JEFFERSON
EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

# *Book Notes #152*

August 2023

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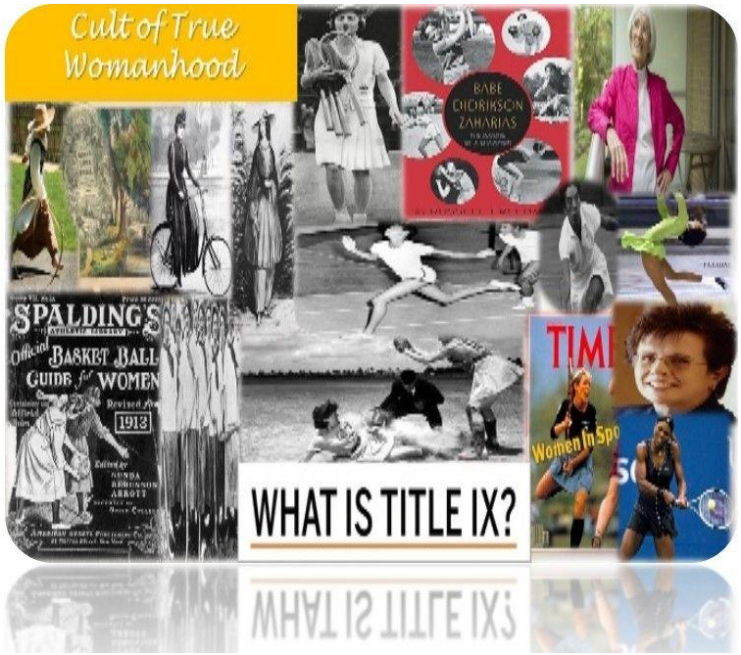
## 'Americans & Their Games' (Part IV-A)

*Freedom's Faultlines: Sports and the Quest for Women's Rights in the 19th Century*




What are the most consequential legislative acts in American history?

Of the many candidates for that distinction, the *Fugitive Slave Act of 1850* is hard to top, for it made Civil War all but inevitable.

But there are others.

After a six-week interval of two "classic" ***Book Notes*** reprising patriotic music and a quartet about leadership, for the next month or so we'll pick up on ***"Americans and Their Games": Sports in American History and Culture***. We will examine: "Sports and The Quest for Women's Rights"; "Sports and 'The Immigrant's Tale'"; and conclude with "Sports in the 21st Century."

Oh, regarding "consequential legislative Acts," beginning today we'll look at two that to date have not occasioned civil war, but are certainly major contributors to the social turbulence roiling American culture since the 1960s. In the realm of "unintended consequences," these two acts are, to borrow a sports cliché, "in a league of their own."

They transformed American culture. Intended or not, America became a different place after their enactment.

It is, literally, another country.

Not everyone is happy about that.

Which acts, you ask?

They are the *Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965* and *Title IX* (a part or section of) the *Education Amendments of 1972* to the *Higher Education Act of 1965*.

We'll examine the Immigration Act of 1965 and its predecessors in a couple of weeks as we investigate "Sports and the Immigrant's Tale." Today, Catharine Beecher, Amelia Bloomer, Nellie Bly, Annie Oakley, and Sendra Berenson Abbott – women and sports in the 19th century; next week Helen Wills Moody, Babe Didrickson Zaharias, Tenley Albright, Wilma Rudolph, and Katharine Switzer – women and sports in the 20th century pre-Title IX; the following week we'll conclude by exploring the world created by Bernice Sandler, Patsy Mink, and Billie Jean King – women and sports in post-Title IX America.

Almost always peripheral to men's, women's involvement in sports is ancient. In ***The Odyssey***, Homer tells of Odysseus waking to hear Princess Nausicca and her handmaidens playing catch with a ball on the seashore. Although women were the "prizes" for some events and only virgins and prostitutes were permitted to attend, some women ran in special races at the ancient Olympics. In the 6th century B.C., honoring Hera, the wife of Zeus, the *Heraen* games for women only were held. Like colonial girls, Indigenous American women played hoop and stick games; Mary, Queen of Scots allegedly was the first woman to play a round of golf.

Because of the myth of female frailty, the fear of harming women's reproductive capacity, and other social conventions, American women prior to the early 20th century were excluded from most sporting activities. Selecting from many options, we'll weave together two threads tracing the path that American women followed from being denied participation in almost all sporting activity to the ***2023 NCAA Women's Final Four*** in which Iowa's Caitlin Clark and Louisiana State's Angel Reese swamped the men by gathering mega minutes of media attention. In one thread, we'll follow women's athletic progress in tandem with a brief review of feminism's four waves; in the other, we'll note women's exclusion in pre-Title IX America and their accelerating inclusion post-Title IX.

| Women's Participation in Sports 1972-2022 | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Item** | **1972** | **2022** | **Increase/ Decrease** | **% Increase** |
| **U.S. Population** | 213,269,805 | 332,403,650 | 119,133,845 | 55.8% |
| **Girls Playing H.S. Sports** | 300,000 | 3,400,000 | 3,100,000 | 1033% |
| **Women Playing Intercollegiate Sports** | 32,000 | 221,000 | 189,000 | 591% |

high school sports and only 32,000 played college sports. Fifty years later, in 2022, 3.4 million girls played high school sports and 219,000 women played college sports. A part of that growth can be attributed to simple population growth, but the proportions tell us the true story. In 1972, the American population was 213,269,805; in 2022, it was 332,403,650 an increase of 55.8%. If only driven by population growth, girls' participation in high school sports should be 467,400 – not 3.4 million. That 3.4 million represents an overall percentage increase of 1,033%. College sports tell a similar if less dramatic tale with an overall percentage increase of 590%.

What accounts for this vast change?

In a word, Title IX.

But first, how did we get to Title IX?

Three important observations are in order. First, just as women's quest for their legal and political rights began in the early and mid-19th century, so did women's participation in sporting activities. Second, in both arenas, sports and women's rights, progress was driven by middle and upper-middle class women. Poor, enslaved, and indigenous women were not overtly excluded, but simply peripheral as mere survival took precedence. Lastly, middle- and upper-middle class women found themselves ensnarled in the dramatic social change shaking American society in the early 19th century. [1]

As a result, understanding the rise of women's participation in sports requires a parallel understanding of the forces driving women's quest for their legal, political, and social rights.

That quest began in earnest in the 1840s.

Characterized by immense social change and dislocation, early 19th century American society was shaken by several powerful forces. So all-encompassing it sometimes seems to disappear in plain sight, first came the challenge of creating a unified American nation and culture from 13 previously independent colonies

and a gathering number of new states. Each of these former colonies and new states possessed its own distinct, or regionally, distinct culture and ethos. The challenge was how to make an American of a Virginian or a “Yorker," as New Yorkers were once called.

Our 21st century culture wars reveal that the challenge has never been completely met.

Simultaneously, America was impacted by the industrial revolution and the emerging market economy as manufacturing and shopkeeping left the home. This had a profound effect upon traditional notions of masculinity and femininity. In a traditional agricultural and handicraft economy, men and women had intertwined roles operating either a farm or a home-based manufactory and shop – think Benjamin Franklin’s father then his sister Jane manufacturing candles at the rear of the home and then selling them from a shop at the front. The rise of industrial-scale manufacturing first took the men out of the home or off the farm to work in urban factories whose products supplied city-based shops. The effect of the city-based stores and a new merchant economy signaled the beginning of the end of home-based shops.

The impact on men, away from home working in urban factories as either laborers or clerks, gave rise to two concerns: 1) the adverse impact upon men’s moral character living and working in cities away from home and 2) for those working in newfangled offices as clerks, a concern for their physical well-being. It was feared that men were becoming either morally dissolute and/or physically weak. This gave rise, first in England and then America, to the Muscular Christianity movement, which believed in physical training to maintain masculine fitness. In tandem, this also gave rise to the Young Men’s Christian Association movement – the YMCA – providing housing and physical activity for young men new to city life. The housing was to protect men from morally dubious temptations and to provide them a safe, clean place to live.

The impact on women was more ambiguous. Remember, the women’s movement was driven by middle-class and upper-middle class women whose social role was transformed by the shifting economy. With home-based handicrafts and shopkeeping replaced by manufacturing and commercial stores, with the men now away from home working in offices in the city, a woman’s role was redefined as keeper of the domestic hearth. She was deemed man’s moral superior. *Woman* became society’s foundation stone.

In the early 19th century this gave rise to a movement known as *The Cult of True Womanhood* or *The Cult of Domesticity*. First based in church culture, this movement wove together many ideas and values percolating throughout society. It meshed with its twin concept, *Home*. *Home* was defined as the urban male’s

refuge, his sanctuary from the tribulations of a market economy. *Home* was the key to American identity. It was the keystone for holding society together. When thinking of *Home*, think Currier and Ives and "Home, Sweet Home."

American literature 's greatest expression of the *Cult of True Womanhood*, the *Cult of Domesticity,* for both its virtues and its discontents, is Louisa May Alcott's ***Little Women***. [2] Alcott described in vivid detail the entire phenomenon's concept of a woman's primary virtues as piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. In the four March sisters, Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy, and their preternaturally patient Marmee, the all-knowing mother, Alcott described the concept's culture-creating, culture-binding power as it defined the role of a woman as keeper of the domestic hearth. In Meg, one finds the daughter who will carry on the tradition; in Beth, one finds the embodiment of the myth of female frailty that inhibited women's athletic interests (the very notion of "athletic interest" would have been incomprehensible to Beth); in Amy, one finds a slightly degraded version of womanhood's role as she determines to marry a rich man and does; and in Jo, heroine to many a modern woman, one finds the concept's discontents. Jo yearns to do the things men do. Jo does manage to become a professional writer earning her own way, but on multiple occasions Jo sighs in exasperation some version of the novel's leitmotif: "Why wasn't I born a boy?"

That is a question which, in many ways, echoed the American women's rights movement's birth as a rejection of the *Cult of True Womanhood* and the smothering notion of the *Cult of Domesticity*. Although it began in America in 1848, the American women's rights movement had its precursors beginning with Abigail Adams, who beseeched her husband John to "… Remember the Ladies … Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could." [3] The women's movement in the English-speaking world began with Englishwoman Mary Wollstonecraft's ***A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*** in which she argued that women have as much right to an education as men. In America, it began with Margaret Fuller, who in her ***Woman in the Nineteenth Century*** argued for a woman's right to an education and to full participation in society's life beyond the walls of *Home*. She famously exhorted "let them be sea captains, if they will." Although conflicted by the *Cult of Domesticity*, which they never quite rejected, Lydia Maria Child and Sarah Josepha Hale, two of the mid-19th century's most influential women, argued for a woman's right to an education and to pursue a career. They, however, never became suffragists, for they feared women's involvement in politics would cause them to forfeit their position of moral superiority. [4]

The women's rights movement grew out of the temperance and abolitionist movements led by evangelical women who, exercising their moral power, condemned the evils of drunkenness and slavery. Among those movements' leaders were Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Carrie Catt, and Lucretia Mott. When Stanton and Mott, who had not previously met, accompanied their husbands to an abolitionist convention in London in the late 1840s, they were not permitted to speak. They were shunted aside to seats in the gallery. They realized that women could accomplish little until they had the same rights and political power as men. Back in America, they organized the first ever women's rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York in 1848. It set in motion what became known as "First Wave Feminism," which gave rise to the suffragists and the crusade for women's right to vote. Modeled on the ***Declaration of Independence***, they issued a woman's ***Declaration of Sentiments and Rights*** asserting that "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men ***and women*** are created equal. …" Among those who signed it was Frederick Douglass. They were later joined by Susan B. Anthony in creating the 19th century women's movement, but Anthony, an abolitionist, was not at the Seneca Falls Convention. [5]

In the 19th century, women's sporting activity was minimal. This began to change as the nascent women's movement sought equal educational opportunities for women, including physical education. The great champion of this movement was Catharine Beecher. A member of the incredible Beecher family, Catharine's father was Lyman Beecher, one of the era's foremost ministers and evangelists. His children included Catharine, her sister Isabella Beecher Hooker, a suffrage leader, Henry Ward Beecher, a pastor renowned for his passionate support of the temperance movement, abolitionism, and women's suffrage, and Harriett Beecher Stowe, whose ***Uncle Tom's Cabin*** is arguably the most influential work of fiction in American history. [6]

Like Lydia Maria Child and Sarah Josepha Hale, author Catharine Beecher in several books opposed the suffrage movement and supported the Cult of Domesticity's key assumptions. She believed women's central role was as mothers and educators, but the life she led contradicted her writings. In 1823, she founded the Hartford Female Academy and, in 1852, the American Woman's Educational Association. She pioneered physical education for girls. For Beecher physical education was non-competitive and focused on calisthenics to improve women's health. In her advocacy of a woman's right to physical education, Beecher refuted the prevailing notions of female frailty and weakness. [7]

Because of Beecher's influence, the 19th century's newly emerging schools for girls and women's colleges (called seminaries in the beginning) allowed physical activity for their students. Sometimes called "Mountain Days," when the students literally left the school grounds for hikes in the surrounding countryside, and usually consisting of calisthenic exercises and limited game playing, physical education became a part of the curriculum. In doing so, it began to change notions of women's capabilities.

Before Beecher, guarded by the myth of female frailty, women were prohibited from strenuous physical activity because they were thought to be too weak. It was believed that women were too fragile, that they were too delicate to participate in sports. Which, if one considers the demands of domestic work, women working on farms and in urban factories, sounds almost hilarious to 21st century ears. But if one recalls that the women's movement was driven by middle-class women whose lives were circumscribed by *Home*, then the notions of female frailty come into clearer focus. It was feared that physical exercise would make women "manly," i.e. they would develop muscles; it was feared that the physical nature of sport would elicit sensual pleasures; and, lastly, in the outmoded biological thinking of the time, it was feared that athletic activity would sap women's Vital Force or Vital Energy undermining their ability to have children.

Catharine Beecher set in motion forces that eventually changed that thinking. Another mid-19th century "sporting" activity also challenged notions of female frailty. With the invention of the safety bicycle, that is a bicycle with two wheels of the same size, a new sporting fad captured the public imagination. Women, seeking to get out of the house and to do something other than play croquet (the one game at the time thought socially acceptable for women), wanted in on the fun. They eagerly adopted cycling as an expression of a newfound freedom.

Susan B. Anthony thought bicycling a key component of women's emancipation. She famously said:

> I think [the bicycle] has done more to emancipate women than any one thing in the world. I rejoice every time I see a woman ride by on a bike. It gives her a feeling of self-reliance and independence the moment she takes her seat; and away she goes, the picture of untrammeled womanhood. [8]

But cycling in the floor-length dresses of the era presented a challenge. One could trace the entire arc of the women's movement by following the changes in women's clothing from the early 19th century to today. It is a tale of expanding freedom by undraping the female form; it is also a tale I am not qualified to tell. If you're interested, however, a simple place to start is Stella Polyzoidou's article in **The Collector**: *"How Social Movements and Activism Influenced Fashion."* [9]

In America, it began in Seneca Falls, New York in 1851 when Elizabeth Miller Smith wore what she called the "Turkish dress" to the home of her friend Amelia Bloomer. Bloomer was the editor of ***The Lily***, a temperance journal that also featured articles about women's interests. At the time, women wore floor-length dresses with necklines just beneath their chin. This not only included more formal wear, but also everyday dresses. Smith's newfangled design resembled a pair of "Turkish trousers" as it consisted of flounced trousers beneath a short skirt. With one simple design, female mobility and agility were freed.

Although designed by Smith, illustrating the power of the press, when Bloomer published an article describing the new garment complete with instructions and the pattern for making them, they became known as "Bloomers." Bloomers were about both comfort and utility. They were an immediate success. Women adopted them for all activities. In doing so, they immediately became targets of masculine insults for wearing male-like clothing. They were called "pantaloonatics." Eventually, Anthony and other leaders of the suffrage movement stopped wearing them as a distraction from their political agenda. Other women, however, continued using them because of the freedom they provided to engage in physical activities, like cycling and calisthenics, not to mention housework and other chores. [10]


Beyond calisthenics, cycling, croquet, and a bit of genteel lawn tennis, women rarely engaged in athletic activity in the 19th century. As the century ended, however, three women and one new sport began to signal a change. Although she was not an athlete, legendary journalist Nelly Bly and sharpshooter Annie Oakley exploded the myth of female fragility. Bly, already famous because of her expose of conditions at the infamous New York City mental asylum on Blackwell Island, persuaded her publisher Joseph Pulitzer of the ***New York World*** to let her try to duplicate Jules Verne's ***Around the World in 80 Days***. She did it in 76 days! [11] Oakley, a farm girl from western Ohio who learned to shoot as a child hunting for food for her impoverished family, was the era's greatest sharpshooter. Married to marksman Frank Butler, the couple traveled the late-19th century county fair circuit eking out a living. Oakley was Butler's assistant, but one day he took ill, she substituted for him, she was the better shot, and a star was born. Oakley later joined William F. Cody's ***Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show*** and met Sitting Bull, who called her "Little Sure Shot." Oakley was the show's headliner. She always wore modest clothes to avoid detracting from her shooting skills. She became an icon, slipping the moorings of mere celebrity, and entered the realm of American folklore so that today you have to remind people that "Yes, there really was an Annie Oakley." [12]

As the century ended, James A. Naismith invented basketball at the Springfield, Massachusetts YMCA. He wanted a game that could be played indoors during the winter. It was specifically designed for men, but Sendra Berenson Abbott, the newly appointed and first director of physical education at nearby Smith College, thought it a game women could play. Abbott was no revolutionary; she adhered to Catharine Beecher's notions of physical education as exercise and activity in a non-competitive environment. She adapted Naismith's rules to fit her ideas for women's basketball. Her rules prevented physical contact, had six players on a side, divided the court into three sections with assigned players required to remain within their sections throughout the game to avoid overexertion, limited dribbling to three times before shooting or passing the ball, and players could only shoot with one hand to avoid altering the muscle structure of a woman's chest. At her early games at Smith College, male spectators were forbidden. [13]

Even with these restrictions, the proverbial camel's nose was in the tent. Basketball was an immediate success with women. The first ever intercollegiate women's basketball game took place on April 4, 1896, between the University of California and Stanford. Stanford won, 2-1. The game was opposed by some faculty and administrators as unlady-like and a travesty. [14]

Still, as the 19th century ended, the prevailing notions were that "sport ruins women and women ruin sport." The first half of that primitive meme refers to the myth of female frailty and the fears women would be injured playing sports, that sports damaged women's reproductive capacity, and that it would make women unattractive as they developed "mannish" characteristics. The second clause refers to the male bias that women playing sports looked awkward and ungainly and that in their awkwardness made a mockery of the sporting culture and the games themselves.

But then, as the 20th century opened, something changed.

*Next week: Women's quest for rights and sports in the 20th century.*

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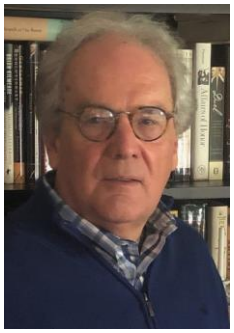

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*"Indigenous Girls and Boys Playing Hoop and Stick Game"* at **Early Native Oklahoma Tribes** available here accessed June 8, 2023.
*"Hoop and Stick at Historic St. Mary's City"* at **Pinterest** available here accessed June 8, 2023.
*"Currier and Ives 'Home, Sweet Home"* at **Smithsonian Magazine** "When the Idea of Home Was Key to American Identity" available at When the Idea of Home Was Key to American Identity | History| Smithsonian Magazine accessed July 29, 2023.
*"Catharine Beecher"* at **Wikimedia Commons** available at File:Portrait of Catharine Beecher, possibly by W & F Langenheim, 1848. (29207844432).jpg - Wikimedia Commons accessed July 30, 2023.
*"Women's Strength Training, Dickinson College, 1888"* at **Dickinson College Archives & Special Collections** available at Women's strength training, 1888 | Dickinson College accessed July 30, 2023.
*"Two views of local Extension leaders drilling in physical exercise in middies and bloomers"* at **Wikimedia Commons** available here accessed July 30, 2023.

*"Bloomers.jpg"* at **Wikimedia Commons** available at File:Bloomers.jpg - Wikimedia Commons accessed July 30, 2023.
*"La Bicycliste, 1897.jpg"* at **Wikimedia Commons** available here accessed July 30, 2023.
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*"Sendra Berenson Abbott.jpg"* at **Wikimedia Commons** available at File:Senda Berenson.jpg - Wikimedia Commons accessed July 30, 2023.

## End Notes

1. We've discussed this before in a ***Book Note*** about Louisa May Alcott's ***Little Women***, in several about significant 19th century women, and in an extensive review of Lillian Faderman's ***Woman: The American History of an Idea***. They can all be found here Book Notes - Jefferson Educational Society (jeserie.org)
2. For a complete discussion of *Little Women*, *Home* and *The Cult of True Womanhood*, cf. ***Book Note*** #128 from January 19, 2023, which can be found here #128 Roth.pdf (jeserie.org))
3. *"Abigail Adams to John Adams, 31 March 1776"* at **National Archives Founders Online** available at Abigail Adams to John Adams, 31 March 1776 (archives.gov) accessed July 30, 2023.
4. To learn more about Margaret Fuller, Lydia Maria Child, and Sarah Josepha Hale consult multiple ***Book Notes*** which can be found here Book Notes - Jefferson Educational Society (jeserie.org)
5. For a full discussion of the origins of the Seneca Falls Convention and its Declaration of Sentiments, cf. Miriam Gurko's ***The Ladies of Seneca Falls: The Birth of the Women's Rights Movement*** (New York: Schocken Books, 1974).
6. *"Lyman Beecher"* at **Harriett Beecher Stowe Center** available at Family – Harriet Beecher Stowe Center accessed July 30, 2023.
7. Michals, Debra, *"Catharine Beecher (1800-1878)"* at **National Women's History Museum** available at Catharine Beecher | National Women's History Museum (womenshistory.org) accessed July 30, 2023.
8. Quoted by Louise Dawson in *"How the bicycle became a symbol of women's emancipation"* in **The Guardian** (November 4, 2011) available at How the bicycle became a symbol of women's emancipation | Women in politics | The Guardian accessed July 30, 2023.
9. Polyzoidou, Stella, *"How Social Movements & Activism Influenced Fashion?"* in **The Collector** (July 25, 2021) available at How Social Movements & Activism Influenced Fashion? (thecollector.com) accessed July 30, 2023.
10. See Gurko, **cited above**, pp. 141-145;147-154.
11. Norwood, Arlisha R. and Mariana Brandman, "*Nellie Bly"* at **National Women's History Museum** available at Nellie Bly | National Women's History Museum (womenshistory.org) accessed July 30, 2023.
12. Cf. Emily Martin, *"The true story of Annie Oakley, legendary sharpshooter,"*in **The National Geographic** (May 31, 2022) available at The true story of Annie Oakley, legendary sharpshooter (nationalgeographic.com); Ashlee Anderson, *"Annie Oakley,"* at **National Women's History Museum** available at Annie Oakley | National Women's History Museum (womenshistory.org); and Christopher Klein, *"10 Things You May Not Know About Annie Oakley,"*at **History.com** available at 10 Things You May Not Know About Annie Oakley | HISTORY. All were accessed July 30, 2023.
13. See *"Sendra Berenson Abbott"* at **Basketball Hall of Fame** available at The Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame :: Senda Berenson Abbott (hoophall.com); Mercedes Townsend, *"Convention on the Court: The Emergence of Women's Basketball and Its Negotiations with Female Propriety"* at **Sport In American History** available at Contention on the Court: The Emergence of Women's Basketball and Its Negotiations with Female Propriety | Sport in American History (ussporthistory.com); and Sally Jenkins, *"History of Women's Basketball"* at **WNBA.com** available at WNBA.com: History of Women's Basketball. All were accessed July 30, 2023.

14. See *"The First Intercollegiate Women's Basketball Game"* (1896) at **History of Basketball** available at The First Intercollegiate Women's Basketball Game (1896) – History of Basketball (wordpress.com); *"Looking Back: The First Game"* at **Stanford125: 125 Stanford Stories** available at The first game - Stanford 125; and *"Timeline of Women's Basketball"* at **Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia** available at Timeline of women's basketball - Wikipedia. All were accessed July 30, 2023.

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