Courting Controversy: Gender and Power in Iowa Girls’ Basketball

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In March of 2003, Iowans marked the tenth anniversary of the end of “6-on-6” girls’ basketball—the unique six-player, half-court “girls’ rules” game played in Iowa since 1934.1 A “sacred institution,”2 Iowa girls’ basketball had a long and popular tradition related in large part to its nationally known state tournament that dated back to 1920. The Iowa Girls’ High School Athletic Union (IGHSAU) had been under scrutiny for its sponsorship of the six-player rules since 1971, when most of the country switched to the five-player full-court game.3 Beginning in the 1970s and culminating in a 1983 lawsuit, a series of legal challenges sought to declare the six-player game discriminatory, and ultimately, to replace it with the five-player rules. In 1993, those challenges succeeded when the IGHSAU voted to retire 6-on-6.4

This paper explores the controversy that preceded the transition to the five-player, full-court game known in Iowa as “5-on-5.” While ostensibly a debate over which set of rules to play by, more significantly, the rules’ controversy was a struggle for power, a struggle between the male-dominated IGHSAU and women physical educators and their allies. This was a gendered battle for control of the sport that dated back to the 1920s and was rooted in the founding of the IGHSAU. Girls’ basketball was perennially a controversial matter in Iowa, particularly for women physical educators at the University of Iowa (UI) who did not approve of the IGHSAU’s program and its control of the sport. Though undoubtedly a power at the national level of the women’s physical education movement,
the UI physical educators failed to successfully challenge the IGHSAU—that is, until the second wave of the women’s movement moved gender issues to the center of national discussion. Legislative efforts like Title IX and the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) highlighted issues of gender and power and, importantly, brought Iowa girls’ basketball into the national dialogue on gender. As the power struggle over girls’ basketball took the form of a rules’ debate, the call to change the rules to the five-player game—spearheaded by UI’s N. Peggy Burke—accompanied a longstanding challenge to change the power structure of the IGHSAU. The critique of the rules as sexist went hand-in-hand with a similar critique of the administrative infrastructure. The emerging national dialogue concerning women’s rights helped to shape and sharpen the debate about the basketball rules, and the lack of women involved in the coaching and administration of girls’ basketball was taken up as a possible sex discrimination issue by a number of women’s political groups.5 Within this heightened atmosphere, the IGHSAU could no longer ignore nor dismiss concerns about Iowa girls’ basketball. The always-gendered struggle over the control of Iowa girls’ basketball that had been present since the beginning of the union came to a head during the rules’ controversy of the 1970s and 1980s.

In this article, I first provide a brief history of the relationship between the IGHSAU and UI women physical educators culminating with the rules’ controversy in the 1970s and 1980s and the increased politicization of Iowa girls’ basketball. This historical narrative is followed by an analysis of the girls’ basketball rules as a form of discourse and an examination of how girls’ physicality was constructed and contested, both by the IGHSAU’s own rules and in the debate over those rules. Lastly, consequences of the power struggle—on and off the basketball court—are considered, in both ideological and material terms. Throughout, I am sensitive to the ways that power is imposed, resisted, reinforced and challenged by both groups represented in this paper, and this, in turn, informs my telling of this story.6

The uniqueness of Iowa’s girls’ basketball program appears as an important theme in women’s sport history literature as evidenced by the amount of attention it receives particularly and especially, although not exclusively, within the subject of basketball.7 With the exception of Janice Beran—who has written extensively on the history of Iowa girls’ basketball—the sport has received little serious attention in sport history literature despite having been widely recognized as “unique” within both scholarly and popular literature.8 An important contribution to both women’s sport and Iowa history, Beran’s work celebrates the unique history of Iowa girls’ basketball and characterizes it as an important part of Iowa’s popular culture. Missing from her most recent work, however, is the tremendous controversy over the rules. Although Iowa’s late arrival to full court basketball has been acknowledged, the switch to 5-on-5 has not been described nor discussed in detail by Beran or other sport historians.

In addition to filling in this gap in basketball history, this study also contributes to a growing number of narratives that explicate and theorize the power struggles behind institutional and organizational efforts to control women’s sports. For instance, Ronald Smith, Ying Wushanley, and Mary Jo Festle each explore the contentious (and later litigious) relationship between the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (AIAW) based on the NCAA’s attempts to
gain control over college women's sports and women physical educators' desire to preserve their position of authority. Women physical educators noted with despair that the persons (the men) running the basketball program were neither educated nor trained to best attend to girls' best interests, whether that be their physical and mental health, or civil rights. Susan Cahn and others suggest that women physical educators viewed male-controlled popular sports as a threat to their professional territory and as dangerous to female athletes, a generalization that holds for Iowa as well. But in contrast to the narratives concerning college women's sport, women physical educators in Iowa were the ones whose power and influence over girls' basketball were limited, while the men of the IGHSAU were the ones accused by women physical educators and their allies of acting out of self-interest rather than in the best interests of the female athletes under their charge.

The IGHSAU and The University of Iowa

The men who founded the Iowa Girls' High School Athletic Union in 1925 did so against the wishes of women physical educators in Iowa and thereby set the stage for a lengthy and contentious relationship between the two groups. The IGHSAU formed following a 259-25 vote by the Iowa High School Athletic Association (IHSAA) to discontinue its sponsorship of the girls' state basketball tournament. Acting upon the recommendations of such groups as the Women's Division of the National Amateur Athletic Federation (NAAF), the National Association of Secondary-School Principals, and female physical education professionals in Iowa, the IHSAA ended the five-year old tournament only to have it resurrected by the small group of dissenters who began the IGHSAU determined to continue competitive girls' basketball. The IGHSAU remains the only current and is the longest standing high school athletic association specifically for girls' athletics and since its origin has controlled girls' basketball. Executive Secretary E. Wayne Cooley, the top office holder in the IGHSAU for forty-eight years, had defended his organization and its programs against criticism from women physical educators since he took office in 1954, and he did not back down when the IGHSAU came under fire in the 1970s and 1980s. Backed by the governor of Iowa and a United States senator, and with a team of lawyers at his side, Cooley had the political clout and public support to fight against a variety of Title IX-inspired actions and investigations that threatened the girls' basketball program. To reference Smith's essay on the control of women's sport: "As national dictators from Napoleon to Fidel Castro have found, once someone is in control with the power to act, it is not easy to give up the advantage." In this case, however, it was not the women physical educators struggling to hold onto their control over sports (as Smith suggests occurred in collegiate sports.) Rather, the male-dominated IGHSAU battled to preserve its power over girls' high school athletics in Iowa in spite of increasing public, political, and legal pressures to relinquish its stronghold.

Women physical educators at Iowa's colleges and universities expressed concern and frustration about the popularity, prevalence, and governance of competitive basketball programs in Iowa. The correspondence files of the UI Department of Physical Education for Women indicate an ongoing effort to dispute, disrupt, and/or dismantle the IGHSAU's
role in sponsoring girls’ basketball—an effort that spanned from the early days of the state tournament in the 1920s to the rules’ controversy and gender equity issues of the 1970s and 1980s. As chairpersons of the UI Department of Physical Education for Women, Elizabeth Halsey (1924-1955), M. Gladys Scott (1955-1974), and N. Peggy Burke (1978-1987) each worked to modify the girls’ basketball program in some manner during their careers, as did other faculty members. These efforts took place despite the fact that their university had “never been permitted to have any kind of input on that organization,” according to Scott.15 Halsey and her peers saw the girls’ basketball program as representing the evils of competition that the Women’s Division sought to eradicate. Scott was not opposed to competition per se but argued against an overemphasis on competitive programs to the detriment of a broad-based physical education program for all students. Burke differed from Halsey and Scott in that she did not battle against the existence or overemphasis on the competitive basketball program. Instead, she fought to change the rules of the game to meet gender equity guidelines of the 1970s and critiqued the lack of women in coaching and leadership within the IGHSAU. Along with other members of the department, Burke was active in the women’s movement—a movement that contributed to unrest on the UI campus as many women fought against sex discrimination. Scott described Burke as well known for her efforts because she was “a little more aggressive” than some.16 The stance on girls’ basketball taken by each of these three leaders illustrates the changing philosophical approaches to competitive sport within physical education for women that is well documented in the literature.17

Under the initial leadership of Halsey, the Department of Physical Education for Women began to build a national reputation based upon the research and leadership of its faculty, the performance of its graduates, and its contribution to the profession. In the mid 1930s, the department became one of the earliest schools in the U.S. to offer a graduate program for women in physical education and the first department on campus to offer
a doctoral degree program for women. As the department’s first Ph.D. recipient and long-term chairperson, Scott commented on its success in an oral history interview, a reflection substantiated by a 1973 recognition of the department as one of the most outstanding “Centers of Influence” with the physical education profession.¹⁸ The UI women physical educators were looked upon and consulted as authorities on the subject of girls’ athletics by people in Iowa, surrounding states, and from as far away as Alaska. High school teachers, principals, and superintendents, graduates of the department now in teaching and coaching positions, parents, students, and concerned citizens all wrote the department in search of information and professional advice about girls’ basketball, and later specifically concerning the rules. Early on, physical educators often referred to this matter of concern as the “basketball situation” as in the “very messy interscholastic basketball situation in the state,” and the “bad competitive situation with girls’ basketball.”¹⁹ A cursory review of the voluminous correspondence files during Halsey and Scott’s tenures show a significant amount of correspondence on this topic addressed to the department—likely due in part to the university’s prestige in the state and on a national level.²⁰ The department typically referenced the Women’s Division-NAAF guidelines for girls’ athletics when replying to requests for information and sometimes included supplementary reading materials. This practice fell under the general mission of the Women’s Division to disseminate information and publicize their cause at the national, state, and local levels.

While the philosophical basis for these UI educators’ arguments against the IGHSAU’s program had shifted, the balance of power between these two groups had not. Despite the prestige accorded to the University of Iowa within the state and the prominence of the UI women physical educators within their profession, they were unable to make any progress toward their goal of having some input or direct influence in girls’ basketball—a situation Scott wrote about with seeming resignation in the early 1970s.²¹ As early as the 1930s,
state Women’s Division chairman Ruby Ana Holton predicted such a scenario: “Our association made an awful error when it got the Iowa High School Association to no longer sponsor girls’ basketball [sic], and then offered nothing as a substitute.” In other words, they missed their chance to influence what would happen next. Although women physical educators were not in a position of power to directly influence the administration of girls’ basketball, because of both the governance structure of the IGHSAU and the low number of women coaches (see below), they continued to challenge the IGHSAU’s authority in a number of ways. Halsey, Scott, and Burke all spoke out publicly concerning the basketball situation as they saw it, and each responded to public inquiries as described above. In the 1920s and 1930s, women physical educators around the state strategized and organized ways to discredit the game and the IGHSAU, including the use of allies in local and state newspapers. Within their academic domain, they taught future physical educators the National Section on Women’s Athletics (NSWA) standards for girls’ basketball rather than the IGHSAU’s own rules and de-emphasized competitive sports in the curriculum.

Although UI’s women physical educators may have felt that their words were ignored, the Iowa Girls’ Basketball Yearbooks show that the IGHSAU at least paid some attention. An IGHSAU publication, many of the yearbook’s articles responded to the women physical educators’ campaign against the evils of competitive basketball by describing the beneficial aspects of girls’ basketball. The yearbooks from the first half of the 1950s, in particular, featured justifications from a number of sources, including medical professionals, former players, physical education researchers, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and a literature review on the controversy presented in a popular agricultural periodical. E. Wayne Cooley used the yearbooks to acknowledge the discourse coming from physical educators very early in his career with the IGHSAU. In an address published in the 1955 volume, he spoke of the IGHSAU’s cognizance of the aims and objectives of the “our physical education program” and cited eight of the objectives he felt the basketball program met. Cooley concluded with a list of the ways the IGHSAU materially contributed to Iowa communities, including interest-free loans to girls planning to major in physical education as a means to countering the shortage of women physical directors. Twenty years later, Cooley again demonstrated an awareness of the women physical educators’ philosophy when he co-opted the Women’s Division motto from back in the 1920s. “We now have a sport for every girl, and a girl for every sport,” Cooley announced in a local newspaper story about the seemingly ever-expanding number of sports offered by the IGHSAU. This comment appears to be a direct response to the criticism directed at the union (from UI’s Scott, for example) for offering only competitive basketball, often at the expense of a well-rounded physical education program for girls of all abilities and needs. Even as Cooley offered this response, changing attitudes about competition, and women’s place and role in society shifted women physical educators’ focus more directly to the realm of equal opportunity and equal rights within competitive programs—a critique that would lead to the politicization of girls’ basketball to an extent not previously seen.
Politicizing Iowa Girls’ Basketball

Women’s historians and women’s sport historians agree that the 1970s represented an important decade of social, legal, and cultural change for women, including women in sport. Women’s physical educators and the general public began to share a change in attitude towards high level competition beginning in the 1960s and moving into the 1970s, due in part to the influences of the second wave of American feminism. New policies and guidelines, organizational structures, and rules for women’s sport followed the change in attitude and women’s basketball would be soon feel the effects. According to historian Joan Hult, “[B]asketball’s most dramatic changes for girls and women actually occurred between 1966 and 1970.” Three rule changes occurred during this period: the unlimited dribble, the thirty-second shot clock, and the five-player full court game. The IGHSAU published its own rules and did not adopt the Division for Girls and Women in Sports/Amateur Athletic Union (DGWS/AAU) Joint Basketball Committee rules. Thus, Iowa’s basketball history did not reflect these same dramatic changes in the late 1960s as Hult describes with respect to women’s basketball in general. Fifteen years would pass between the introduction of the five-player full court game as experimental rules by the basketball committee and the sanctioning of those rules by the IGHSAU in 1984. As women in sports gained recognition in broader popular culture, sport also garnered consideration within the political space of the women’s movement. Hult states that the women’s movement “contributed immeasurably to the sports movement” for women. For example, when the men’s athletic establishment, the NCAA in particular, coordinated a major opposition to Title IX, approximately sixty women’s groups organized in defense.

Within the climate of the 1970s, Iowa girls’ basketball was more overtly articulated as a political issue and a power struggle than it had been previously. The rules’ controversy took place in the midst of a burgeoning women’s liberation movement and a growing cultural awareness of the rhetoric and discourses associated with that movement including, for instance, sex discrimination, equal rights and opportunities, and sex/gender roles. Given the high profile and value of girls’ basketball in Iowa, not surprisingly, local advocacy groups concerned with women’s issues also turned their attention to sport. The Iowa Commission on the Status of Women (ICSW), Iowa International Women’s Year Assembly, Iowa Women’s Political Caucus, Iowa Civil Rights Commission, Iowa Civil Liberties Union, and State Senator Minnette Doderer, all took active roles in investigating and/or pursuing issues of sex discrimination within girls’ athletics and the IGHSAU. Iowa girls’ basketball occupied an important role as Title IX and the Equal Rights Amendment moved from the national stage into the local spotlight in Iowa. These two legislative efforts influenced and shaped the rules’ controversy in Iowa as illustrated below. At the same time, these examples provide a glimpse at how a specific localized situation can shape the local understanding and reception of matters of national concern.

As the implications of Title IX for athletics became clear, Cooley felt that Iowa was in good standing because Iowa girls had already enjoyed a long history of uninterrupted high school athletics in contrast to many other states in the U.S.—a position echoed in both scholarly and popular remembrances of Iowa girls’ basketball. Ironically, Cooley had written to Governor Robert Ray in early 1974 to warn him that Iowa’s universities and
colleges needed to seriously address *Title IX* demands lest they face pressure from organizations such as the ICSW—the same organization that would investigate the union’s program. Cooley felt that his program was beyond reproach, advising the governor that “our state will be totally free of agitation or critical review” if the federal government only looked at high schools. In fact, in the 1970-1971 school year, 20 percent of the 294,000 girls participating in high school sports were in Iowa—a staggering statistic in which Iowans took pride. By 1976, Iowans represented only 5.8 percent of the total participants, and thirteen states had more sports for girls than Iowa did—evidence of the tremendous growth in opportunities following the passage of *Title IX*. Contrary to popular perceptions (that remain today), *Title IX* requires more than counting participation slots, however. Despite Cooley’s assurances to Governor Ray, Burke and groups such as the ICSW used *Title IX* as the impetus for a number of questions about the six-player rules and the IGHSAU (as a sex-segregated athletic association and because it was male-dominated). Although legal challenges to 6-on-6 ultimately led to the introduction of five-player basketball, legal historian Sarah Fields points out that *Title IX* provided only the inspiration and not the legal remedy for such actions. Nevertheless, *Title IX*, along with other legal initiatives such as the ERA, contributed to a climate of social change for women (and men) that affected the rules’ controversy.

Iowa’s sports programs figured prominently in the anti-ERA materials circulating the state in the months prior to the 1980 Iowa general elections. Needing only three more states to ratify the ERA, its advocates were hopeful of victory in Iowa, especially given the positive polling data. However, a last-minute negative campaign by anti-ERA groups purportedly turned the tables, and Iowans voted down the ERA initiative by a 56 to 44 percent margin. National organizations such as Phyllis Schafly’s STOP ERA and Beverly LaHaye’s Concerned Women of America helped their local affiliates tailor campaign materials to Iowa. Along with other anti-ERA groups across Iowa, these organizations targeted Iowa girls’ basketball as one of the handfuls of issues deemed important to Iowans that would be adversely affected by an equal rights amendment. In most cases, basketball (or more generally, school sports) supplied one of the bullet points in a list of arguments against the Iowa ERA that also typically included abortion, homosexual marriage, religion, and a state militia. The Concerned Women of America, however, ran a large newspaper advertisement devoted only to basketball. In bold print, the advertisement declared, “An amendment like this in Iowa would definitely mean the end of Girls’ Basketball.” Opponents were concerned that the amendment would mean the end of single sex sport programs and that as a result, boys would take over Iowa’s beloved 6-on-6 teams. The Iowa ERA Coalition recognized this issue’s emotional power and established a topical file on sports. They also sought out legal advice on how to respond to such arguments and provided their speaker’s bureau with written responses to common questions about this issue. The debate over the ERA, as several scholars have argued, was more about the differences between women and men (“real” and/or perceived) and the meaning of those differences than about equal rights or discrimination under the eyes of the law. Similarly, the debate over the basketball rules focused on differences between girls and boys and how that affected their ability to play a particular form of basketball. These differences, or lack thereof, were central in the discourse concerning physicality, a topic to which I return later.
A Discursive Playing Field: Constructing and Contesting Physicality

The IGSHAU’s resistance to switching from the six-player rules had both ideological and material foundations and implications that become evident through discourse analysis. In the section that follows, I examine the six-player rules as a form of discourse, discuss characterizations and characteristics of the two main groups involved in the rules’ debate, and describe and analyze constructions of, and contestations over, girls’ physicality: a dominant theme within the rules’ debate that is inextricably linked to the rules themselves. Although I am attentive to the role of discourse in the events and mediated narratives throughout my writing of this history, in this section I more explicitly address this form of analysis and use it to support my argument that underlying the rules’ controversy was a gendered struggle for power. My work here follows the examples set by Patricia Vertinsky, Susan Cahn, and Helen Lenskyj, all of whom examine the historical underpinnings of the discursive construction of women’s bodies, female sexuality, and women’s physical activity.40 This method is a way to examine how meanings are created and is aimed at uprooting or uncovering the power structures implicit in discourse. Discourses are broadly defined and consist of “practices as well as beliefs, are both material as well as ideological, and may take a whole range of cultural forms: social institutions, aesthetic productions, political systems, popular cultures, economic structures, ideological belief systems, and so on.”41 They can be considered as a form of “text” to be read but a text with a constructive power rather than simply a reflective capacity.42 The power of an institution to define or exclude—whether that be through written rules, hiring decisions, or day-to-day practices—is one way it utilizes discourse as a means of exercising its power.43 Using this perspective, the IGSHAU’s constitutional mandate that executive board members and the twelve-member Representative Council (the first and second tiers of governance, respectively) come from the ranks of school superintendents (almost exclusively men)—thus defining who is eligible—is one example of its power to exclude women.44 Likewise, the basketball rules are a form of discourse and not simply a written text describing the formal structure of the game.

In my experience as a native Iowan and former 6-on-6 player, “girls’ basketball” was synonymous with the half-court, six-player game and “boys’ basketball” with the full-court, five-player rules. This vernacular had historic roots, of course, in that women designed the half-court version of the game specifically for women’s use. The women’s game required less physical exertion, contact, and stamina than the men’s in accordance with late nineteenth-century social, cultural and medical beliefs faced and shared by women’s physical educators—the originators and early caretakers of the game.45 Rita Liberti, Robin Bell Markels, and others argue that these beliefs were culturally constructed along gender, class, and race lines rather than biologically-based, yet many supporters of 6-on-6 still judged females to be physically inferior to males when it came to the tools and skills necessary for playing basketball.46

Despite the fact that these notions about girls’ physicality originated from Victorian ideology, they remained part of the dominant discourse in Iowa in the 1970s and 1980s. Although always present to some degree in the history of Iowa girls’ basketball, the level of discourse on physicality heightened during the rules’ controversy as the IGSHAU, and
women physical educators continued to contest each other’s constructions of girls’ physicality. The IGHSAU used its view of girls’ limited physical capabilities as a justification for maintaining the six-player rules, a position challenged by women physical educators like UI’s Burke and other critics of 6-on-6. Iowa had the most physically confining rules among other states that continued to use the six-player rules after the 1971 rules change. To illustrate, in contrast to some other forms of half-court or “women’s” basketball, Iowa high school girls did not have a rover position, and they were limited to two dribbles. As noted previously, in Iowa the girls’ basketball rules were written and published by the IGHSAU—the same men Burke referred to as having “never been confined to playing the game they praise.” These men figuratively inscribed their vision of girls’ physical abilities on girls’ bodies. Once these rules were codified, girls were literally trapped by the rules.

Taking place alongside and within debates surrounding the ERA, Title IX, and the women’s movement more generally, the push to change the basketball rules was often identified as a push for women’s rights. An analysis of the rhetoric concerning these issues and initiatives indicates that the campaign to end 6-on-6 was often cast as a feminist or “women’s” issue and one that polarized men versus women. For example, the state’s largest newspaper, the Des Moines Register, opened an early story on a proposed ban on the game with: “The feminists cheered and the governor cried foul” and one of their columnists advocated keeping “[the rules’ controversy] as a basketball issue and not a Women’s Issue.” Iowa City School Board member Ruth Skelley chastised the “lately liberated in female sports” for thinking that the five-player game would be “the answer for present-day women’s lib.” Feminism and the disruption to the status quo that the movement sought (and sometimes achieved) were sometimes viewed negatively or with little enthusiasm in Iowa. Likewise, a popular press book about Iowa girls’ sports (published by the IGSHAU) demonstrated a flippant attitude toward the women’s movement. A reference to “Betty
Friedan and all the aggressive equal rights workers” and choice of language throughout reflect a recognition of the threat posed by the ERA and the women’s movement to the dominant male establishment even as the author’s tone dismisses the possibility in Iowa.⁵³

Although the rules’ debate was often portrayed as between feminists (typically identified as women) and men (primarily those associated with girls’ basketball)—and certainly some feminists (who were women) and some men were vocal in the debate—the split was not that simple. High school classes, newsletters, opinion polls, and even research articles explored who stood on what side of the debate and why—and the results did not fall neatly into women versus men.⁵⁴ For example, even as coverage by the Des Moines Register of the controversy often reduced the debate to women versus men, public opinion polls published periodically in the newspaper categorized responses by age, gender, region of the state, and population (urban/rural). A look at the 1984 poll, which asked whether high schools should switch to “5-girl basketball,” indicated that women aged fifty and older, and Iowans living in small towns and rural areas (particularly in western Iowa) were the strongest supporters of 6-on-6, while younger females, males, and urban dwellers were most likely to advocate a switch.⁵⁵ An article in The Iowa High School Athletic News claimed that “one must invade the college coaching rank” (including female and male coaches) to find strong supporters for the five-player game and reported that overwhelming support for 6-on-6 existed among IGHSAU executives, coaches, and players.⁵⁶

Despite the gender, generational, and geographical divides suggested by polling data, the power players—the persons occupying positions of authority and influence in the state, and particularly, in the rules’ debate—were often either associated with the IGHSAU, or cast as feminists. These players are better characterized as “traditionalists” and “liberal reformers.” Traditionalists produced both compensatory and celebratory discourse in their support of 6-on-6, while liberal reformers relied on a discourse of equal opportunity in their advocacy for a switch to 5-on-5. The commentary, affiliations, and political and philosophical arguments put forth by individuals and organizations, as documented in a variety of sources including state and local newspapers, legislative records, research files, personal correspondence, and oral histories, substantiate this characterization. Although certainly not all of the persons involved and/or affected by the rules’ debate fall into a categorization neatly, nonetheless these two opposing sides dominated the public narratives, discussions, and debates concerning Iowa girls’ basketball. Such a categorization affords a way of understanding both the gendered nature of the power struggle and the struggle over gender as represented by social constructions of, and contestations over, which form of basketball rules were the most appropriate for Iowa girls.

Traditionalists fought to keep 6-on-6, citing its long and popular history in Iowa as well as the notoriety the game brought the state. The most prominent, and most frequently referenced, traditionalists were commonly represented by members of the IGHSAU and high school girls’ basketball coaches. Many former players, current players, and other Iowans also valued the tradition of 6-on-6, as evidenced by opinion polls, letters to the editor, and organized efforts to overturn the IGHSAU’s decision to end the six-player rules in 1993.⁵⁷ However, the dominant voices belonged to those in positions of power and influence, primarily school administrators (superintendents, principals, and athletic directors), coaches, and IGHSAU executives—all of whom were predominantly male.⁵⁸
Moreover, they wanted to keep 6-on-6, according to a 1983 survey of superintendents, principals, athletic directors, and coaches at the 490 basketball-playing schools in Iowa. A substantial majority of respondents preferred the existing rules, with smaller schools more likely to favor 6-on-6 than bigger schools, and coaches registering stronger support than most other officials.59

In their support for 6-on-6, traditionalists presented a mix of compensatory and celebratory discourse. The compensatory discourse presumed a natural and fixed sex differentiation that manifested itself in the different basketball rules. Girls were not physically well suited for five-player, full-court basketball: Boys were. The modified game succeeded because the special rules compensated for girls’ inferior athleticism. An acknowledgment of difference also occurred within the celebratory discourse, but here it was celebrated. Iowa’s unique game and the specific skills it developed (quick passing, for example) were praised. Also, the game and its players were sometimes recognized as more athletic and rigorous than previously given credit for. Some traditionalists relied on both compensatory and celebratory discourse in their defense of 6-on-6, arguing that although girls needed modified rules to compensate for their inferior physicality, their success at certain elements of basketball (high scoring, crisp passing) has been and should continue to be celebrated. As one male coach put it, “It emphasizes the girls’ best assets.”60

Liberal reformers were the other main participants in the debate: women and men who sought a change to the five-player rules as a means to end sex discrimination and provide equal opportunity for Iowa girls’ basketball players to earn college athletic scholarships.61 Reformers wanted girls to have the same opportunities as boys. They responded to the traditionalists’ argument on sex differentiation by claiming that this difference was culturally constructed. Relying on a discourse of equal opportunity, liberal reformers argued that if girls had the opportunity, along with the proper training and coaching, they would be able to play 5-on-5 successfully. Women were the most noted representatives of this group’s ideas, even as some of the political and legal efforts to change the rules were headed by men such as Thomas Mann, director of the Iowa Civil Rights Commission, and Dr. Peter Wirtz, president of Five on Five, Inc.62 Many former players, current players, and other Iowans also supported the position taken by liberal reformers, though as with the traditionalist group, primarily high-profile Iowans received the public and media attention. As noted above, critics and critiques of 6-on-6 were often broadly cast as feminists, and indeed, some of the participants that I have characterized as liberal reformers were self-identified feminists and/or members of organizations known to promote liberal feminist ideals and policies, such as the National Organization for Women. However, many of the people aligned most closely with the liberal reformers were not self-identified feminists. Ironically, even as some observers identified critics of the IGHSAU and its basketball rules as feminists, discussed below, others characterized the work of the IGHSAU, and Cooley in particular, with the same label.

Both traditionalists and liberal reformers referred to the two most basic differences between the six-player and five-player rules: length of the playing surface (half- versus full-court), and eligibility to shoot the ball (half the competitors versus all of them). Traditionalists regarded a switch to 5-on-5 as unfair because girls were unequipped for that style of play and would be unable to play the game effectively. A high school athletic director

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claimed they would be “asking young ladies to participate in basically a man’s game.” According to the *Des Moines Register*, “an oft-made argument” against the switch was that girls did not have the endurance to play full-court. Girls lacked the stamina of boys; they “just aren’t built the same.” As stated by Cooley, the rationale for an earlier decision about the rules came straight from physical difference:

> We [the union] decided that the full court game for girls was physiologically much slower than for boys; that girls didn’t jump as high or run as fast as boys; that they didn’t have as much strength because they are physiologically different.

This argument remained consistent over the decades. In the 1950s, the IGHSAU published medical opinions in its basketball yearbooks to demonstrate that although girls were physiologically different than boys, playing basketball was still safe and even beneficial to their health. The IGHSAU moved from discounting those differences as a means to justify its competitive basketball program, to relying on those differences as a rationale for keeping the half-court, six-player rules. Critics responded to the argument that girls did not have the stamina to play full-court basketball by noting that it was based on old-fashioned ideas about girls’ physicality. One former player retorted that “Diana Nyad just swam from the Bahamas to Florida, and if that doesn’t take stamina, I don’t know what does.”

Because the six-player game only allowed three players to shoot the ball, coaches in the traditionalist camp also claimed that a rules switch would force out the girls who had no shooting skills. Many girls had been pegged as forwards or guards based on the shooting ability they exhibited in their first days of organized basketball. “If a girl can’t shoot, she is a guard, and if a girl shows a shooting ability, she’s a forward, simple as that,” was a common refrain among coaches. Women physical educators, and some coaches and players spoke out against the idea that only some girls were born to shoot. Their remarks constructed athleticism not as a natural talent or gift but as skill acquired through training and coaching, consequently undermining other arguments about boys’ versus girls’ natural abilities. Players countered that hard work and practice were necessary to acquire the art of shooting, and many guards admitted that they would be reluctant to try out for college basketball because they would be lacking that important skill. One player said she had “no experience in shooting, and it would take too much time to learn. By then, college would be over.” They did not doubt their ability, only the time it would take to learn new skills. Rooted in long-standing beliefs about women in sport, the IGHSAU defended its view of girls’ physicality by pointing to the performance of current players: indeed, some girls could not shoot and most did not have the stamina to play full court. However, discourse analysis of the six-player rules illustrates their power to circumscribe girls’ physicality.

Ideologically, the rules reinforced the same old-fashioned ideas about girls’ physicality which the original “women’s basketball rules” were based upon by denying girls the opportunity or the physical space to prove otherwise. Traditionalists could argue that girls did not have the stamina to play 5-on-5 because in most cases, they did not. Yet, this had nothing to do with girls’ innate abilities and everything to do with rules that were designed to limit physical exertion. Within the structure of the game, girls could not challenge the
limitations placed upon them by rules or ascribed to their physical selves without breaking the rules. To illustrate, the rules prevented a player from crossing the center line, thus no player could demonstrate that she had the endurance to run full court. The center line dictated rest breaks for half of the players at any given time, as action continued only on one-half of the court. Similarly, the rules prevented unlimited dribbling thus disallowing any attempt by a player to show she could skillfully avoid inhibitive physical contact on her way to the basket. Finally, a defensive player had no opportunity to disprove the notion that she simply had no shooting ability. Of course, some players did switch sides and alternated between defense and offense when the occasion was called for, but this movement required special permission from the coach and officials. More significantly, the maneuver required an interruption of play—girls could not move out of their prescribed space on their own volition. The rules were understood as a common sense way of accommodating girls’ limited and inferior physical abilities, and the lines on the playing surface restricted where and what kind of movements they could make. In short, the players were trapped within a discursive playing field—created and maintained by the IGHSAU—which was both ideological and material. As producers of the rules, the performances of physicality were orchestrated by the IGHSAU and, as such, become suspect as justification for the continuation of 6-on-6.

For the most part, traditionalist male voice dominated the conversations about the rules. The news media privileged their voices, according their views more coverage than those opposed to 6-on-6. Moreover, traditionalists generally engaged in commentary about girls’ abilities to play either version of the game more often than did reformers and did not acknowledge nor respond to claims that 6-on-6 was sexist and out-of-date. Yet, the IGHSAU faced public criticism for its antiquated and entrenched position. The Des Moines Register published several editorials chastising the male-dominated IGHSAU for being obstinate in the face of growing legal and public challenges to 6-on-6 and characterized a public hearing on the rules’ debate as “a parade of men who talked about how great Iowa rules are and a parade of women who attacked those rules as ‘demeaning’ and discriminatory.” The IGHSAU was mocked as being stuck in the past, as in this description of the game: “the quaint half-court game handed down to them by their grandmothers. Or should we say grandfathers?” and of school administrators who supported it: “We asked 165 middle-aged men how girls should play the game, and they say like their grandmothers.” In stark contrast to this portrait of the IGHSAU as sexist, some observers labeled its leader, Cooley, as a feminist—a contested characterization.

Although he has been credited for guiding the IGHSAU to do “what is best for the Iowa girl,” and despite efforts to cast him as a feminist, Cooley alternately dismissed, appropriated, and negotiated his way around the rhetoric of feminism as it suited him and the occasion. In 1976, the Omaha World Herald implied that Cooley was an early feminist, observing that Iowa’s leadership in girls’ basketball predated the National Organization for Women and Gloria Steinem. And in 1992, Cooley curtly denied a reporter’s suggestion that he was Iowa’s leading feminist (although he softened his response and said that he had not thought of himself in those terms before). He came to have “a love affair with the Iowa girl,” but when he first took the job in 1954 he claimed to have had “no special interest in women’s rights.” In a 1973 Sports Illustrated article, Cooley explained
that his motivation for making the girls’ program so successful was to make it as good as the sports program offered for boys by the Iowa High School Athletic Association—to beat the competition. (As noted earlier, the IHSAA’s vote to drop the girls’ basketball tournament led to the formation of the IGHSAU.) In spite of Iowa’s impressive record for providing girls opportunities, and in light of Cooley’s comments, *Sports Illustrated* concluded that he should not be mistaken for a crusader for women but rather qualified as a hard-working executive and promoter.\(^8^0\) In a 1983 interview with the *Des Moines Register*, Cooley denied that the women’s movement had affected women’s sports in Iowa because their programs had been there to begin with.\(^8^1\) He deflected attempts to characterize his work as in the interest of women’s rights, yet he did not accept the charges that the IGHSAU and the girls’ basketball rules were sexist. Cooley asked how they could be sexist when they offered girls’ so many opportunities. “I don’t know why the feminist people are coming at us,” he told the *Wall Street Journal*.\(^8^2\) He even proclaimed “[I]t’s a game for girls and by girls—and nothing is more feminist on this earth.”\(^8^3\)

Given some of Cooley’s public comments on women’s role in society, many feminists likely grimaced at attempts to equate him with their movement. For instance, in response to a *womenSports* magazine story about the lack of women coaches in Iowa, Cooley explained why men would always represent a higher percentage of coaches:

> Not because the women aren’t capable, but because historically and traditionally, a woman will be a professional person for three or four years; then she gets married, has a family, and abandons professional life as a coach. I hope that’ll never change. We’ve got to have some housewives and some mothers or something’s going to happen to this society.\(^8^4\)

His philosophy on appropriate gender roles dated back to Cooley’s earliest years on the job when one of his first initiatives was to bar girls from competing who were married or had a child. He stated that “husbands and homes were the first obligation of the wives.”\(^8^5\) The courts forced Cooley to repeal the IGHSAU’s seventeen-year-old rule when Jane Rubel, a high-scoring forward, wife and mother, filed and won a lawsuit in 1971 in order to play
her senior year of high school. The ruling was based in part on sex discrimination as no similar regulations existed concerning male athletes who are fathers, husbands or divorcées. By denying that the development of the Iowa girls’ basketball program could be connected to, or motivated by, furthering women’s rights, Cooley tried to avoid making girls’ basketball a political issue. Despite Cooley’s and other 6-on-6 supporters’ efforts to keep 6-on-6 as “just a game” and out of the political arena, Iowa girls’ basketball was right in the middle of it. This was not “just” politics. The controversy over Iowa girls’ basketball had both material and ideological effects that affected people’s lives.

On and Off the Court: Considering the Consequences

The power struggle between these two institutions went beyond a turf battle and, in fact, had consequences—ideological and material—for many Iowans, female and male, as students, athletes, coaches, teachers, and administrators. Significantly, the rules had a far-reaching material effect in compromising a player’s chance of being considered for an athletic scholarship. Opportunities to participate in the Olympic games and other venues were also limited. The six-player rules did not allow girls the means to learn and develop the skills necessary to adequately compete for college scholarships against girls from states playing 5-on-5. In 1979, The Iowa Civil Rights Commission (ICRC) considered this scenario and proposed banning 6-on-6 on the grounds that it discriminated against the non-shooting player and 6-on-6 players in general when competing for college scholarships. ICRC Director Thomas Mann explained that a 1978 civil rights law compelled them to address “controversial sports questions and ‘prejudices rooted in tradition,’” even if their actions upset people. Burke’s research on this topic showed that most athletic scholarships were awarded to forwards rather than guards, and that scholarship opportunities continued to decrease for all Iowa players. For example, in 1977, thirty-five athletic scholarships were awarded to Iowa girls’ basketball players: twenty-nine to forwards, none to guards (six were undocumented). In 1978, only twenty-eight scholarships were granted; twenty-three went to forwards. Boys’ basketball players did not face the same limitations.

The effects of the power struggle between the IGHSAU and women physical educators went beyond the boundaries of the basketball court and the players trapped by the six-player rules. A decrease in the number of female physical education majors and a shortage of women physical educators and female girls’ basketball coaches in Iowa schools were linked to the long-standing animosity between these two groups. In the mid 1950s, both UI’s Gladys Scott and E. Wayne Cooley noted the shortage of women physical educators at Iowa high schools. Scott saw this problem highlighted in the smaller schools where the IGHSAU had a strong presence. To address this situation, the IGHSAU offered interest-free loans to girls planning to major in physical education, while Scott asked a mutual friend to broach Cooley about the possibility of his helping to steer girls into physical education. She warned that this was a “very delicate situation” because she attributed the decline in female students studying physical education to a belief by the IGHSAU and its affiliated high schools that the UI Department of Physical Education for Women would not welcome girls’ basketball players in their program.

Sixteen years later, in 1972, a school superintendent blamed both the women physical educators and the IGHSAU for a lack of female coaches at Iowa high schools and ex-
pressed concern about a possible loss of job opportunities for women. Robert Buckner, Superintendent for the Central Community School District, complained to the State Board of Public Instruction that the women’s physical education departments at the three state universities were not training its students to coach 6-on-6, or any sport for that matter. The superintendent also faulted the IGHSAU for not making any effort to promote cooperation with women physical educators for the purposes of recruiting women coaches for girls’ sports. The fault primarily resided with the educators in his view, and he blamed their outdated philosophy on girls’ sport programs. Buckner stated that high schools were now requiring physical education teachers to also coach because of the “big swing” in girls’ sports; and in many cases, men were employed to both teach girls’ physical education and coach because schools needed girls’ coaches who were qualified to coach. His comments were later substantiated by a study appearing in the *Iowa State Journal of Research* that showed women teachers were losing jobs to male physical education teachers who were hired not only to coach but to teach subjects like social studies, mathematics and English—subjects more commonly taught by women. However, at the same time as women were losing teaching positions, the percentage of females (over 70 percent) graduating in teacher education at Iowa’s three state universities was increasing. The author, a political scientist, suggested that eliminating the coaching/teaching relationship as a condition of employment could stop this trend. The disparity in coaching positions between women and men is well beyond the scope of this article, and more importantly, is an ongoing problem that extends well beyond Iowa high schools. However, these narratives show that the problem was perceived (by many parties) to be rooted in the relationship between the women physical educators and the IGHSAU.

**Conclusion**

In 1984, Des Moines school board member Jonathan Wilson introduced a resolution intended to start the Des Moines district down the path to an eventual switch to 5-on-5. His stated reason for doing so, at the risk of being called a “rabble rouser,” was his concern that the school district (and by intimation, the union) had “communicated an inappropriate message to our young people relative to the ability of boys and girls.” The inappropriate message to which Wilson referred originated in the 6-on-6 rules and with the traditionalists who supported the game. Traditionalists advocated the continuance of a game designed at the turn of the century and premised on assumptions of girls’ inferior physicality to boys. Using compensatory discourse, they argued that girls did not have the stamina to compete in a full-court game, lacked the athleticism and skills that boys had, and that too many girls could not shoot. Some traditionalists celebrated the skills girls acquired, despite the limits of the game and their physicality. Liberal reformers contested this construction of girls’ physicality and the continuation of a game deemed well-suited for girls by men who had never played the game. They argued that girls could also be well-suited for 5-on-5 if they were given the proper instruction and training. Although the dominant discourse on girls’ physicality supported the traditionalists’ view, the equal opportunity discourse, backed by a pending civil trial, pushed the IGHSAU to offer 5-on-5 as an option in 1984.

The controversy over Iowa girls’ basketball had most commonly taken the form of “five players or six?” during the 1970s and early 1980s, yet the issues and events faced by
the IGHSAU during this time period pointed to more profound questions: Why did men have complete control of Iowa girls’ basketball? Why did so few women coach girls’ basketball? Where were women in the IGHSAU’s administration? Why did the IGHSAU so strongly resist switching the rules? And finally, why did the most vocal critics of 6-on-6 seem to be women and the most defensive supporters men? The controversy over changing the rules was most obviously about a struggle for power and control over girls’ athletics and that gender was the primary underlying factor—similar to the narratives about college women physical educators and the NCAA in Smith’s and Wushanley’s work. However, in this case, it was the male-dominated IGHSAU—and not women physical educators—whose resistance to adopting the 5-on-5 rules limited the possibilities for female basketball players to earn and enjoy the same elite level athletic opportunities as Iowa boys. And as noted just above, the battle between these groups had long-ranging consequences affecting schools and educators in a number of ways.

Supporters of 6-on-6 challenged the legitimacy of feminist concerns about gender equity and the social construction of gender by resisting the notion that the rules’ controversy constituted a “women’s issue,” except when it was politically expedient to do so. Speaking from a position of entrenched power (even then, Cooley had already held his office for twenty years), Cooley dismissed the necessity for, or impact of, the women’s movement, by denying his investment in women’s rights and supporting paternalism and his organization’s constitution. The IGHSAU rationalized its resistance to changing the rules by defining girls as different than boys, particularly their physical capabilities. By doing so, players were excluded from fairly competing for post-secondary school basketball opportunities. The IGHSAU’s constitutional definitions of appropriate parties to serve on its executive board also functioned to exclude women from the inner circles of the IGHSAU. Combined, these processes helped maintain and reinforce the authority of this male-dominated organization.

The liberal reformers’ campaign to change the way girls played basketball in Iowa took place alongside a critique of the male-dominated power structure of the IGHSAU, and these efforts occurred within the context of a social movement to improve upon women’s second-class citizenship. Changing the rules also meant challenging dominant constructions of girls’ physicality and challenging social constructions of gender more generally. If girls could play full-court basketball despite popular assumptions to the contrary, what else might girls (and women) be able to do? The women’s movement combined with the possibility of switching the rules threatened to upset the heavily gendered balance of power within Iowa girls’ high school athletics—and the scale had been firmly tipped to the men’s side since the IGHSAU’s formation in the 1925.

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1Six-on-six featured teams of six players, three defensive and three offensive, separated by the half-court line. Only players on offense could shoot and score, no one could cross the center line, and all players were limited to two dribbles. Essentially, a 6-on-6 contest looked more like two games of 3-on-3. Although other states continued to play by the six-player rules after the 1971 national rules change, Iowa had the most physically confining rules. Only Iowa limited the number of dribbles. Oklahoma, the one state to outlast Iowa and continue playing six-girl basketball, permitted unlimited dribbling, defenders could knock the ball loose anywhere on the court, and after a field goal the opposing team had to move the ball up the court to their offense (similar to 5-on-5). Iowa players were limited to two dribbles,
defenders could tie the ball up only in the free throw lane, slapping the ball anywhere else was a foul, and players were allowed to stand back up with the ball after falling to the ground and not be called for traveling. N. Peggy Burke, “Iowa Girls’ Six-player High School Basketball Discriminates, Burke Says,” press release, The University of Iowa Women’s Sports Relations, 8 November 1978, N. Peggy Burke Papers: Equality in women’s athletics, Six-player girls’ basketball, Reports, 1976-1978, Iowa Women’s Archives, The University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa (hereafter IWA); Chuck Schoffner, untitled Associated Press newspaper clipping, 19 August 1990, Janice A. Beran Papers: Research files—girls’ basketball, newspaper clippings, IWA.

According to Janice A. Beran’s published history of Iowa girls’ basketball, girls and women have been playing basketball in Iowa since 1893. The Iowa Girls’ High School Athletic Union (IGHSAU) moved from the three-court to the two-court rules in 1934. Janice A. Beran, From Six-on-Six to Full Court Press: A Century of Iowa Girls’ Basketball (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1994), 57.

2“HEW Shelves 6-player Ruling,” 14 September 1978, Janice A. Beran Papers: Research files—girls’ basketball, newspaper clippings, IWA.


4The controversy over Iowa girls’ basketball rules gained widespread public attention in Iowa when the game came under fire in the 1970s and early 1980s from a variety of legal challenges brought under and stemming from Title IX including a 1976 Tennessee court ruling declaring the six-player game discriminatory, a 1978 investigation by the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW), a proposed anti-discrimination rule banning the game by the Iowa Civil Rights Commission in 1979, and a federal lawsuit brought by three young Iowa girls in 1983. I grew up in Iowa playing 6-on-6. In 1984, my senior year of high school, the IGHSAU offered schools the option of playing the five-player game as a compromise which precipitated settlement of the civil lawsuit. Schools gradually began to switch over to the new rules until the IGHSAU voted to retire 6-on-6 while it was still a viable and strong game. At the time of the announcement, 134 schools played 5-on-5, and 275 played 6-on-6. Beginning with the 1993-1994 school year, Iowa girls played 5-on-5 exclusively. Susan Harman, “Tradition to End: Farewell, 6-girl Game,” Des Moines Register, 4 February 1993, sec. A, p. 1.

5During the height of the rules’ controversy, critics of the IGHSAU also decried the lack of women coaches, and female representatives within the IGHSAU leadership and governing bodies—an ongoing issue of concern dating back to the early days of competitive girls’ basketball in Iowa. While integral to the gendered struggle for power over girls’ basketball, this issue did not generate nearly the amount of public debate and media attention as the rules’ controversy. Although I address this issue in the larger research project, for the purposes of this article, I focus primarily on the details and discourse associated with the rules’ controversy.

6I consulted a variety of primary source materials, published and unpublished, in this study. I was fortunate to have a wide range of archival materials available at the Iowa Women’s Archives located in the University of Iowa Libraries. Because Iowa girls’ basketball occupies such a strong place in Iowa history and culture, numerous collections in the IWA include material pertaining to Iowa girls’ basketball. The following three collections offered the richest source material for my purposes: the University of Iowa Department of Physical Education for Women Records, the N. Peggy Burke Papers, and the Janice A. Beran Papers. My research on the attitudes, opinions, and actions of women physical educators in Iowa is focused on the administrative records of the UI Iowa Department of Physical Education for Women. While these archival documents necessarily provide a better view of this particular collegiate institution.
and its faculty, the correspondence files and other records contain the names of women physical educators from across Iowa (and elsewhere) indicating their shared concerns about Iowa girls' basketball.

Despite the history of animosity between UI women's physical educators and the IGHSAU, in 1992 the university sponsored E. Wayne Cooley Night at a women's basketball game in honor of his contributions to girls' and women's athletics. Cooley had served at the helm of the IGHSAU as the Executive Secretary since 1954 and was credited with both expanding and promoting the girls' high school athletics program. At that game, it was announced that the IWA would be the repository of the IGHSAU's records. As a graduate research assistant at the IWA, I worked to facilitate the transfer of those records to no avail. Unfortunately, not only were the records not made available for researchers, but the current administration of the IGHSAU reports that its records have been destroyed in due course with the passage of time. Despite this loss, some correspondence and other primary sources originating from the IGHSAU can be found within the papers of various organizations and persons affiliated with athletics, education, and politics. Three secondary sources also provide important information about the organization. Beran's book, *From Six-on-Six to Full Court Press*, and her other publications provide scholarly descriptions of important details throughout the history of the IGHSAU. Two books published by the IGHSAU offer insight and anecdotes into the history and development of its sports program, albeit from a celebratory standpoint. Jim Enright's *Only in Iowa: Where the High School Girl Athlete is Queen* (Des Moines, Iowa: IGHSAU, 1976) contains numerous interviews with key administrators and coaches for many sports. E. Wayne Cooley and the Iowa Girl: *A Celebration of the Nation's Best High School Girls Sports Program* (2002), commissioned and published by the IGHSAU, offers a longer narrative about Cooley's personal and professional development, as well as stories about the inner workings of the IGHSAU and its staff. Written by a popular Iowa newspaper columnist, Chuck Offenburger, this book appeared in late 2002 to commemorate Cooley's retirement after fifty-four years at the helm of the IGHSAU.


Iowa's uniqueness was also a popular narrative outside of organizational and institutional sport history. National publications such as the *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*, *USA Today*, *Life*, and *Sports Illustrated* turned their attention to Iowa girls' basketball and the state within the past fifty years or so, particularly around state tournament time.
During the time that this study was underway, an American Studies graduate student completed a dissertation that, in part, describes the transition from the six-player to the five-player game. See David W. (Max) McElwain, “The Only Dance in Iowa: A Cultural History of Iowa Six-Player Girls’ Basketball” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Kansas, 2001).


10Cahn, Coming on Strong, 56; Smith, “Women’s Control of American College Sport,” 103-120. Smith argues that the leading women physical educators supported their separatist, non-competitive women’s sport model in order to protect their power and control over women’s collegiate sport and that this model came at the expense of skilled female athletes who were excluded from competition.

11Beran describes the earliest years of Iowa girls’ basketball as well as the tumultuous activities of the 1920s in “Playing to the Right Drummer.” The pressure to end the state tournament came from a network of sources as the Women’s Division obtained endorsements for its position on modified sports for girls and women from almost 250 school officials, recreation groups, and athletic associations. Cahn, Coming on Strong, 61-62; “Report of the Committee on Athletics,” National Association of Secondary-School Principals Ninth Yearbook (1925), quoted in Athletics for Girls: A Digest of Principles and Policies for Administrators and Teachers in Junior and Senior High Schools (New York: Department of School Health and Physical Education of the National Education Association, 1933), p. 5, found in University of Iowa Department of Physical Education for Women Records (hereafter UI Department of PE for Women Records): unprocessed publications, IWA; Hult, “The Governance of Athletics for Girls and Women,” 58, 69-71. I also found evidence that women’s physical education leaders in Iowa lobbied the IHSA to cease sponsorship of the girls’ sport. These efforts were referenced in Ruby Ana Holton to Elizabeth Halsey, 9 December 1937, UI Department of PE for Women Records: Administrative Records, Halsey, Correspondence, “H”, IWA.

12E. Wayne Cooley was only the second person to hold the office of Executive Secretary in the Iowa Girls’ High School Athletic Union. He recently retired in the fall of 2002 at the age of eighty and will remain a consultant to the union. Troy Dannen, age 35, replaced Cooley.

13Governor Robert Ray and Senator Dick Clark lobbied the Office of Civil Rights (of the HEW) to postpone and later overturn a decision to declare the six-player game discriminatory. Governor Ray was on record as being strongly opposed to any effort to force Iowa to change the 6-on-6 girls’ basketball rules.

14Smith, “Women’s Control of American College Sport,” 107. Smith uses this example in reference to women’s power and control over college women’s sport from 1870 to 1970.

15M. Gladys Scott to Katherine M. Roggow, 6 December 1973, UI Department of PE for Women Records: Administrative Records, Correspondence, Scott and Fox, “R”, IWA.

16M. Gladys Scott, interview by James Beilman, 2 November and 9 November 1976, Volume XLIV, transcript, The University of Iowa Oral History Project, 1976-1977, Special Collections, The University of Iowa Libraries. Scott describes many of the difficulties that she and the department faced due to power struggles with UI administration and the UI Department of Physical Education for Men concerning issues such as resources (facilities, salaries, and so forth) and philosophy (such as curriculum and department mergers). In the early 1970s, an HEW investigation found that the women’s physical education department had been subjected to sex discrimination on campus. The quotation describing Burke as “aggressive” occurs during Scott’s description of unrest on campus during the early 1970s, see Scott transcript, p. 142.

In her oral history interview, Burke talks about her political activism with regard to feminism, Title IX, AIAW, and her philosophy concerning women and competition in sport. N. Peggy Burke, interview by Linda J. Yanney, 15 November 2000, Special Collections, The University of Iowa Libraries.


Scott interview by Beilman. The University of North Carolina at Greensboro recognized UI's Department of Physical Education for Women as a "Center of Influence" based on three selection criteria: 1) production of nationally notable students (as teachers, researchers, committee women, and leaders in organizations such as the Division for Girls and Women in Sport (DGWS); 2) the ability to attract nationally notable teachers, researchers, writers and administrators; and 3) historically noted for outstanding contributions to the physical education profession. Bonnie A. Beck to Gladys Scott, 15 November 1973, UI Department of PE for Women Records: Administrative Records, Correspondence, Scott and Fox, "B" (folder 1), IWA. In addition, Faculty and alumni from UI were well connected to AIAW leadership. Peg Burke and Christine Grant each served as president, as did alumni Laurie Mabry and Ginny Hunt (president-elect at the time AIAW dissolved.) Bonnie Slatton served as the president of DGWS.

Elizabeth Halsey to Margaret Hayes, Chicago Field Hockey Association, 14 October 1928, and Elizabeth Halsey to Mabel Lee, Director, Department of Physical Education for Women, University of Nebraska, 13 June 1932, both located in the UI Department of PE for Women Records: Administrative records, Correspondence, Halsey, General, c. 1926-1951 (folder 2), IWA.

As for the university's reputation in the state of Iowa, a letter from the Director of Women's Physical Education at Drake University (located in the state capital of Des Moines) suggested that UI might carry more authority on the issue than her institution. Ruby Ana Holton to Elizabeth Halsey, 22 November 1939, UI Department of PE for Women Records: Administrative records, Correspondence, Halsey, "H", IWA.

Scott to Roggow, 6 December 1973.

Ruby Ana Holton to Elizabeth Halsey, 9 December 1937, UI Department of PE for Women Records: Administrative Records, Correspondence, Halsey, "H", IWA.

Ibid.; Elizabeth Halsey to Ruby Ana Holton, 28 November 1939; Elizabeth Halsey to Earl Hall, Mason City *Globe-Gazette*, 29 May 1939, both located in UI Department of PE for Women Records: Administrative records, Halsey, Correspondence, "H", IWA.

R. H. Chisholm, an Iowa sportswriter and fan of girls' basketball, created the *Iowa Girls' Basketball Yearbook* in 1944. The IGHSAU took over publishing the yearbook in 1950 with the last publication in 1964.


Sport historians have identified a number of factors and influences that contributed to the shift in attitudes toward competition sports for women, including the social change movement of the 1960s and 1970s, the coming of age of a younger generation of women physical educators, and the American Medical Association modifying its stance on competitive athletics for girls and women in 1960 to now.

28 Hult, “The Saga of Competition,” 234; see also Davenport, “Tides of Change,” 91-93, 100-104, and fn3.


31 For instance, writer Linda Ford suggests that Iowa schools did not really need Title IX based on the large numbers of female high school athletes already playing sports there. Linda Ford, Lady Hoopsters: A History of Women’s Basketball in America (Northhampton, Mass.: Half Moon Books, 1999), 123. Also, the Women’s Basketball Hall of Fame recognized Iowa’s high schools as being twelve years ahead of Title IX mandates. See E. Wayne Cooley Induction Biography, Women’s Basketball Hall of Fame [website], available at www.wbhof.com [30 October 2001].

32 E. Wayne Cooley to Governor Robert Ray, 21 February 1974, UI Department of PE for Women Records: Intercollegiate Athletics, unprocessed papers, IWA.

33 Beran, From Six-on-Six, 99; handwritten speech, N. Peggy Burke, Testimony about IGHSAU’s administrative structure, 1977, Burke Papers: Equality in women’s athletics, Six-player girls’ basketball, Notes, 1976, 1977, and undated, IWA.

34 For example, during her term as State Senate President Pro Tem, Minnette Doderer posed two questions to the Office of Civil Rights concerning Title IX requirements in relation to Iowa’s separate athletic associations for girls and boys and appointive power granted to school superintendents to select board members for these associations. Jerold D. Ward to Honorable Minnette Doderer, 13 January 1976, Doderer Papers.

35 Sarah K. Fields, “Female Gladiators: Gender, Law, and Contact Sport in America” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Iowa, 2000), 102-118. Fields argues that although legal actions concerning six-player basketball, including the 1983 lawsuit filed in Iowa, were inspired by Title IX, this piece of legislation was in fact, ineffective and inappropriate as a legal remedy for two reasons. First, basketball was defined as a contact sport (which were exempt from enforcement), and second, because Title IX made no provision for sports played by different rules for each gender.

36 See the Iowa ERA Coalition Records housed in the IWA.

37 Advertisement, “Girls’ Basketball and the ‘ERA,’” Iowa NOW Records: ERA-Iowa, Antis, 1980, IWA. I found a large number of anti-ERA campaign materials in several collections at the IWA, including the records of the Iowa ERA Coalition, Iowa Women Against the ERA, and Iowa NOW. A few examples of the artifacts that listed Iowa sports or at times more specifically, Iowa girls’ basketball, are as follows: Brochure, “A Vote for the ‘ERA’ is a Vote for ‘Gay Rights,’” Iowa NOW Records: ERA-Iowa,

38J. Keith Rigg to Trudy Kattner, 3 July 1980, and Monica McFadden to Victoria Herring, 9 July 1980, both located in the Iowa ERA Coalition papers, Topical files, Sports and the Iowa ERA, 1980, IWA.

39Jane J. Mansbridge, *Why We Lost the ERA* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); see also Donald G. Mathews and Jane Sherron De Hart, *Sex, Gender, and the Politics of the ERA: A State and the Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); and Wandersee, *On the Move*. In their study of the ERA in North Carolina, Mathews and De Hart suggest that their research does more than attempt to explain the failure of the ERA; rather, their analysis of the discourse surrounding the debates provides an understanding of the women’s movement and its place in the U.S. in the 1970s. My larger project on the rules’ controversy in Iowa girls’ basketball has a similar purpose. (This project incorporates my dissertation which is being reworked for publication in book form.) For one, I hope to provide a better explanation for the switch from 6-on-6 to 5-on-5. But also through a discursive analysis of the rules’ controversy, I am trying to unpack the meanings attributed to the game and its players, and the relationships and connections among the game, the state of Iowa, and the history of the game. For example, the Iowa media’s characterization of the advocates for the rule change as feminists and the debate as a “Women’s Issue” also cast light on the place of the women’s movement in Iowa in the 1970s. Shelley Lucas, “Courting Controversy: Gender and Power in Iowa Girls’ Basketball” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Iowa, 2001).


42My conceptualization of discourse as an expanded definition of text is informed by Roland Barthes’s inclusion of images and cultural practices as text, and the more recent example provided by Susan Birrell and Mary McDonald’s “reading sport” method whereby they consider sports personalities and events as texts from which multiple and shifting meanings can be read. See John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993), 77-85, for his explanation of the work of Roland Barthes within the theoretical methodology of structuralism; and Mary G. McDonald and Susan Birrell, “Reading Sport Critically: A Methodology for Interrogating Power,” *Sociology of Sport Journal* 16 (1999): 283-300. Also see this method put into practice in Susan Birrell and Mary G. McDonald, eds., *Reading Sport: Critical Essays on Power and Representation* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000).


44The IGHSAU responded to early criticism about the lack of women on its executive board by deferring to its constitution and the requirement that board members be school superintendents. In the mid-1970s, Iowa public schools had only one female superintendent. Similarly, the Advisory Committees for the various sports were heavily male-dominated and typically chaired by men, with the exception of a few sports like synchronized swimming. See Burke speech (about IGHSAU’s administrative structure).

The IGHSAU Constitution was amended, presumably due to political pressure, in 1974 to include the provision that one board member be a “lady” coach or director (now referred to as “woman”). An examination of the issues concerning women’s representation in the coaching and administrative ranks is discussed more fully in the larger research study, see Lucas, “Courting Controversy,” 95-105.
45 On the role of female physical educators and medical and cultural influences on women’s sport, including basketball, see Hult and Trekell, eds., *A Century of Women’s Basketball*; Cahn, *Coming on Strong*; and Lenskyj, *Out of Bounds*.

46 Rita Liberti, “‘We Were Ladies, We Just Played Like Boys’: African American Womanhood and Competitive Basketball at Bennett College, 1928-1942,” *Journal of Sport History* 26 (1999): 567-584; Robin Bell Markels, “Bloomer Basketball and Its Suspender Suppression: Women’s Intercollegiate Competition at Ohio State, 1904-1907,” *Journal of Sport History* 27 (2000): 31-49. Liberti and Markels provide recent examples of a growing body of literature that examines race, class, and region to dispute the scholarly assumption of the universalizing effect of women physical educators’ anti-competitive platform in women’s basketball history.

47 See endnote 1.


49 The term “feminism” is used in a general way in mediated sources, equating the theory and/or with a general goal of ending women’s oppression, which does not capture the nuances of various strands of feminist theory. Likewise, individuals who were represented as “feminists” were painted with the same broad brush. I have found that the feminist discourse associated with the rules’ controversy is most accurately characterized within liberal feminism. I have not come across arguments in favor of 6-on-6 that rely on, or embrace, a radical feminist position. Mary Boutilier and Lucinda SanGiovanni suggest that a radical feminist would argue to preserve and support the game as “one of the few athletic forms that presents an alternative to the men’s game and reflects women’s unique approach to sport.” Boutilier and SanGiovanni, *The Sporting Woman*, 250.


55 Elbert, “Five-girl Basketball Mounts Iowa Poll Drive.”


57 A group of women led by Sherry Laughery, a 1963 state basketball champion, protested outside of Veteran’s Auditorium at the 1993 state tournament. They handed out almost 6,000 petition letters to spectators attending the tournament. Susan Harman, “Protesters Hoping to Save Six-Player Game Greets Fans,” *Des Moines Register*, 10 March 1993, sec. S, p. 4.

58 In her research on the under-representation of women in the governance of Iowa girls’ sports in the mid-1970s, Burke tabulated preliminary statistics to document the number of female superintendents, principals, vice-principals, and athletic directors (high school and junior high). In her sample, (the first 100 schools, alphabetically, in a list of approximately 500 schools), she found only four women: one principal and three vice-principals. See Burke speech as well as endnote 44.
The percentage of female basketball coaches dropped to an all-time low of 1.5 percent in 1972 (Beran, *From Six-on-Six*, 122). By the early 1990s, the number of women coaching Iowa girls’ basketball had risen to as high as 18.5 percent, only to steadily decrease in the years that followed, nearing 10 percent in the late 1990s. According to the Women’s Basketball Coaches Association, Iowa brings down the national average that was about 20 percent near the end of the 1990s. In what appear to be separate studies, slightly different numbers result from two surveys on the number of women coaching Iowa girls’ basketball during the 1992-1993 season. Jeff Oliphant adapted a NCAA gender-equity survey to a high school setting and reports that women represented 15.2 percent of head coaches and 47.3 percent of assistant coaches. Jeff Oliphant, “Iowa High Schools Athletic Gender-Equity Study,” available at http://bailiwick.lib.uiowa.edu/ge/IowaStudy/iowahs.html. A 1998 *Iowa City Press-Citizen* front-page story about the shortage of women coaches references a study (author unknown) completed for the IGHSAU. The study indicates an all-time high of 18.5 percent female head coaches for 1992-1993 and a decrease to 10.3 percent for 1997-1998. Rob Howe, “Fewer Women Coaching: More Girls’ Teams Led by Males,” *Iowa City Press-Citizen*, 12 March 1998, sec. A, p.1.

Of the 490 questionnaires sent out, 390 returned at least one of the four sent out (to coaches, principals, etc.) Class 1A (smaller schools) voted 85% in favor of keeping 6-on-6 with superintendents–98%, principals–76%, athletic directors–76%, coaches–87%. Class 2A (bigger schools) had slightly lower numbers, with 74% overall supporting 6-on-6: superintendents–66%, principals–67%, athletic directors–77%, coaches–84%. Peterson, “Survey,” sec. S, p. 1.


Liberal reformers who pushed for equal opportunity in Iowa girls’ basketball would also closely fit into the liberal feminist model described by Boutilier and SanGiovanni in *The Sporting Woman*, 42-43.

See “Smith Backs Suit Seeking 5-on-5 Girls Basketball,” *Des Moines Register*, 18 August 1984, sec. S, p. 4, for a list of prominent Iowans supporting the efforts of the group “Five on Five, Inc.”—the group that pushed forward the 1983 lawsuit that led to the introduction of 5-on-5 play in Iowa. The names of ten supporters are provided: eight women and two men. As director of the Iowa Civil Rights Commission, Thomas Mann tried to push forward a set of anti-discrimination rules that included a provision to ban 6-on-6. The Iowa Commission on the Status of Women and the Iowa International Women’s Year assembly had previously formally declared their support for five-player rules for girls, “Commission Supports 5-player Basketball”; N. Peggy Burke to Governor Robert Ray, 15 August 1978, Burke Papers: Equality in women’s athletics, Six-player girls’ basketball, Correspondence, 1976-1978, IWA.


Sandra Staker quoted in Wirtenberg, “Ex-players Back 5-person Basketball.”

Simpson College Coach Rod Lein quoted in Randy Peterson, “Girls’ Cage Ruling Angers Cooley; Sees Suit in Iowa,” *Des Moines Register*, 2 December 1976, Burke Papers: Equality in women’s athletics, Six-player girls’ basketball, Newspaper clippings, 1974-1978, IWA. See also the statement by coach Larry Niemeyer in Randy Peterson, “Girls’ Basketball Controversy Renewed,” *Des Moines Register*, 30 November 1976, sec. S, p. 4. I imagine my earliest coaches used the same formula for as far as I can remember, I only played in the guard position.
Quotation from a Dysart-Geneseo player in Peterson, “Girls’ Cagers”; “Basketball Outcry,” [four letters to the Editor], Des Moines Register, 1979, Beran Papers: Research files—girls’ basketball, Newspaper clippings, IWA; Cindy Altmaier, “There’s a Difference,” letter to the Editor, Des Moines Register, 22 July 1979, sec. D, p. 9; Suss, “Attitudes.”

A common example would be moving a tall forward to play defense at the end of a close game to prevent the opponent from scoring.


The Iowa Civil Rights Commission held three hearings around the state in the summer of 1979 to hear public testimony on its proposed anti-discriminatory rules which included a ban of six-player basketball. The final hearing, held in Cedar Rapids, was a day-long affair that included testimony from twenty-five people. “Men and Girls’ Basketball,” sec. A, p. 12 [quotation]; John Carlson, “Rights Panel Hears Views on Basketball,” Des Moines Register, 31 August 1979, sec. B, p. 10.

“Ian Binnie quoted in Jonathan Roos, “D.M. Basketball Players to be Polled on 5-girl Issue,” Des Moines Register, 8 February 1980, sec. A, p. 3. Binnie’s comment pertained to a Des Moines School Board poll of administrators of the state’s largest ninety-six high schools to see which rules they preferred.

Beran, From Six-on-Six, 194.


Beran, From Six-on-Six, 194.


Ibid.

The Condition of Girls’ Sports in Iowa,” Des Moines Register, 6 March 1983, sec. D, p. 9. The IGHSAU offered fifteen sports by the late 1970s, due in part to the financial success of the basketball program: basketball, volleyball, cross-country track, softball, team gymnastics, all-around gymnastics, tennis singles, tennis doubles, coed tennis, singles golf, doubles golf, coed golf, track, swimming, and diving. Most of these sports were added between 1955 and 1970. Beran, From Six-on-Six, 102.


Denney newspaper clipping.

Molly Tyson, “Iowa Fever: Girls’ Basketball is Big Business in the Corn Belt. Ask Any Scalper,” womenSports, December 1977, p. 29, found in Iowa Cornets Records: WBL, Articles and newspaper clippings, 1977-1979 and undated, IWA. At that time, 1977, women represented only 5.2 percent of coaches (26 of 497).

Soon after he started, Cooley polled school superintendents throughout the state and got permission to do three things: expand the high school program beyond basketball, make junior high girls ineligible for the high school team, and ban married girls and mothers from playing. E. Wayne Cooley quoted in Enright, Only in Iowa, 39-40.

In 1972, the Federal District Court in Iowa ruled that the IGHSAU violated both the state constitution and the U.S. Constitution for forbidding married and divorced female students and students who are mothers from participating in high school sports. IoWoman (newsletter of the Iowa Commission on the Status of Women), January 1972, p. 3, found in Iowa Commission on the Status of Women, IoWoman, IWA; Richard Broaddie, “Six-player Star Jane Rubel Won Victory for Girls’ Rights,” Des Moines Register, 14 March 1993, sec. D, p. 9, found in Jane Christoffer Rubel Papers: IWA. Additional documentation of the lawsuit is available in Rubel’s papers housed in the IWA.


E. Wayne Cooley, “Aims, Objectives of Girls’ Union”; M. Gladys Scott to Carl Troester, Executive Secretary, AAHPER, 30 April 1956, UI Department of PE for Women Records: Administrative Records, Correspondence, Scott, General, 1956 (folder 3), IWA.

Robert D. Buckner to Mrs. Richard Cole, State Board of Public Instruction, 20 January 1972, Doderer Papers. Buckner claimed that female students were “brainwashed” during their college careers (presumably to be against sports), but he argued they did want to play sports. Ironically, Peggy Burke published a short article around this time period claiming that she had been brainwashed as an undergraduate physical education major. She spoke mostly of the pressure to be feminine and the implications for her attitudes toward physical education, competitive sport, and her own identity as a woman. Peggy Burke, “Confessions of a Former Sexist,” WomenSports, October 1974, p. 80.

Robert Wessel, a political scientist, reported a steady decrease in the number of women teaching in secondary education and questioned whether this trend could be related to an higher demand for coaches in response to Title IX and greater participation in athletics. Comparing 1971 to 1976, the study showed an increase in the number of physical education majors hired to teach mathematics, social studies, and English, and a loss of positions in those areas by women teachers. He based his argument, in part, on the assumption that the physical education majors hired were men, and statistics that showed the overwhelming majority of head coaches for girls’ sports were men. Robert I. Wessel, “Athletics and Their Effects on Female Teachers in Public Schools in Iowa,” Iowa State Journal of Research 55 (1981): 245-252.