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Measuring Up: Women's Intercollegiate Sports Return to Western

In fall 1972, Western's physical education program boasted enough talent to compete statewide in tennis, regionally in gymnastics and nationally in golf, yet some of its students were transferring and many high school athletes were spurning the overtures of Western recruiters. The reason? The athletes were female and, unlike other Kentucky universities, Western offered them no program of intercollegiate competition. Title IX, which banned discrimination in school athletics, had become law but approval of its implementing regulations was still years away. For some faculty members and students, this was too long to wait.

Women on the Hill had not always lacked the opportunity to compete against other schools. In 1912, girls (as they were called) in the sophomore, junior and senior classes enthusiastically fielded basketball teams. The classes played each other at first, but in 1915 a team that included President Henry Hardin Cherry's daughter Josephine journeyed to Russellville to defeat Logan College by a score of 12-8. On January 12, 1923, Logan College was again the victim as the bloomer-clad girls gave freshman coach E. A. Diddle the first intercollegiate basketball victory of his long career.

Unfortunately, Western withdrew support for intercollegiate play in 1930. While women enjoyed an expanded physical education curriculum that included volleyball, field hockey, archery, baseball, tennis, track and soccer as well as basketball, competition was scaled back to intramural play and occasional "sports days" arranged with other schools.

For one student, the intramural system proved entirely too tame. In the mid-1940s, physical education major Betty Langley startled Western's athletic coaches by trying out for the men's tennis team. She defeated two of her three male opponents—then went home. "I thought if you lost once, you were out," she recalled. "Nobody told me any different."

A similar communication gap arose in October, 1972 when Ms. Langley, now an assistant professor of physical education at Western, presented a proposal for women's intercollegiate sports to the University Athletic Committee. She had long been working toward this goal even though administrators, like the coaches who had observed her tennis skills, had not volunteered much positive feedback. The idea for women's competition had been "shoved around," she realized, but apparently suffered from a fatal defect: it had never been put down in writing.

At the same time as Ms. Langley was quietly negotiating bureaucratic channels, a group of physical education students had concluded that their intramural programs were inadequate and discriminatory. After meeting several times and gathering seven hundred signatures on supporting petitions, the women loudly demanded better competitive opportunities. "We need to start measuring up to other universities if our program is going to stay in existence," said one.

Physical education department head Burch Oglesby was taken aback by the students' impatience. "The young women have talked about this thing ever since I've been here," he protested, "but they have never once gone to the athletic director." Suggesting that the women's only mistake was procedural, he nevertheless expressed his preference for an intramural program and grumbled about the financial cost of instituting equality. "I have certain reservations about a total athletic program for women," agreed gymnastics coach Ray Rose. "What I would really like to see for girls is a limited program to start out with and see how it works."

While the students complained about unresponsiveness and red tape, Betty Langley persisted. Under her ministrations, the Athletic Committee warmed to the idea of paying $75 and $15, respectively, for Western to join the Association of Intercollegiate Athletics for Women and the Kentucky Women's Intercollegiate Conference. The breakthrough came on January 29, 1973, when President Dero Downing, after conferring with several department representatives, gave the go-ahead for intercollegiate competition.

Women gymnasts traveled to their first meet only two weeks later, and faculty member Shirley Laney began coordinating Western's initial foray into women's tennis and golf. Volleyball and basketball also came under consideration, but not without some residual anxiety. Basketball, in particular, revived long-standing cultural tensions about the level of competition considered safe for the "delicate" female constitution. Though teams in the early 1900s often played by modified rules so as not to appear unladylike, the game's potential for scrappiness and high emotion had always worried the guardians of womanhood, both male and female. "There is a lot of faculty resistance to women's basketball," warned Burch Oglesby, "and I am one of them."

The doomsayers, however, quickly lost the fight. In October, 1973, coach Pam Dickson announced tryouts for the intercollegiate basketball team, and players began their seven-game schedule on January 19, 1974. During 1973-74, Western women also competed on an intercollegiate basis in tennis, golf, gymnastics, and track as well as riflery, which had been a coeducational varsity sport since 1972. Funds were scarce—in 1974-75, the *entire* women's athletic budget was $12,025—but with the implementation in 1975 of grants-in-aid as required by Title IX, Western began attracting some of the top women athletes in Kentucky and the nation.

Although the women's gymnastics program ended in 1981, intercollegiate competition in volleyball commenced that same year. Swimming followed in 1997, softball in 2000 and soccer in 2001.

The results? Through 2006, six women basketball players, along with seven other female athletes who have excelled in track, tennis, riflery and gymnastics, have been inducted into Western's Athletic Hall of Fame. The last thirty years of women's intercollegiate sports on the Hill have been outstanding, thanks to skill, hard work and courage—and to Betty Langley, who first put the idea down in writing.

Sources:

Athletic Committee Minutes, University Archives
Dero Downing Papers, University Archives
College Heights Herald
The Elevator (University Archives)