil. The women were not allowed to take the streetcars or date. These rules reinforced the prevailing view of ladylike and feminine attributes of a “true woman.”²²

THE DAWN OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Because of racial biases and violence of Blacks in the Deep South, many began to migrate to the north, the mid-west and west beginning in 1910. This migration afforded Blacks, including women, to attend some predominantly White coeducational state universities, primarily in the mid and far west. By 1915, 75 percent of all women in coeducational colleges in the United States were in the mid-west and west. Black women were a part of that number. This migration overlapped with the rise in the field of

²⁰ Raymond Pierre Hylton. 2014. *Virginia Union University*. Charleston, South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 37.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 47.

²² *Ibid.*

physical education.²³ This field of physical education began in the late nineteenth century in New England at the Sargent School of Physical Education for women at Boston University. It was the first institution to specialize in physical education.²⁴ These years, beginning in 1915, were viewed as the golden age of sports for college women. As both physical education and women's sports grew during the period being discussed, by the 1940s certain competitive sports for women were being questioned as diminishing women's femininity.²⁵ This was true for women across racial backgrounds, however, for African American women, they had the additional burden of race of not being allowed to join a sports team on most White college campuses. In addition, they were barred from living on campus and participating in many extra-curricular activities.

POST-WORLD WAR I

The period after World War I witnessed the rise in physical education as an academic major. This field arose after it was recognized that a large number of military men were not physically fit. Prior to 1915 only three states required physical education classes in schools. After the war, the number jumped to twenty-eight, and by 1929 forty-six states required such classes in public schools. Black women began to take advantage of this new field as well as participating in collegiate sports.²⁶ However, Martha Verbrugge, the author of *Active Bodies: A History of Women's Physical Education in Twentieth-Century America* noted that while teaching positions emerged in public schools, these positions went to White women; Black women experienced segregation and discrimination in both education and employment. When they were hired, they were restricted to work only with Black youth. They struggled to participate in sports at the major campuses in the mid-west and west where they gained entrance after the turn of the century. Black women began to participate in sports on White campuses in growing numbers during the decade of the 1920s. A study on the Black

²³Martha H. Verbrugge. 2012. *Active Bodies: A history of women's physical education in twentieth-century America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

²⁴College of Health & Rehabilitation Sciences: Sargent College. 2019. Boston University. <https://www.bu.edu/sargent/about-us/our-history/>. Accessed 23 Feb 2019.

²⁵Susan K Cahn. 2015. *Coming on strong: Gender and sexuality in women's sport*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press; Ivora (Ike. King. 1931. Women in sports: Feminine yet athletic. *Baltimore Afro-American (1893-1988)*, September 19.

²⁶Martha H Verbrugge, *Active Bodies*. 2012.

students on the four universities in the “heartland” (University of Kansas, University of Minnesota, University of Iowa and University of Nebraska) noted that the 1920s was the peak of women’s competitive sports. Black women, as did the men, had varying experiences in their attempt to join athletic teams.²⁷

As the number of Black women students in these institutions grew during the mid-teens, so did their presence in various sports. For example, at the University of Iowa, Harriette Alexander made the women’s field hockey team in 1919. Lorraine Crawford, a native of Des Moines, Iowa, played on the women’s volleyball team in 1923. In the same year, her teammate and housemate, Corinne Mathis, of Bailey, Oklahoma, played on the women’s baseball, volleyball, and basketball team while also running track. A superior athlete, Mathis was the leading scorer of the sophomore volleyball team and, along with three other women, broke the University-wide women’s relay record.²⁸ The decade of the teens and early twenties allow for different views of womanhood and femininity for college athletes as competitive sports became popular. However, these views were short-lived.

Another Black woman, Sarah McGhee, became a member of the women’s baseball team at the University of Illinois in 1923. Majoring in Physical Education afforded Black women opportunities to be on various sport teams since this was a requirement for the degree. For example, one such person, Alice Sims, from Tulsa, Oklahoma, was on the hockey team and was one of the first Black women to play on a university team. In 1927, Sims received an Emblem from the Women’s Athletic Association for scoring 600 points that year. Another Physical Education major, Gwendolyn Butler from Kansas City made the sophomore baseball and hockey teams at the University of Kansas in 1930 making her the only African American student on any athletic team at the institution.²⁹ Sims continued her work in women’s sports by working in Black communities in Minneapolis and St. Paul. Many other Black women at Kansas followed

²⁷ Richard Melvin Breaux. 2003. *We must fight race prejudice even more vigorously in the North: Black higher education in America’s heartland, 1900–1940*. PhD diss., University of Iowa.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. 1924 *Ivy Leaf*; 19; Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. 1925. *Ivy Leaf*; 1; Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. 1930. *Ivy Leaf*; 6.

Sims and Butler as Physical Education majors in subsequent years and served on the hockey teams.³⁰

In addition to serving on various teams as a result of being Physical Education majors, Black women at numerous schools in the heartland and mid-west established their own sports teams. As early as 1922, the *Ivy Leaf*, the journal of the all-Black sorority, Alpha Kappa Alpha (AKA), reported that the group at Kansas was organizing their own basketball team. In an issue in 1925, the publication reported that the AKA basketball team had played in several conference games with high schools and colleges. The magazine also reported that the Topeka, Kansas, chapter of the sorority had organized two basketball teams and had participated in an intramural game with eight sororities. It noted that AKA teams played in three of the games. The Black sorority women played against members of White sororities because the article noted, this was the first time “colored” teams were included in the games. The AKA chapter at the University of Minnesota had established a basketball team and also participated in intramural games. However, various institutions had different attitudes towards the inclusion of Black women teams. For example, the AKA basketball team at the University of Nebraska had to fight for the right to play against the White sororities on campus. In the December 1930 issue of the *Ivy Leaf*, their chapter reported: “Through persistent efforts of the Intra-racial staff of the YWCA, our sorority has at last gained the privilege of taking part in the intramural athletic contest with the White sororities.”³¹ After these women were allowed to participate in intramural sports—they competed not only in basketball but in bowling, ping pong, and riflmg. The Black women students during this decade participated not only in organizations for racial justice such as the NAACP and the Urban League, but they increasingly participated in interracial organizations, particularly the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA), which had chapters on college campuses. Although this was an era of extreme and persistent racism on most White college campuses as well as the nation, there were also attempts towards interracial harmony through organizations such as the YWCA and the NAACP. However, even the YWCA had segregated chapters throughout the South. Hence the views of White women in that organization were not monolithic.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Ibid. 11.

For example, in 1934, Thelma Mitchell Rambo, the Dean of Women at Fisk University in Nashville, reported to the institution's president, Thomas Jones, that the National Negro Secretary of the YWCA invited a group of Fisk women students to participate in an interracial seminar on religion that was being held on the campus of the University of Kentucky in Lexington. Ten students were selected—they prepared for the event and worked with a Religion professor on contemporary movements in religion. Dean Rambo reported she received a letter from the National YWCA saying that the young students would not be allowed to come to the University of Kentucky but rather could go to the Black YWCA in the city. She said the letter stated that the president of the University had not given permission for the Black women to be on campus. As an alternative, the Black National Secretary of the YWCA stated she would find housing for the Fisk women in the homes of local Fisk alumnae. Dean Rambo noted that after a discussion with the students and the Executive Committee of their group, they decided to decline the invitation. Rambo said the students were disappointed, but it was the right decision.³² President Jones (who was White) responded in a brief statement, "Under the circumstances outlined in your letter, I think you and the Executive Committee made the only decision possible. I do regret that it was not possible to go ahead with the original plan."³³

These indignities were historic and continued a long legacy of White women in many colleges and institutions treating Black women as undesirable human beings.

However, the experiences of Black women across the country in White institutions were not monolithic. Many broke barriers playing sports. In 1914, Mary Parker set a school record at Simmons College in Boston in the standing and running broad jumps. Some institutions allowed Black women on their basketball teams, but they were far more welcomed on many baseball teams. In 1917, Phyllis W. Waters became a lettered member of the University of Michigan's women's basketball team and played all four years.³⁴

³²Thelma Mitchell Rambo, Dean of Women, Fisk University, Nashville, Tennessee. 1934. Letter to President Thomas E. Jones. In *Thomas Jones Papers*, 06 Nov. Nashville, Tennessee: Fisk University Archives.

³³Jones Thomas.1936. Letter to Mrs. Thelma Mitchell Rambo, Dean of Women, Fisk University. In *Thomas Jones Papers*, 08 Nov. Nashville, Tennessee: Fisk University Archives.

³⁴Ibid.

On the east coast, Black women were on the teams of their institutions and most instances not barred from participating. For example, Inez Robie Patterson at Temple University was considered one of the most renowned and versatile women's athletes of all times. Patterson was a native of Philadelphia and entered Temple in 1929. She had the highest average of any athlete in her class of sixty-seven women and made the All-Collegiate hockey team for four years. In addition, Patterson was in the All-Collegiate teams in tennis, basketball, track, volleyball, and dancing. When she was inducted into the Temple University's Athletic Hall of Fame in 1987—sports experts noted she was probably the “most versatile woman athlete in the history of Pennsylvania.”³⁵ As noted earlier, Black women college students increasingly involved themselves in interracial groups for racial harmony. The YWCA was an important such organization. Inez Patterson, like many other Black women college graduates, spent her entire career working for various YWCAs. She trained girls in recreation and physical education at YWCAs in Orange, Newark, and Montclair, New Jersey, and in the YWCAs in New York City.³⁶ YWCA facilities for Black women and girls were segregated from those of the White YWCAs.³⁷

The Black women who were physical education majors as well as members of college sports team took their talents to work with girls in the Black community and Black colleges. While basketball was viewed as the most popular sport for women during the 1920–1940s, physical education classes for women also stressed exercise and physical development and became more concerned with feminine refinement. Questions of femininity resulted in these sports being phased out and restricted only to intramural games. This view was expressed in White colleges and also those of the most elite Black colleges. Institutions such as Howard, Spelman, Fisk and Hampton were very conscious of Black women's image of not being perceived as feminine and refined. For example, Rosemary Reeves Allen, the head of the Physical Education of the elite Howard University in Washington, DC, from 1925 to 1967, stressed poise, beauty and femininity in Howard women. Allen had an undergraduate and master's degree

³⁵ Owl Sports. 2019. Temple University. <https://owlsports.com/hof.aspx?hof=249>. Accessed 22 Feb 2019.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Helen Laville. 2006. ‘If the time is not ripe, then it is your job to ripen the time!’ The transformation of the YWCA in the USA from segregated association to interracial organization, 1930–1965. *Women's History Review*, 15 no. 3: 359–383.

from the renowned Sergeant School of Physical Education at Boston University. She instilled within her students the notion of dignity, courtesy and refinement. Her goal, she stated, was to make the women at Howard so distinctive that they could go anywhere in the world and someone would say, “I can always tell a Howard woman when I see one because she walks in such beauty.”³⁸ During the period that she taught at Howard, up until the 1954 *Brown v. Board* Supreme Court decision which integrated public education, 80 percent of all Black women who taught physical education were graduates of Howard. Allen instilled within her students that beauty and health were synonymous and that inner beauty would reflect outer beauty. The curriculum that she established focused not only on sports, but on anatomy, beauty, body aesthetics, charm, dance and hygiene. The goal was to produce a sophisticated and feminine woman. One scholar who analyzed Allen’s philosophy of beauty and femininity noted that it was a response to Western culture and the American society that deemed Black women inherently unattractive and not feminine, the history of these views has been discussed earlier in the chapter. Allen epitomized the type of educator of Black women and girls that stressed femininity and virtue. She understood that most Black women held inferiority complexes about the darkness of their skin and their kinky hair—attributes not considered attractive. Appearances also counted with notions of femininity.

The rise in basketball coincided with the rise in beauty pageants on college campuses. Beginning in the 1920s, to divert women from competitive sports, May Days, homecoming queens, proms and elections of prom queen and other types of student “queens” emerged on campuses.³⁹ According to Karen Tise’s scholarship on beauty queens on college campuses, such competitions were a “primary source of prestige and ceremonial space afforded women students on college campuses.” She noted that these beauty contests ranked women on the basis of “idealized versions of beauty, femininity, masculinity, desirability, respectability, poise, and aspirations.”⁴⁰

Rosemary Allen, mentioned earlier, established annual events at Howard University like the Beauty Bazaar, Christmas Program, Folk

³⁸ Quoted in Martha H. Verbrugge, *Active Bodies: Pamela Grundy*. 2000. From amazons to glamazons: The rise and fall of North Carolina women’s basketball, 1920–1960. *Journal of American History* 87: 112–146.

³⁹ Karen W Tice. 2005. Queens of academe: Campus pageantry and student life. *Feminist Studies* 31, no. 2: 250–283.

⁴⁰ Tice. 2005, 251.

Fiesta, May Festival, Water Show and Sports Day. Allen believed that archery, badminton, light sports, volleyball and dance were the most appropriate sports and physical activities. While Allen didn't specifically name basketball, she commented in 1938, "the heavier sports have no place in a woman's life, they rob her of her feminine charms and often of her good health."⁴¹ Thelma Bando, who attended Howard during the 1920s and became a Dean of Students at several historically Black colleges, recalled that Howard was a training school for social etiquette for its students. She said the woman students sponsored teas at 4 pm on Sunday and they could invite a guest. They were taught how to serve tea and fancy finger foods. Bando also stated in keeping with the expectation that the women students portrayed themselves as ladylike and feminine, they "were supposed to dress appropriately in pretty afternoon dresses."⁴² Lucy Diggs Slowe, who served as Dean of Women at Howard and who was the senior most Black woman Dean—and the first to serve at Howard (1918–1937), responded to an inquiry from a dean of women at another historically Black college about Howard's program to 'refine' its women students. Slowe responded:

I should say that the young women could be taught much by frequent participation in activities that call for the social graces and therefore make them conscious of their deficiencies. Teas and receptions to faculty members, administrators and visitors, to whom women students always like to make a good showing, are valuable. We have used etiquette reading and discussion groups to great advantage; particularly effective were their demonstrations before the whole group. It must not be overlooked that idleness is conducive to disorder and general roughness of manner. The social program for the dormitory should be designed to fill all the time which the director of the dormitory finds unused for business. Sundays and holidays need special attention. Leisure reading groups, hikes, excursions to places of interest, and some group participation in community uplift work will serve to educate people as well as fill their vacant hours. The time is also important; people do not develop in one school year.⁴³

⁴¹ Rita Liberti. 1999. We were ladies, we just played basketball like boys: African American womanhood and competitive basketball at Bennett College, 1928–1942. *Journal of Sport History* 26: 567–584.

⁴² Perkins. The impact of the 'cult of true womanhood'.

⁴³ Lucy Diggs Slowe. 1931. *Lucy Diggs Slowe papers*.

Slowe was the Black woman dean that others consulted on such matters. As more and more Black women attended residential colleges, the deans of women were concerned about developing them into poised and feminine women.

By the 1940s, middle-class society and colleges determined that competitive sports were masculine endeavors.⁴⁴ Verbrugge's study on college women, physical education and sports noted that elite White women's colleges viewed team sports like basketball as masculine and appealing to working-class women (and obviously Black women). Top women's colleges preferred individual exclusive country club sports such as golf, tennis, badminton, archery, bowling and swimming.⁴⁵

In the meantime, women's basketball teams, in an attempt to distinguish their movements from the men's teams were given "girl's rules," which confined them one part of the court and restricted them a minimum number of dribbles, and women had to avoid physical contact with other players. To have women students avoid competition and tournaments and awards, games were overwhelmingly intramural so that a large number of women could participate and not a select few. As noted by the courses offered at Howard University, physical education courses began to require women students to stress good posture, class attendance and homework in addition to athletic activity. Varsity matches were replaced with "play days" and "sports days" in which the students combined games and various social activities.⁴⁶

The Black press of the era also commented on the inappropriateness of women in sports:

The girl who is too athletic is on the wrong track to becoming a wife. Men want feminine women, not creatures who are half like themselves and the other half resembling something else. It is only natural and logical because we loathe men who act effeminate and desire a man, all man. Men want women all women ... being too athletic and consequently too mannish prevents her from being.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Martha H Verbrugge, *Active Bodies* 115.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ivora (Ike King,). 1931. Women in sports: Feminine yet athletic. *Baltimore Afro-American* (1893-1988), September 19, 13.

This obvious sexist and homophobic statement reflected the thinking of the era. The one exception to an elite school continuing basketball for Black college women was Bennett College in Greensboro, North Carolina. Bennett was an all-women's private college, and they had one of the top women's basketball teams in the nation in the 1930s. Despite the renown of this team, by the 1940s, the institution also succumbed to the belief that competitive basketball was inappropriate for women. Like Howard and other institutions, Bennett switched to intramural games and play day activities. An insightful article with a defensive title on the basketball team at Bennett entitled "We Were Ladies, We Just Played Basketball Like Boys: African American Womanhood and Competitive Basketball at Bennett College, 1928–1942" reflected the players' plea for the public to understand that although they played the game "like men"—they did not play by "girl" rules. The team practiced against the local Black high school boys' basketball team. One of the team's members said, "being a lady does not mean being prissy, it's just an inward culture ... always being polite and not saying things to hurt people's feelings. You could be tough as I don't know what on that basketball court, but you still have those same principles."⁴⁸ In the minds of these women, there was no contradiction in being a star basketball player and being a "lady." A former women player who was then a coach wrote in support of women playing competitive basketball with "men's rules" versus the "girl's rules":

Girls of today are red-blooded, virile young creatures, and are no longer content to conform to the masculine ideal of feminine inferiority and frailty. The clinging vine has given way to the freely moving, sensibly clad young Amazon of today. Such fineness of physique cannot be maintained or secured through the inadequacies of girls' rules in basketball.⁴⁹

Despite this plea for Black women and girls to reject this notion of "femininity," this became a minority opinion. As Black women educated in White physical education programs went south to teach in Black colleges and high schools, they absorbed the view that competitive sports were not ladylike or feminine.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Rita. Liberti. 1999. We were ladies, we just played basketball like boys: African American womanhood and competitive basketball at Bennett College, 1928–1942. *Journal of Sport History* 26: 567–584.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

Basketball was a popular sport for Black college women in North Carolina beginning in the 1920s. Shaw University, Livingston College, Barber Scotia, North Carolina A and T, and Bennett all had basketball programs. However, the quest to make Black college women “soft” and more “feminine” took place by the 1930s.

For example, in 1937 North Carolina A and T University, a Black public institution, hired Ordie Roberts from the University of Illinois. She established a physical education program for women students that included her interest in dance and tennis. She established modern and folk dance, and a “correctives” class for students who couldn’t keep up with regular instruction. Roberts quickly advocated ending competitive women’s sports—particularly basketball. She repeated the view that such activities were harmful to the physical health of the women. And, she noted all of the leading colleges in the country agreed and had eliminated such sports. As a result, the athletic committee voted to terminate intercollegiate competitive sports.⁵⁰ Within a few years, Bennett College with the most winning and distinguished basketball team also succumbed to pressure and also discontinued its basketball team as well. In a front-page article in 1939 in the college newspaper, *The Bennett Banner*, reported that twenty-five Bennett Belles (the term the institution called its students) participated in a Sports Day at Hampton Institute, another Black college. The article noted that the sports and activities that the women participated in were hockey, volleyball, badminton, soccer, and relays.⁵¹ It was clear that the move towards non-competitive sports had been accomplished. By the 1950s, all of the colleges had replaced their teams with sports days, gymnastic exhibitions, May Days and intramural games. There was no mention of basketball and the article made clear the aim of sports for Black college women:

It is hoped that such events will bring about a closer Relationship between the schools; that the participants will feel a part of the group with regards to working towards the best of her ability for the good of the group; taking part for the self-satisfaction and not trying to be outstanding as such for prizes of praise.⁵²

⁵⁰ Pamela Grundy. 2000. Amazons to glamazons, 130.

⁵¹ _____. 1939. Bennett Joins in Fall Sports Day. *The Bennett Banner*, vol. X, no. 2. December.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 2.

As basketball was phased out in Black colleges for the women students, the sport of track and field was viewed as worst for women students (Fig. 3.1). Like basketball, the sport conveyed the belief that the women athletes were not feminine. From 1937 to 1948 the women's track and field team at Tuskegee Institute dominated the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU). They won every year except in 1943 when they placed second to the Cleveland Olympic Club. While there were many outstanding women on the track team, Alice Coachman was considered the unrivaled star. She was an outstanding high jump and track star, winning twenty-six national championships, more than any American women with the exception of her Polish-American rival, Stella Walsh.⁵³ In 1938, Coachman won the Olympic gold medal in track, the first African American woman to do so. Nicknamed Tuskegee Flash because of her speed, Coachman, despite her record-breaking achievement as a sprinter and high jumper, received little press coverage because she was a woman in a "man's sport."⁵⁴ The *New York Times* gave her only one sentence of coverage when she won the gold medal. One observer of the press treatment of Coachman noted this comment when Coachman won the gold medal in the *Atlanta Constitution*:

An all-around athlete, Alice is an outstanding forward on the basketball team in her college, but her instructors say confidentially that she's just a "fair" student in her home economics classes.⁵⁵

In other words, Coachman excelled in male sports but was not competent in the stereotypical women's area of home economics. And, of course, no other classes were mentioned. The Black press coverage was different with headlines entitled "Tuskegee Star," "the Flying Miss Coachman," "Tuskegee's 21 year old Speed Queen," "America's Number One Woman Track Athlete," "Alice Coachman Crowned National Sprint Queen."⁵⁶ While the larger society viewed track as a masculine sport, the Black press attempted to portray Coachman in a feminine vein. In a 1941 feature article on the Tuskegee track team in the *Baltimore Afro-American*, the paper described the women in a manner that reflected their femininity—it said, "these young women, while mixing athletics with studies, enjoy all

⁵³ Jennifer H. Lansbury. 2001. The 'Tuskegee Flash' and the 'Slender Harlem Stroker': Black women athletes on the margin. *Journal of Sports History*, 28: 233–252.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ _____. 1948. *Atlanta Constitution*. August 8, section B:11.

⁵⁶ Jennifer H Lansbury. 'The Tuskegee Flash'. 2001, 239.



Fig. 3.1 Alice Coachman

the pleasures and indicated desires to become a nurse ... teachers, social workers.” Of Alice they specifically emphasized her heterosexuality by saying Coachman was interested in being either a teacher or a social worker—but also the author noted “being a good wife when she married will probably be the fulfillment of her secret ambitions.”⁵⁷ Observers of Black women’s teams noted that their coaches stressed “athletic femininity.”⁵⁸

While the Black press provided attention to the Black women in track, critics note that the Black male sports writers attempt to feminize the women athletes and diminished their athletic talents.⁵⁹ The Black press also eroticized female track athletes by writing stories about their use of a peanut oil that was created by the famous chemist at Tuskegee, Dr. George Washington Carver. One article entitled “Tigerettes Owe Success to Dr.

⁵⁷ See p. 19 in _____. 1940. *Baltimore Afro-American*.

⁵⁸ Martha H. Verbrugge. *Active Bodies*. 50.

⁵⁹ Jennifer, H. Lansbury. ‘The Tuskegee Flash’, 245,

Carver's Peanut Oil," which suggested that the women's success on the field was due to this oil, which gave their bodies "the smooth velvet appearance" resulting in their "rhythm in motion." The oil that Dr. Carver developed for the women's team was one that was used for the entire athletic department at Tuskegee to help relieve strained muscles and Charley horses, muscle spasms that were common in runners or people who did strenuous leg exercises.⁶⁰ Another Black newspaper, the *Chicago Defender*, trivialized the Tuskegee women by referring to them as "gals." In a story discussing how the team forgot to pack the peanut oil in their luggage for a track meet in New York and London, the article entitled "Rush Carver Peanut Oil to Olympic Team Gals" reported, "A day out of New York, Miss Coachman discovered that the peanut rubbing oil was not in the luggage, although Coach Cleve Abbott of Tuskegee had promised to have some in New York for the gals to take to London."⁶¹ However, to their credit, the newspaper did refer to Coachman as "Miss" Coachman—a title society never gave to Black women.

A decade later, one final example of the dilemma of femininity and the Black women athlete was the portrayal of the award-winning tennis player, Althea Gibson. Gibson was a contemporary of Alice Coachman, and the same summer that Coachman won the Olympic gold, Gibson won the American Tennis Association championship for the second year in a row. Gibson grew up as a tomboy in Harlem, New York. At age twelve, she won the women's table paddle championship in New York. While track was associated with working-class and rural young women, tennis was viewed as an elite middle-class sport.⁶² In 1951, Gibson became the first African American to play at Wimbledon. Despite tennis being a "female" sport—Gibson had a big serve and a powerful delivery and was repeatedly characterized in the White press as having a "masculine" manner of how she played the game. She was described as having an "aggressive" style of playing the sport. In 1957 she won Wimbledon—both singles and doubles—and won the United States National Championship and made the finals of eight Grand Slam events. As a result of these outstanding accomplishments, Gibson was named the Female Athlete of the Year and became

⁶⁰ Ibid., 233.

⁶¹ See p. 11 in _____. 1948. *The Chicago Defender* 1948; Lansbury, 'Tuskegee Flash', 233, 240.

⁶² See the discussion *Active Bodies* of class-based notions of women's sports in Verburgge's *Active Bodies*. She makes the distinction between bourgeois versus working class women's sports.

the first Black woman to be on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* and *Time* magazines. The Black press praised her and noted: “there was never any doubts that mannish playing Miss Gibson would emerge victorious.”⁶³ On the one hand, the White and Black press noted Gibson’s success although they both suggested that Gibson wasn’t feminine by referring to her “masculine style” and “mannish” behavior. Gibson had broken what were once impenetrable racial barriers during a period when the Civil Rights Movement in the United States was in full force, yet the press she received focused on their perceived lack of femininity.

As noted above, Black women have historically been perceived as not possessing “true womanhood” and were not thought of as attractive or feminine. Throughout the period of the discussion of Black college women in sports, these women had to fight to dispel the stereotype that they did not meet the Eurocentric notion of femininity. Society’s changing notions of femininity, and probable fear of homosexuality, fuel both White and Black institutions in terminating competitive sports in the name of femininity. Coach Abbott of Tuskegee was very conscious of the view that Black women were perceived as lacking femininity; hence she overemphasized the Tuskegee’s female athletes modeling White middle-class femininity as well as portraying their heterosexuality.⁶⁴ These issues are not just historical. Currently, renowned tennis champion Serena Williams has endured continuous insults from sports commentators, the press, and tennis spectators. Her body has been described as “masculine” and her femininity has been constantly commented upon. She has been described like Gibson as “playing like a man,” and she and her sister Venus have been referred to as the “Williams Brothers.”⁶⁵

While much has improved for Black women in sports in the United States in terms of access and participation, this chapter has sought to demonstrate that they are still challenged by the historical belief that they do not reflect the Eurocentric notion of beauty, femininity, and womanhood. Because they are descendants of slaves and historically worked side by side with slave men, the view that Black women are less feminine than other women remains a reality.

⁶³ See p. 1 in _____. 1958. *Chicago Defender*.

⁶⁴ Martha H. Verbrugge, 2012. *Active Bodies*.

⁶⁵ Erika Nicole Kendall. 2015. Female Athletes Often Face the Femininity Police- Especially Serena Williams. *The Guardian*, July 14.

REFERENCES

PRIMARY SOURCES

- Breaux, R. M. (2003). *We Must Fight Race Prejudice Even More Vigorously in the North: Black Higher Education in America's Heartland, 1900–1940*. PhD dissertation, University of Iowa.
- Bulletin of Oberlin College, New Series 345, November, 1834:4.
- Female Literary Association. (1831). Preamble. *Liberator* (1831–1865), December 1903.
- Garrison, W. (1832). Ladies Department: Female Literary Association. *Liberator* (1831–1865), June 1903.
- Ivy Leaf Magazine, May 1924, Vol. 3, No. 1 edition.
- Ivy Leaf Magazine, 1925, Vol. 4, No. 1 edition.
- Ivy Leaf Magazine, December 1930a, Vol. 8, No. 4 edition.
- Ivy Leaf Magazine, September 1930b, Vol. 8, No. 3 edition.
- Jones, T. (1936). Letter to Mrs. Thelma Mitchell Rambo, Dean of Women, Fisk University. In Thomas Jones Papers, 08 November. Nashville: Fisk University Archives.
- Kendall, E. N. (2015, July 14). Female Athletes Often Face the Femininity Police – Especially Serena Williams. *The Guardian*.
- King, I. (Ike). (1931, September 19). Women in Sports: Feminine Yet Athletic. *Baltimore Afro-American* (1893–1988).
- Perkins, L. M. (1986). Interview with Thelma Bando. Baltimore, Maryland, Nov 4. Rambo, Thelma Mitchell, Dean of Women, Fisk University, Nashville, Tennessee. 1934. Letter to President Thomas E. Jones. In Thomas Jones Papers, 06 Nov. Nashville: Fisk University Archives.
- Slowe, Lucy Diggs. (1931). Letter to Miss Tossie P. F. Whiting, Dean of Women, January 27, 1931. Virginia State College. Lucy Diggs Slowe Papers. Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, DC
- Slowe, L. D. (1939, December). Bennett Joins in Fall Sports Day. *The Bennett Banner*, X(2).
- Slowe, L. D. (1940). *Baltimore Afro-American*.
- Slowe, L. D. (1948a). *Atlanta Constitution*. August 8, section B:11.
- Slowe, L. D. (1948b). *The Chicago Defender* 1948. Quoted p. 233 and 240 in Lansbury, Jennifer. 2001.
- Slowe, L. D. (1957, August 3). Pittsburgh Tennis Fans to See Althea Gibson. *Pittsburgh Courier*.
- Slowe, L. D. (1958). *Chicago Defender*.

SECONDARY SOURCES

- Baumgartner, K. (2019). *In pursuit of knowledge: Black women and educational activism in antebellum America*. New York: New York University Press.
- Cahn, S. K. (2015). *Coming on Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Women's Sport*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Captain, G. (1991). Enter Ladies and Gentlemen of Color: Gender, Sport, and the Ideal of African American Manhood and Womanhood During the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries. *Journal of Sport History*, 18(1, Special Issue: Sport and Gender), 81–102.
- College of Health & Rehabilitation Sciences: Sargent College. (2019). *Our History*. Boston University. <https://www.bu.edu/sargent/about-us/our-history/>. Accessed 20 Dec 2019.
- Collins, P. H. (2002). *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York/London: Routledge.
- Crenshaw, K., & Thomas, S. (2004). Intersectionality: The Double Bind of Race and Gender. *Perspectives Magazine*.
- Darwin, C. (1859). *On the Origin of Species of Natural Selection: Or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Dubois, W. E. B. (1901). *The Negro Common School*, Atlanta University Publications, 6. Atlanta: Atlanta University Press, Georgia.
- Grundy, P. (2000). From Amazons to Glamazons: The Rise and Fall of North Carolina's Women's Basketball, 1920–1960. *The Journal of American History*, 87(1), 112–146.
- Higginbotham, E. B. (1993). *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church 1880–1920*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Hylton, R. P. (2014). *Virginia Union University*. Charleston: Arcadia Publishing.
- Jewell, K. S. (1993). *From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond*. New York: Routledge Publishing.
- Lansbury, J. H. (2001). The 'Tuskegee Flash' and the 'Slender Harlem Stroker': Black Women Athletes on the Margin. *Journal of Sports History*, 28, 233–252.
- Laville, H. (2006). 'If the Time Is Not Ripe, Then It Is Your Job to Ripen the Time!' The Transformation of the YWCA in the USA from Segregated Association to Interracial Organization, 1930–1965. *Women's History Review*, 15(3), 359–383.
- Liberti, R. (1999). We Were Ladies, We Just Played Basketball like Boys: African American Womanhood and Competitive Basketball at Bennett College, 1928–1942. *Journal of Sport History*, 26, 567–584.
- May, S. J. (1869). *Some Recollections of Our Antislavery Conflict*. Boston: Fields, Osgood, and Company.
- Owl Sports. (2019). Temple University. <https://owlsports.com/hof.aspx?hof=249>. Accessed 22 Feb 2019.

- Painter, N. I. (1997). *Sojourner Truth: A Life, a Symbol*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company.
- Perkins, L. M. (1983). The Impact of the 'Cult of True Womanhood' on the Education of Black Women. *Journal of Social Issues*, 39, 17–28.
- Tice, K. W. (2005). Queens of Academe: Campus Pageantry and Student Life. *Feminist Studies*, 31(2), 250–283.
- Tice, K. W. (2012). *Queens of Academe: Beauty Pageantry, Student Bodies, and College Life*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Verbrugge, M. H. (2012). *Active Bodies: A History of Women's Physical Education in Twentieth-Century America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Washington, M. (2009). *Sojourner Truth's America*. Urbana/Chicago: University of Illinois.
- Welter, B. (1966). The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820–1860. *American Quarterly*, 18(2), 151–174.
- White, D. G. (1999). *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894–1994* (1st ed.). New York: W.W. Norton & Company.