

Beginnings

By Kevin Lydy

The woman in youth cannot get the best training for domestic, social, or professional activities through the practice of these activities alone, or with the addition merely of academic or cultural studies, largely sedentary in nature. Wholesome play, vigorous group games of suitable types give a vital part of the best preparation for the more serious work of later life.¹

In 1891, Dr. James Naismith developed the game of basketball as an alternative to existing sports such as lacrosse, football, and baseball. The new game came about as the Springfield, Massachusetts YMCA addressed a "need for a vigorous activity . . .

that could be played indoors during the winter months."² Though originally invented to enhance the physical skills of men, basketball soon seemed an effective opportunity for women as well. As early as 1892, just months after men began playing, several female teachers inquired about the suitability of the new game to women who had

been restricted to less "physical" activities such as cycling, badminton, and tennis. Optimistic about the idea, Dr. Naismith assisted such women as Clara Baer and Senda Berenson in developing a women's basketball program, with rules "suitable" to women's abilities.³ The rules established in the 1890s, which endured into the 1930s, created a sport which vaguely resembled today's game: there were two baskets, a ball, and a court. The court was divided into three sections, not two, and teams positioning two players in each section.⁴ With players restricted to their sections, teams relied more on effective passing than on skillful dribbling of the ball to ensure victory. Women first began playing basketball in colleges and universities all over America; corporations and

businesses also provided women with the opportunity to play the game by way of leagues or tournaments. The game did not filter into America's high schools until the 1920s with the creation of the Midwest Federation of State High School Athletic Associations. It was in this way that Indiana, as one of five states involved, began its long tradition of basketball heritage.⁵

Ft. Wayne, Indiana's options for public gatherings included the occasional traveling circus, the popular Fort Wayne Speedway or the occasional rifle competition, all crowd-pleasing summer attractions.⁶ Once the winter months began, however, the options became scarce. In addition, with no

professional athletic organizations, Fort Wayne relied upon high school athletics for social recreation.⁷ Constructed amid Indiana cornfields and narrow country roads, Arcola High School emerged in 1921 in the small town of Arcola, ten miles northwest of Fort Wayne. The school's first basketball season began in November, 1922, with both the women and the men

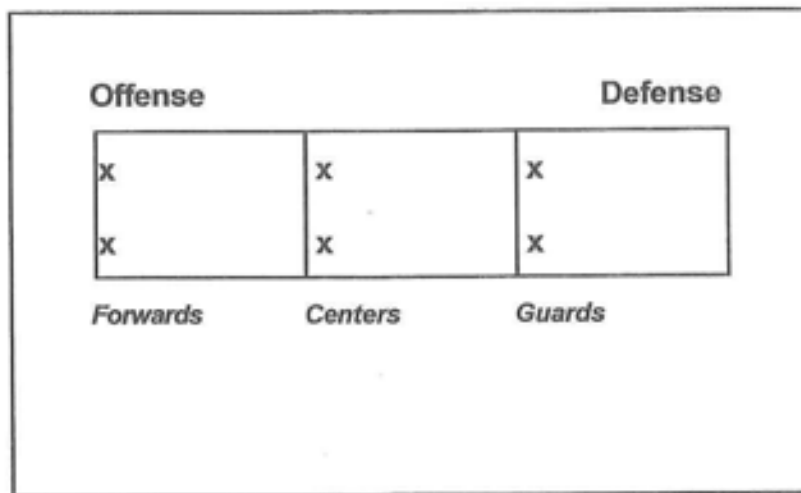


Diagram 1: Layout of the positions for women's basketball circa 1920s. Players from one team are represented by "X's." Players are not permitted to cross over into other players' sections.

playing other high schools in the Ft. Wayne area.⁸ Known as the Arcola Greyhounds, the teams enjoyed relative success, but it was not until the 1930-1931 season that the women's team experienced noteworthy achievement. Coached by Dwight "Pete" Byerly, the lady Greyhounds began their season in October with twelve women on the team. Of the team's six starters, captain Dorothy Corbat had the most experience, playing side-center her freshman and sophomore years until moving to forward her junior and senior years. Joining her in the other forward position was Dorothy Hilger. These girls were the only team members who could score as all other players had to remain in their sections, away from the scoring basket. Eleanor Holloper and Helen

Vaughn filled the jumping-center and side-center positions, respectively. Eleanor's ability to get the tip-off and Helen's penchant for breaking up the opposing team's pass work allowed the Greyhounds to jump ahead early in a game. Velda Bauman and Edna Butler served as the Greyhounds' defensive duo. As guards, their speed and hard work made it

ARCOLA GREYHOUNDS SCHEDULE 1930-1931

October	31st	Jefferson City - <i>Lost</i>
November	7	Hoagland - <i>Won</i>
	14	Coesse - <i>Won</i>
	21	Huntertown - <i>Lost</i>
December	28	Lafayette Center - <i>Won</i>
	5	New Haven - <i>Lost</i>
	6	Churubusco - <i>N/A</i>
	12	New Haven - <i>N/A</i>
January	19	Lafayette Center - <i>Won</i>
	9	Hoagland - <i>Lost</i>
	23	Jefferson Center - <i>Won</i>
February	30	County Tourn. - <i>N/A</i>
	13	Huntertown - <i>Won</i>
	20	Coesse - <i>Won</i>
March	28	Churubusco - <i>Won</i>
	6	Sectional Tournament - <i>Lost in second round to Huntertown</i>

difficult for opposing forwards to score.⁹ Playing an eighteen-game schedule, the team compiled an impressive regular season record of twelve wins and six losses, eclipsing the boys' record of eleven and seven.¹⁰ In the late 1930s Arcola High School took women's basketball off of its list of athletic programs, as did many others across the nation.¹¹ It was not until decades later that schools began reintroducing the sport. When President Richard Nixon signed Title IX of the Educational Amendment stating that no one shall, on the basis of sex, be denied access to any educational program or activity that receives federal aid, women's basketball gained tremendous momentum. In 1975, Madison Square Garden held its first women's college game. The sport made its Olympic debut at the Montreal Games in 1976. Two years later, the Women's Basketball League formed. The NCAA held its first Women's National Championships in 1981. Most recently, the Women's National Basketball Association emerged in October, 1996.¹² With superstars and national recognition, endorsements, multi-million dollar contracts and coed all-star weekends, women's basketball may finally be getting the attention it deserves. Yet one should not recognize the achievements made by today's players without acknowledging the strides made years ago. An appreciation of women's basketball begins with teams like the Arcola Greyhounds.

Endnotes

- 1 Helen Frost and Charles Digby Wardlaw, *Basket Ball and Indoor Baseball for Women* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925), xv.
- 2 Francis H. Ebert and Billye Ann Cheatum, *Basketball*, (Philadelphia: W.B. Saunders Company, 1977), 1.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 5.
- 4 The players located nearest their defending basket were called "guards", those in the center "centers," and those attacking the opponent's basket "forwards," thus the origin behind today's position names. See diagram 1.
- 5 Ebert and Cheatum, 9.
- 6 George and Gloria Bojrab, local Arcola historians, interview by author, Ft. Wayne, Indiana, 24 January 1998.
- 7 The Fort Wayne Pistons, an NBA franchise, did not arrive until the late 1940s.
- 8 *Red Pepper*, 1, no. 4 (October 1922): 5.
- 9 *Red Pepper*, 7, no. 7 (March 1931): 5.
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 The reason schools took the sport away stems from the "rough" nature the sport began to develop, questioning the "suitability" of the sport to women's needs.
- 12 "The History of Women's Basketball" in WNBA, [Online], Available: <http://www.wnba.com/basics/timeline.html> [31 January 1998].
- 13 The games marked "N/A" may have been canceled, as no record of the outcome is available. However, it is known that the Greyhounds posted five more victories: one each against Coesse, Anthony Wayne, and Hillcrest and two against Harlan.

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- Red Pepper* 1, no. 4 (October 1922).
- _____. 6, no. 1 (29 October 1929).
- _____. 6, no. 2 (November 1929).
- _____. 6, no. 4 (January 1930).
- _____. 6, no. 5 (March 1930).
- _____. 7, no. 1 (September 1930).
- _____. 7, no. 2 (October 1930).
- _____. 7, no. 3 (November 1930).
- _____. 7, no. 4 (December 1930).
- _____. 7, no. 5 (January 1931).
- _____. 7, no. 6 (February 1931).
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