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Netball in Australia: a Social History

by

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1. Introduction

This working paper discusses the development of the sport of netball in Australia. The administration, politics and playing of netball are examined within a socio-historical framework that incorporates a discussion of gender and social relations. It will be argued that netball was designed, promoted and promulgated to enhance the ideals of a 'compliant femininity', a premise that provided a socially legitimated foundation for netball and positioned it as an acceptable activity for women and girls. The paper explores the debates surrounding the early development of the game and its progress, proposing a conceptual framework in which to situate netball's emergence as the number one team sport for women in this country.

2. Australian netball

Netball is played in schools, in community and state competitions and at representative and professional levels across contemporary Australia. While growing numbers of men and boys have become involved in netball, it has been historically dominated by female involvement in all aspects of the game, from players to umpires, coaches and administrators. Netball is traditionally a winter sport in Australia running from April to September, but there is also a substantial number of summer and night competitions. At the élite level there are annual national championships each year, in 17 years and under, 19 and under, 21 and under and open age-groups as well as a National Disabled Championship. Recently a national championship was instigated for male teams. An annual Australasian Schools Netball Championship and an International Test Series complement these events. Netball has operated as a professional sport since 1997 when the National Netball League, a female-only competition, commenced.

While the sport is now commonly and officially termed *netball*, this has been a relatively recent name change from *women's basketball*. The title change officially occurred at a 1970 meeting of the Council of the All Australia Netball Association (AANA) in Brisbane (Jobling and Barham, 1988). When the national association approved the new name of netball in its title, all member states followed suit and the sport became officially known as netball across Australia. Prior to this there was a great deal of confusion surrounding the exact nature of game, as it was being played under different names and rules around the country due to the *ad hoc* nature of its introduction into schools, church competitions and community leagues. In this paper the nomenclature that was used during the particular period under discussion is utilised. However, it should be noted that some of the authors quoted in the paper use the term 'netball' instead of women's basketball even when referring to the pre-1970 period.

The contemporary sport of netball has the highest level of female participation of any team sport in Australia. In 1991 a study of national sports participation found that over 185,000 girls and women participated in netball on a weekly basis and 240,000 participated on a monthly basis (Department of the Arts, Sport, the Environment, Tourism and the Territories, 1991). These data are complemented by a 1995-96 study, which found that 287,000 females aged 15 years, and over played netball in 1995-96 and 285,800 in 1997-98 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1998). It has been further documented that netball has increased its participant numbers by 49 per cent between 1975 and 1998 (Commonwealth of Australia, 1999). Table 1 outlines the position of netball in relation to other sports played by females aged over 15 years.

Table 1. Most popular sports/physical activities, females 15 years & over, Australia

Sport	*1995/6*	*1997/8*	*Change*
		'000s	
Aerobics	566.3	896.2	+329.9
Netball	287.0	285.8	- 1.8
Tennis	207.2	474.2	+267.0
Swimming	153.8	896.0	+742.2
10-pin bowling	111.1	217.3	+106.2

Source: ABS, 1998

While these figures may seem to suggest that netball has lost popularity and other sports have soared in participation, it should be noted that the data are not directly comparable between the two collection periods due to a change in data collection procedures. Prior to 1997 'sport' was defined only as organised activity, from 1997 onwards the Australian Bureau of Statistics changed the definition to include all non-

organised activity, so the data included recreational pursuits as well. Many more women informally participate in activities as recreation rather than sport. This explains why recorded participation levels in sports such as aerobics, swimming and tennis increased substantially from the 1995/6 to the 1997/8 figures.

Australian Bureau of Statistics (1998) data has indicated that, for young girls aged 5-14 years, netball and swimming were by far the most popular sports or physical activities, with participation rates of 20.5 per cent and 15.0 per cent respectively. The next most popular sports were basketball (8.3%) and tennis (7.7%). It was further estimated that if informal play and competitions are counted that some 750,000 or one in seven females (of all ages) in Australia play netball (Otago, 1991). On its official web-site (last updated on March 2000) Netball Australia claimed a national membership of over 350,000 and 541 affiliated associations. Totalling all of the registered numbers of Netball Australia, there are an estimated 1.2 million netball players in Australia, a substantial increase from the 1991 estimates. Internationally netball is played in approximately 50 countries, 45 of which are affiliated with the International Federation of Netball Associations (IFNA).

A detailed profile of netball was developed for the Australian Sports Commission from the ABS 1995-1998 Population Survey Monitor surveys and related to people over the age of 18 years. The study concluded that netball participants are predominantly female, Australian-born, have never married and are employed full-time and on average are aged between 18 and 24 years. Australian-born players comprised 91.8 per cent of netball participants (Australian Sports Commission, 2000).

Netball is also a major sporting attraction with over 312,000 estimated spectators attending netball matches in 1995 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1998). Netball was the only sport for which significantly more females than males attended games (33,600 females and 11,700 males) in 1995-96. In the same year, it was estimated that $76.7 million was spent on netball and that the average cost per participant was $233 per annum (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1998). Just how netball achieved this position of dominance in female team sports is discussed in the following sections of the paper.

3. Development up to 1970

In seeking to determine the historical course of the development of netball in Australia it was revealed that there is limited research or critical documentation about the game's development. This seemed surprising, given netball's dominant place in the construction and practice of women's sport in Australia. A similar situation has existed in New Zealand, where netball is also the largest female participation team sport. As in Australia, there has been little attention paid to the New Zealand game either sociologically or historically (Broomhall, 1993). General histories of netball, which provide descriptive narratives of key events and personalities in the game, exist but these have focussed on providing a factual documentation of the game rather than social critique (see Dunbar, 1989; Netball Victoria, 1994). A socio-historical series of articles about netball was authored by Jobling and Barham (1988, 1991, 1992), but these publications were limited to a generalist overview of the sport's development until the 1980s.

The lack of netball-specific literature is compounded by its non-inclusion in general sport texts. Many of the early works on the history of Australian sports made little or no reference to this game or its participants; instead they focussed on established male-dominated sports, such as the various football codes and cricket. When women were discussed the comments typically focussed on women's achievements in Olympic sports. In respect of the lack of academic discussion about netball, Darlison (1985) expressed concern that women's netball teams have been hugely successful over the years but their efforts have been largely unnoticed outside the netball community. Netball clearly has been a success story in terms of national team supremacy. The national Australian side won the inaugural World Championships in 1963 and dominated the ensuing championships, but received little media or public recognition until the 1990s. While it could be argued that this circumstance may be predicated on the narrow bases of netball, as it is a sport which is primarily played in a selected number of Commonwealth countries, or the fact that it is not a recognised Olympic sport, this argument fails to explain the amount of attention paid to male sports such as Australian Rules football which is even more territorially limited

than netball. Netball's fight for media attention is discussed in detail later in the paper.

The ensuing discussions outline the historical development of netball in Australia, with a particular emphasis on New South Wales, the state in which the subsequent case study is located. The information for this section has been obtained from primary and secondary sources, including archival records, newspaper reports, letters and oral histories of women involved in the game. This material offers comments on the general development of netball. It will also suggest why and how netball became the most popular women's team sport in Australia, why men were excluded from all spheres of the game for so many years and why women from ethnic minority backgrounds have had only a marginal presence in netball. These issues are located within their social context and discussed in relation to values and ideologies present in Australia during the corresponding time period.

4. Development of the code

In the following historical sections the term 'women's basketball' is used to refer to what was to become 'netball' in 1970. The precise timing of the introduction of women's basketball into Australia is uncertain and largely based on speculation. Previous research has traced the history of the game in Australia to the turn of the century, when it was thought to have been introduced into primary and secondary schools by teachers from England (Jobling and Barham, 1988). While the historical roots of women's basketball are imprecise, it was most certainly derived from the men's sport of basketball and is a modified form of the game. The origins of men's basketball are well documented; it was first played in 1891 and codified in 1892 in the USA at Springfield College, a physical education training institute in Massachusetts. Its inventor, a Canadian, Dr James Naismith, was a Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) instructor who developed the game to increase the interest of his students in their gymnasium exercises. Smith College, an institution for women 20 miles from Springfield, introduced a female version of basketball in 1892. Women's basketball spread across the USA and into Canada but its development followed a somewhat different path from women's basketball in England and Australia. The North American game started off with netball-like rules but it then evolved to mirror the men's game.

The Australian version of netball traces its roots to England. Some sources attribute the development of women's basketball in England to an American, Dr Toll, who was visiting Marina Bergman-Osterberg's Physical Training College in 1895 (Martin, 1977). Madame Osterberg, apparently an autocrat who controlled students' activities in practically every detail, believed that a girl's education should be geared to her subsequent role as a mother. She promoted sport as training for motherhood and for the delivery of healthy children (Hargreaves, 1985). The modified game of women's basketball appealed to her as it could be played in a manner that retained femininity and decorum. The sport restricted physical movements and involved no body contact and therefore was not perceived as a threat to a woman's reproductive function.

Another theory on the introduction of women's basketball to England has suggested that two English women watched a game of basketball at Springfield College and returned home to, 'develop a set of rules more suitable for the less robust female competitor who, in those days was regarded as a rather frail and timid person' (Smith and Humberstone, 1978:11). Rules were subsequently devised to accommodate the restrictive female dress of the day, as women's long skirts made dribbling the ball and lengthy passes difficult. In consequence, the playing court was divided into three equal parts, with players based respectively in one of these three sections. The rules did not permit players to travel the full length of the court. A women's basketball team initially comprised either seven or nine players (this varied between competitions) compared to the five required for men's basketball. The number of players was increased for the women's game as a practical way of dealing with the mobility restrictions faced by women playing the sport in long skirts and restrictive attire (Dunbar, 1989).

Women's basketball arrived on Australian shores in various forms, as it had not been formally codified in England. The first recorded women's basketball game was played in 1897 in Victoria and included much improvisation; women used broomsticks for posts and wet paper bags for baskets (Netball Victoria, 1994). Another early variation included the use of washing

baskets on poles for goals. A separate pole was then used to tip the basket to allow the ball to be removed from the basket after a goal was scored (Netball Victoria, 1994).

The genesis of women's basketball varied markedly because the rules were not formally documented - they were largely passed on by word of mouth. While the early versions of the rules varied considerably, women's basketball was primarily played indoors as it had been in England (Jobling, 1994). However, by 1899 the game had moved outdoors as indoor playing space was limited and outdoor play suited the Australian climate. Due to the uncertainty about the rules, the Ling Association of England revised and published the first set of rules in 1901 and also changed the name to *netball* as the baskets had been replaced by rings and nets (Jobling, 1994). Meanwhile in Australia the game retained the nomenclature of women's basketball and regional variations continued with little notice being taken of the English codification.

The size of teams varied to include nine-aside, seven-aside, six-aside and five-aside versions. As a result, attempts to standardise started to occur at the national level as early as the 1930s (AAWBBA, 1931). However, these early attempts by the national association to regulate formal play and competitions in each state or association were only partially successful. Women and girls played by varied sets of rules up until the 1960s. While New South Wales officially used the seven-aside rules, many schools and community groups playing netball in the state were not formal members of any association and various versions of the game continued.

National rules were finally established in 1963 at the time of the first World Championships. It was decided that netball would be played on a court measuring 30.5m x 15.25m, by teams of seven players. Scoring was to be achieved by shooting a ball through a 380mm ring attached to a post 3.05m high. To score, the ball was to be put through the ring by either the Goal Shooter or Goal Attack from within the goal circle. A match consisted of four fifteen-minute quarters for women and four ten-minute quarters for schoolgirls, with a two-minute break between quarters and five minutes at half-time. Teams change ends after each quarter. Each player has a designated area on court, determined by his or her playing position. A player could catch the ball with one or both hands and had to pass it or shoot for goal within three seconds (Brown, 1978). Netball was defined as a non-contact sport, however, in reality there was some physical contact even though no player was allowed to come into personal contact with an opponent in a way that would interfere with the opponent's play.

5. Tracing the growth and development of women's basketball

State Level

The earliest developments in women's basketball were in the state of Victoria. In Melbourne, Victoria, girls in primary schools were informally playing women's basketball by 1913 (Cashman, 1995). The game spread to secondary schools, and the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) courts, which opened in 1920, recorded hosting formal competitions from their inception (Netball Victoria, 1994). The YWCA were to play a critical role in the promotion and development of women's sports associations and in encouraging physical activity during the early part of the twentieth century. Along with independent girls' schools, the YWCA supported numerous women's sports, from basketball to cricket, providing women with the impetus to form independent associations as well as providing actual sporting facilities and organising sports competitions. The ethos underlying this move for greater involvement of girls and women in sports was based on the 'muscular Christianity' belief that team sports could be used to develop upstanding moral values and ideals of citizenship. Sports participation was also accompanied by physical benefits. These beliefs were to remain firmly in place for decades to come; evidenced in 1942 in an article in the *Age* (5 September 1942), in which a sports mistress from a Melbourne girl's school was reported outlining the importance of schoolgirls' basketball as a good way in which, 'to build good character and make solid citizens who can contribute to this nation'.

Women's basketball was an ideal sport for women to play. Being played only by women, it failed to contest pre-determined male terrain in either psychological or physical terms. While women's basketball required some physical skills the sport initially did not require the use of excessive strength, aggression or overt physical exertion and therefore did not challenge per-

ceptions about the player's femininity. In the early years games were played on asphalt courts, school grounds and tennis courts, and in church and drill halls. In using these venues for their sport girls and women did not have to compete with male-dominated sports for ovals used for cricket and the various codes of football. In keeping women's basketball separate from male sports the game was able to develop independently, unlike many other sports which women played and that were controlled by men's associations.

While some states adopted the game earlier and more enthusiastically than others, women's basketball soon spread across Australia. In Victoria, Louise Mills and Nonie Hardie from the Melbourne Residential YWCA took the first steps to formalise women's basketball when they formed the Melbourne Girls' Basket Ball Association in 1922. An active sportswoman, Louise Mills was also instrumental in founding the Victorian Women's Cricket Association in 1923, and later played a role in establishing the Australian Women's Cricket Association (Cashman and Weaver, 1991). The Melbourne Girls' Basket Ball Association went on to become the Victorian Women's Basketball Association in 1928 when the game's popularity spread beyond the confines of Melbourne into other areas of the state.

In South Australia the game developed slightly later than in Victoria but by 1937 there were over 100 teams registered with the South Australian Women's Basketball Association, with a further 80 teams playing in the United Church Association (Daly, 1994). Independent girls' schools supplied the largest numbers but other organisations, such as the YWCA and other similarly focussed girls' and youth clubs, also joined together to form competitions.

In Queensland, nine-a-side women's basketball was played from 1920 under the banner of the Queensland Ladies' Basket Ball Association, which was based in Albert Park, Brisbane (Jobling and Barham, 1991). In 1929 the Queensland Women's Basketball Association was set up as a competitor, offering seven-a-side basketball along with a women's cricket association that drew most of its players from the basketball and hockey associations (Cashman and Weaver, 1991). It is likely that this alliance was formed to provide women with the opportunity to play a winter sport and a summer sport within the same club. In the Australian Capital Territory, the first women's basketball association, called the Canberra Netball Association, formed much later, in 1942. This association later divided into two district Associations, Canberra and South Canberra; both were affiliated with the New South Wales Netball Association (ACT Netball Association, undated).

In a development phase similar to the other states, women's basketball in New South Wales was initially associated with girls' schools and the YWCA in the early 1910s, moving into women's leagues in the 1920s. In 1923 the City Girls' Amateur Sports Association of New South Wales became the first recorded association to run competitions in Sydney (Hyland, 1987). The popularity of the game grew quickly amongst women and the association rapidly expanded. The New South Wales team emerged victorious in the first Annual Interstate Basketball competition in 1926 (Hyland, 1987).

Just as the rules and regulations of this relatively new game were modified and changed to meet the needs of players and society alike, the structure of its administration also evolved to meet the demands of the times. In the 1920s and 1930s the New South Wales competition was comprised of teams and clubs from around the state and games were played in both Saturday and week-night competitions. In Sydney, the main competitions were played at Moore Park, the Domain and Sydney University. In 1928 there were 43 clubs listed as competing in four grade competitions (Dunbar, 1989). On 4 July 1929 the City Girls' Amateur Sports Association changed its name to the New South Wales Women's Basket Ball Association to reflect the prime focus of its activity. At this time the association had some 41 teams registered (Hyland, 1987:28). The amalgamation into the new association also included fourteen other teams from the YWCA and an unspecified number from the Sydney Basket Ball Association, making a total of approximately 60 teams (Dunbar, 1989). Women's basketball was a growing sport for both girls and women.

In the 1940s and 1950s, as Sydney's population expanded westwards, associations at Parramatta (now Parramatta-Auburn) were formed, followed by Manly-Warringah to the north. The growth in the game further accelerated and in 1949 there were 142 teams (with approximately 1400 players) in the Sydney

metropolitan area. By 1959 this number had increased and 180 teams were affiliated with the New South Wales Women's Basket Ball Association (Dunbar, 1989).

The New South Wales state association was restructured in 1968, adopting a new constitution that established districts across the state. Prior to this only the metropolitan clubs were allowed to hold full membership in the New South Wales Women's Basket Ball Association, all other groups being classified as associates. These changes meant that all district associations were now eligible for full membership and were given equal representation on the New South Wales Council.

In New South Wales women's basketball has historically been sensitive to and inclusive of women with differing physical abilities. For example, deaf women have had a long-standing involvement in the game. Women's basketball was played in the 1930s at Darlington Deaf School and there was a team entered in the 1944 New South Wales Women's Basket Ball Association competition (Dunbar, 1989). Originally called the NSW Deaf Basket Ball Club, the club changed its name to the Sydney Deaf Netball Club in 1977. Additionally, in 1959 the Eastwood Ryde Association began training the first blind netball team (Dunbar, 1989). The ball used had a bell inside, not unlike the popular sports of goal ball and blind cricket. A separate competition was also organised from the 1960s for girls and women with intellectual disabilities and many hospitals and institutions entered teams.

National level

While matches between state representative teams had commenced in 1924 and formal interstate competitions were in place by 1926, the creation of an Australian association did not occur until a few years later. The All-Australian Women's Basketball Association (AAWBBA) was formed in 1927 with the first All-Australian championship held in 1928. New South Wales was one of the foundation states, joining the AAWBBA for its inaugural meeting in 1927. Following this national alliance, interstate carnivals were held each year from 1928, except in 1937 when the carnival was cancelled due to a polio epidemic and in 1940-45 due to World War II (Dunbar, 1989).

Although most competitions were played on Saturdays, states such as New South Wales had quite active night competitions as well. Night Basketball Associations were initially separate from the day associations; however in some states these were controlled and organised by the parent association and others were officially affiliated. Night Basketball Associations also had their own constitutions. The Queensland Women's Basket Ball Association offered both night and day competitions. The South Australia Night Association was a subsidiary of the day association, New South Wales' Night Association was an associated member of the day association, and Victoria operated under two separate bodies. The day parent association president and secretary were automatically the president and secretary of the Night Association but were not affiliated with AAWBBA (Night Carnival Minutes, 1932). In 1940 AAWBBA proposed that Night Basketball should be controlled by AAWBBA, with a sub-committee consisting of one member from each state having a night association. A Night basketball tournament was to be held every year in the same state as the All Australia tournament and either immediately before or after the All Australia tournament. AAWBBA was adamant that constitutions for Night Associations must be drawn up and approved by each state (Night Association Minutes, 1940).

A unique aspect of women's basketball in the world of Australian sports was the control that women had over its management and delivery. Men were excluded from holding any formal positions in the association either as players or administrators. The female executive of women's basketball held steadfast for many years and did not allow men, in any state, to be umpires or hold official positions. In 1940 the Queensland association requested that AAWBBA allow two men to keep their life members badges for their informal service to the sport. A majority voted that the men be allowed to keep their badges, however, they were not to take part in the future management of the Queensland Association. It was decided that no other badges would be issued to men in the future (AAWBBA, 1940). When the Northern Territory representative body applied to AAWBBA for either state or associate membership in 1950 the council minutes documented the discussions about the Northern Territory Association's application. It was a contentious

application because the organisation was a combination of both men's and women's teams and men held office. AAWBBA therefore suggested that the Association be informed that only if they ran the women's competition as a separate body, controlled by women officials, would the council give consideration to their status as a state or associate member (AAWBBA, 1950).

The lack of uniformity in the construction of the game was soon brought home when Australia began to play in overseas competitions. During the 1948 Australian team tour of New Zealand Australia was forced to compete in both seven-aside and nine-aside games in Timaru (*Rotorua Post*, 1948). Australia travelled to England to play in 1956 and again rule variations caused conflicts when matches were played between the two countries. It was not until 1957, in London, that a meeting was called to try and develop consistent international rules and work out the differences as England, USA, Australia and New Zealand were each operating under different codes. Northern Ireland, South Africa and Wales were also present at this historic meeting (AAWBBA, 1957). In 1960 the first conference of the International Federation of Netball Associations was held in Ceylon. This inaugural conference adopted an international code of rules and resolved to meet every four years afterwards, at which time a council meeting and international tournament were to be staged (AAWBBA, 1960).

The first World Championships were played in England in August 1963 with Australia winning the title from a field of eleven countries (Blanch and Jenes, 1982). The second tournament was held in Australia in 1967 in Perth and New Zealand won the world title, Australia placed second. Australia regained the world crown in 1971 in Jamaica and won it again in New Zealand in 1975. At the fifth world tournament in Trinidad in 1979 there was a three-way tie for first place between Australia, New Zealand and Trinidad and Tobago. Australia won again in 1983 in Singapore and finished tied for second with Trinidad and Tobago in Scotland in 1987 with New Zealand taking first place. Demonstrating their recent dominance of the game Australia won the world title in 1991, 1995 and again in 1999.

6. Firstly feminine – a game for 'girls'?

Women's basketball carved out a unique place in women's sport, particularly until the 1970s. From its introduction to Australia in the late nineteenth century women's basketball rapidly gained in popularity in the first part of this century. The game was defined as non-contact; the skills required to play were perceived as simple and not too strenuous and the uniforms were respectable and quintessentially feminine. Middle class women instilled the sport with qualities that were highly valued during this epoch (Kirk, 2000). Consequently, it met with general public acceptance as women's basketball was a sport that conformed to expectations of the times about women and sport, as it was not seen as overly competitive or masculine (Jobling and Barham, 1991).

In her examination of the history of women in sports Stell (1991) contended that women's basketball was introduced to Australia as a more feminine alternative to field hockey, which was regarded as boyish and rough and therefore not suitable for women or girls. Women's basketball was played in a ladylike fashion and the players were supposed to be co-operative rather than overtly competitive. Such considerations about desirable femininity and acceptable behaviours reflected societal attitudes of the era; if women were going to play sport they were best to engage in a game that accounted for their delicate nature. These arguments are explored in the following sections.

Built for comfort not speed

In pursuing the line of argument about the societal acceptability of women's basketball, Nauright and Broomhall (1994) have suggested that the sport was a prime example of a sport that Australian and New Zealand women have been 'allowed' to play. This social acceptability was evidenced in the widespread approval of women's basketball as a suitable sport for female players in schools, churches and industrially sponsored competitions. Nauright and Broomhall asserted that while women were involved in designing and promoting the sport it was mainly middle-class Anglo-Celtic women, operating under the presumption that women's basketball should retain its compliant feminine character who dominated the game's

development. Furthermore, they contended that public permission to participate in this sport was readily forthcoming from its beginnings because women's basketball was seen to complement the dominant conceptions of proper female physical activity. It did not constitute a challenge to the gender order or conventional perceptions of femininity. It has also been suggested that women played the sport merely for enjoyment, for physical activity, to obtain some independence and to secure a break from household activity (Muir and Romanos, 1985). These analyses suggest that women's basketball gave women the space to play sport while remaining within the confines of a 'compliant femininity'.

The argument of this paper is that initial design and the premise of being a sport specifically for women shaped the subsequent growth in popularity of women's basketball. This design was based on meeting the perceived needs of women but staying within the confines of their social context. It is quite evident that the game's designers and advocates aimed to explicitly address the requirements of middle class women who wished to publicly engage in physical activity. The appeal of women's basketball was clearly located in the description of the parameters of the game, 'it lasts only 30 minutes, that is less than half as long as hockey: so that many girls who find hockey beyond their strength benefit by, and thoroughly enjoy it' (Martin, 1977:2). Field hockey required players to cover a large pitch and thus the level of aerobic exertion could be quite high. The lower level of strenuous physical activity and absence of any sanctioned body contact was perceived as a distinct advantage for women's basketball, which was viewed as graceful and ladylike.

Women's basketball was structured to emphasise teamwork and co-operation, attributes that were considered socially appropriate for women. Only certain player positions were allowed to shoot for goals and players could only have possession of the ball for a restricted time limit. 'Netball because of its rules, ensures, that in the end, the team reigns above the finest individual' (Smith and Humberstone, 1978:12). The team sport philosophy was evident in the rules that assigned each player a role and defined space on the court so that no one player can dominate the game. Recent rule changes have eased on these requirements, just as general society has become more flexible about restraints on acceptable female behaviour.

Dimensions of co-operation and support, along with the absence of sanctioned body contact and uniforms that were designed to retain a definite feminine quality, were used by promoters of the game throughout the decades to encourage a wide variety of 'mainstream' women to play women's basketball. These specific considerations were employed to keep the game aligned with popular conceptions of middle class femininity. As an early publication on the game stated, 'good temper, pluck, determination, extreme agility of mind and body, are traits universally found among Net-Ball players, and best of all perhaps, that inexpressibly happy attitude, esprit de corps' (Grieve, 1916:32).

There were some gaps between the passion and commitment of the early organisers to develop the game within an acceptable and respected middle class framework of expectation and the practice and perceptions of women's basketball. These were between the stated ideal and practiced reality. Despite organisers' attempts to quell public disquiet about women playing sport through the design of a game they felt met societal expectations, early attitudes about female sportswere tinged with scepticism. A newspaper[1] headline from 1926 proclaimed 'Women play basketball result: Four taken to Hospital'. The text of the article implied that playing sport was a dangerous preoccupation for women and those who played did so at their own peril. Two years later a 1928 circular from the Sydney City Girls basketball competition included this statement about the expected behaviour of female players in a public place:

> *A Warning*: Any girl speaking to onlookers in the Domain will be asked to leave the Field … There will be a policeman present to prohibit any conversation by onlookers.

Such sentiments were an indication that the organisers of the game felt that the moral reputation of women playing sport needed to be closely guarded. Women and girls were allowed to play women's basketball but within the confines

[1] The article was included in archival material of the Queensland Netball Association with no reference to the newspaper title.

of societal expectations. Steps were continually taken to ensure that an acceptable feminine aspect of the game remained intact.

The 1930 minutes of an Executive meeting of the AAWBA stated that, 'our girls should always be well presented and demonstrate good manners in public'. The 'girls'[2] referred to in the minutes were actually women players. It was common in this era to refer to women players as 'girls', thereby maintaining the authority of the organisers. In a 1931 executive meeting of the AAWBA a motion was passed that required players to be silent during the course of a game. The documented discussion, which accompanied the motion, affirmed that the executive felt that women's basketball should be designated as a silent game where only the captain was allowed to speak. The executive stated that they did not think it was 'lady-like' for players to shout and carry on while engaging in the sport. The rules of the game were changed to meet expectations about proper conduct of women in a public forum.

Looking like ladies

Starting with the first games played, the public appearance of players and the associated dress requirements of women's basketball were taken very seriously by officials and standards were rigorously applied. Photographs from the 1920s to the 1930s show the players' uniform as comprising a stylish broad headband, belted tunic falling to the knee, a white blouse under the tunic and dark stockings. In Victoria, the initial uniform was a navy blue tunic that fell below the knee, a blouse, tie and black stockings and in the 1940s the stockings were replaced by socks (Netball Victoria, 1994). The Women's Night Basketball Association of Victoria (WNBBAV) stipulated that uniforms must be eight inches above the ground when kneeling and that, 'all girls must wear a blouse and matching underwear' (WNBBAV, 1960). Each local and state association had its own rules about colour and length of skirt, which were strictly enforced. The regulation of proper and acceptable attire was central to the sport's image and was subject to much debate and discussion throughout the century. The game's central administration held a conservative line until the late 1980s when a move into commercialism signalled a monumental shift in its ideological stance.

While the official uniform rules were inherently conservative, it has been noted that there was some player resistance to strict compliance. The *Age* (1961) reported that a number of Perth residents had complained about the length of the players' uniforms worn in a local competition. As a result, the Western Australian Women's Basketball Association took action the following week; armed with tapes they measured every participant's uniform at the competition. Representatives checked the uniform length for the regulation seven inches from the ground when kneeling. In response to the public criticism the Association's president reported, with apparent distain, that 'of the 150 teams measured yesterday only 10 were passed'. She was clearly upset by the many breeches of dress protocol.

Bushby and Jobling (1985) have suggested that during these years looking like a 'lady' was essential for women's basketball players. Debates about the appropriateness of the attire worn by women engaging in sport and physical activity had plagued every sport since women first took to the playing fields. The cumbersome outfits that women were expected to wear in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries severely restricted their participation in many sports and inhibited their movement and competitiveness. These restrictive dress requirements were the prime reason the game of basketball had been modified for women in the first place (Cashman, 1995). The prescriptive dress regulations that were evident in the regulation of women's basketball were not dissimilar to cricket (Cashman and Weaver, 1991), cycling associations (Hess, 1998), golf (Stoddart, 1995), surf-life saving (Booth and Tatz, 2000), swimming (Raszeja, 1992), tennis (Kincross-Smith, 1995) and other sports. Cashman and Weaver (1991) observed that more media words have been written on the clothing of women playing cricket than their sporting ability in the initial years of women's cricket. This public fixation and control of appropriate female attire in sports has been the subject of much feminist analysis and related to issues of self-identity, oppression and exploitation of women in sports (as previously outlined in

[2] This terminology is common whereby the official administration documentation refers to women's basketball and then netball players as 'our schoolgirls' or 'our girls' until the 1980s, symbolising that players should be subservient to officials.

Section 2.5.3). The dissension caused by female dress requirements has been the focus of detailed gender relation analyses (Simpson, 1993). It has been suggested that during the initial years of Australian sports the sporting attire worn by women also acted to symbolise their inferiority as well as contributing to their restricted activity (Stoddart, 1986). Therefore, while women's basketball strictly regulated the attire of its players the stipulations were neither more conservative nor more liberal than those found in most other sports of the era.

Social dimensions

Bushby and Jobling (1985) have suggested that, for the majority of Australian women, sports were perceived to be a pleasant social outing or a diversion from home-making duties until the 1970s. However, exploring the archival documents of the state sport associations of women's basketball spanning the years up to 1970, it is clearly evident that many of the women involved in women's basketball took their participation and the competitive side of the sport quite seriously. These women did not consider playing women's basketball a mere diversion from their 'womanly responsibilities' and a number of committed women dedicated their entire lives to playing, coaching and administering the game.

However, it would appear that the majority of women who played women's basketball were attracted to the sport because it had an obvious recreational component and it was a game that fitted comfortably into middle class social acceptability. Players did not need to be outwardly athletic or overtly strong to play in social competitions. It has been suggested that, 'netball is a game that can be played by women of all shapes, sizes and aptitudes ... netball is the game of a lifetime you can start at eight and still be playing in your fifties' (Smith and Humberstone, 1978:14). In addition, women's basketball was only played by females and this provided the game with a broad appeal. It meant that girls and women players did not face the same social resistance to playing women's basketball that confronted women who played less conventional female sports. As many women discontinued playing women's basketball when they had children it was not perceived as interfering with their family or domestic responsibilities (Broomhall, 1993). In interviews with players from the 1920s and 1930s it was reported that young single women dominated the game, and many women entered into teams that were supported by their church, school or place of work (Duncan, 1994). This structure of involvement facilitated a large decline in player numbers as women made the transition from school to work and from work to marriage and children.

Although obviously influential, the early role of workplace-based teams in the development of women's basketball has been largely undocumented. It is evident from the records of the New South Wales Women's Basket Ball Association on Sydney competitions that a substantial number of businesses supported teams from the 1940s onwards. Companies such as Myer, Unilever, Rothmans, Esanda and Fletcher Jones appear to have regularly entered teams in competitions, and encouraged their female employees to be physically active. Many workplaces required women to resign when they married and this impacted on the basketball involvement of women who played for work teams. In general terms, workplace teams appeared to be much more prominent in larger cities. Country and rural areas fostered club systems and church-based competitions. Club, church and work teams were all exclusively female.

No men allowed

The official exclusion of men from women's basketball was ingrained in AAWBBA's constitution and underpinned its ideological stance. Despite constant pressure to change the AAWBBA executive held steadfast to a women-only policy for over 50 years. It was not until the 1970s that men were allowed to hold formal positions within the member associations. This female-only policy made women's basketball unique, as it was exclusively female from its players through to its top coaches and administrators. In retaining its gender exclusivity women's basketball was able to offer girls and women the rare opportunity to control and shape the direction of a sport. Although it could be argued that women's softball found itself it a similar position, softball never achieved the level of mass participation achieved by women's basketball.

The women who organised and directed the development of women's basketball positioned it

in the mainstream. The sport was reliant on its social acceptability for continued growth as it had aligned the rules, dress and ideological basis of the game within a framework that did not directly challenge social mores or male superiority in sports. Women's basketball perpetuated an image of acceptability through public compliance to femininity expectations within its performative spaces. While general discourses of sports are dominated by male superiority claims, women's basketball was able to create its own discourse that acted to largely exclude men. In managing the lines of connectivity between actions and justifications, women's basketball was able to capture and retain female constituents from 'middle' Australia and in doing so increased its member base beyond that of all other female team sports.

A new era

Women's basketball was faced with a different set of challenges when a new era of heightened awareness about gender issues in sports emerged in the 1970s. Sporting opportunities for women increased and a larger range of physical activities became accessible. This, combined with the growing professionalisation of sports, meant that women's basketball was forced into a new phase of development. It had to adapt to the changing environment or lose its position as the number one female team sport in Australia. A substantial component of the game's early success was attributable to the limited opportunity for schoolgirls and women to choose other sports that were regarded as acceptably feminine. However, these limitations disappeared as the women's movement gained momentum and women began to make choices that contested long-standing notions of gender relations. Sports organisations also faced a period of striking change. Many sports shifted their focus from amateur based, grass-roots philosophies and began to adopt professional and market-driven approaches. The intersection of these ideological shifts produced a nexus that would dramatically reposition women's basketball as a 'new' sport called netball.

7. More than just a name change

The 1970s signalled the beginning of a new era for women's basketball as it moved away from its roots as an amateur and volunteer-run organisation, and began to restructure into a professionally administered sporting organisation. Women's basketball administrators moved to promote the sport's image and profile to a broader section of the community. During the early part of the 1970s Australian sports had the possibility of securing funds from a substantially increased federal government-funding scheme. However, each sport had to demonstrate that it had both national appeal and the potential to grow if it was to attract any of these funds. Male-dominated sports appeared better positioned to capitalise on the new funding opportunities due to their high levels of media exposure. Women's basketball did not have a national club competition, they had few corporate sponsors, and it was not an Olympic sport. The focus over the previous 70 or so years had been the grass roots participation of women and girls in the sport, and while the Australian team were extremely successful in international competitions, the media coverage they received was minimal (Dunbar, 1989). Women's basketball was in danger of becoming marginalised in this new economically-based, globally-focussed sports environment. The administration recognised that a change in operations was necessary if netball was to successfully manage the change process (Jobling and Barham, 1988). One response was a name change instigated at the 1970 Council meeting in Brisbane; the sport became known as the All Australia Netball Association (AANA). All member states immediately followed suit and changed their official titles to 'netball' in place of women's basketball (Jobling and Barham, 1988). The change of name was to mark the start of more dramatic changes to netball's amateur structure and focus.

The winds of change

The feminist movement of the 1970s championed the cause of women's rights and greater equality of opportunities for women. In response, governments at both the state and federal level instituted policies to encourage greater female involvement in sports. The Australian Sports Commission established a Task Force for Women in Sport in the 1980s that provided the basis for a

number of government initiatives concerned with increasing the level of female sports participation. These were followed by the Department of the Arts, Sport, the Environment and Territories, *Access and Equity Plan 1991-1992 to 1993-1994* and the Australian Sports Commission (ASC) *Access and Equity Plan 1991-1994* and the *Active Women*: *National Policy on Women and Girls in Sport, Recreation and Physical Activity, 1999-2002*.

Substantial growth in women's sports occurred as public funds were made available for the development of new facilities across the country. In particular, new housing estate areas were built with community sporting facilities as dictated by changes to state planning legislation. These were quickly filled with netball teams and competitions. In New South Wales alone the number of districts affiliated with the New South Wales Netball Association grew from 41 in 1968 to 98 by 1979. The Casino District, for example, began with six courts in 1969, but six months later the number of courts used doubled to accommodate demand and by the end of 1970 there were 18 courts in use. The Ku-ring-gai District listed 63 teams and 520 players when they commenced competition play in 1969. By 1978 there were 235 teams with 1,600 players and by 1987 some 2,700 players were registered (Dunbar, 1989). This growth was repeated across the state where the game attracted record numbers of players.

The massive increase in players, clubs and competitions facilitated a change in the way netball was administered. The 'kitchen table' approach of years past could not cope with the increased demands that were being placed on the previously all volunteer-run administration (Hyland, 1987). Netball moved into a new period of expansion and professionalisation that not only marked a shift in the administration but also a change to the public image and promotion of the game. The Victorian Women's Basketball Association was among the first to introduce salaried staff positions when it hired a full-time salaried secretary at the state level in 1969 (VWBBA minutes, 1969). The national office soon followed suit and in 1978 Helen Edmunds-Jones was hired to the newly created post of National Development Officer. This was the beginning of a huge paradigm shift in netball operations. While many women involved in netball welcomed the change, it was strongly resisted by others and a number of power battles were soon to envelop the sport.

Netball NSW's response

As the first step in the change process the New South Wales Women's Basketball Association officially changed its name to the New South Wales Netball Association in 1970. This coincided with the national body's name change and provided the organisation with a new sense of purpose and direction for state netball (Hyland, 1987). The association began a program of change that comprised three initiatives. First was the identification and development of talented players. An elite level Inter-District competition was introduced in 1970 with six associations represented. In 1978 this was expanded to two grades, and by 1985 four divisions were in operation. Second, the association moved to replace the older women who had controlled the game for many years with new younger, professional administrators. Organisational changes were made at a rapid pace after nearly 50 years of relative stability in the administration of the game and for the first time men were permitted to assume official roles in netball organisations. This meant stalwarts such as Anne Clarke were encouraged to retire to make way for a younger and more professional cadre of sports administrator (pers comm. Dunbar, 1997). Anne Clarke had been the driving force behind the New South Wales Women's Basket Ball Association and an influential figure in the game since 1929. She had held various positions in the association and was an office bearer with netball for 50 years until 1979. After a 29-year term as President of the New South Wales Association she was forced to resign due to an age clause in the Companies Act (Hyland, 1987). The end of her term coincided with the end of an era of volunteer administration and organisation.

The third platform of change was to re-position netball in the commercial sphere of sports. The New South Wales State Association headquarters, along with other state sporting bodies, moved into Sports House in The Rocks in July 1978. The association became incorporated as a company limited by guarantee in February 1979. In September of that same year the Minister responsible for sport, Ken Booth, laid the foundation stone for the State Netball

Headquarters at Wyatt Park, Auburn. The Anne Clarke Netball Centre was officially opened on 11 October 1980 with over 800 people in attendance (Dunbar, 1989). New South Wales Netball Association then hired its first paid employees in 1980; these included an Executive Director, Peter Epov; Manager, Robert Whitton; and Director of Coaching, Margaret Corbett. It was the first time men had been appointed in an official capacity in the New South Wales Netball Association. These initiatives shifted netball away from its origins as a totally volunteer-administered female sport and repositioned it in the new era of global sports organisations.

National organisational change

At the national level the transition process was not smooth. The National Council members did not support many of the new directions and tensions were apparent between the old and new guard. The All Australia Netball Association (AANA) decided to pursue a strategy of commercialisation, sponsorship and expansion of netball into the new professionalism of sports in 1978. In this restructured administration the AANA employed their first Executive Officer and opened a national office. The first salaried National Executive Director hired in 1978 resigned not long into her term because of problems with the commitment of the Management Committee to the new direction and over concerns about her contract (AANA, Feb 1980). Long-standing official Dorothy McHugh recalled the many challenges faced by the first executive officer:

> ... when she (the Executive Officer) got out there in the corporate sector, they didn't know what netball was about. It took her six months to build up an awareness of netball. Well once that started to roll, we didn't ever look back. You needed the professional paid people there, and in turn, All Australia exploded, and the states couldn't keep up with it, because they were all working in a voluntary sort of way (in Duncan, 1994:56).

The vote was taken during debate about the control that the newly appointed administrator was exercising over the sport and the direction that netball was heading. The job descriptions of the National Secretary and the National Executive Officer were revised to ensure that key decision-making power was not placed in the hands of salaried staff members. The National Secretary was deemed responsible for day-to-day administration and operation of the AANA office, supervision and performance of office staff, preparation of submissions for government and the co-ordination and evaluation of approved programs. The National Executive Director was to control finance and sponsorships, media liaison, preparation of development programs, represent the Association at events, assist member associations and manage AANA Sport Trading. Although the impetus for these decisions was not apparent from the Council minutes a financial crisis was reported in 1982 and this appeared have facilitated the restructure. In a report to the Management Committee, sub-titled 'Financial Crisis' (AANA, 1982), the National Executive Director expressed concern about the current financial operations.

Initiatives and strategies to instigate change were pursued. A former player Keeley Devery commented, 'It's getting more professional, it certainly needs to, and I guess its becoming more of a business, and it certainly has to when you're talking million dollar sponsorships. You can't operate like a tea and scones brigade' (in Duncan, 1994:15). Sponsorship deals were actively sought to fund the new initiatives. However, gaining greater sponsorship funding seemed to elude AANA and they blamed this failure on the lack of media coverage (AANA, 1983). AANA were especially disappointed at the media coverage for the Sixth World Tournament in Singapore (1983 Minutes of Management/Finance Committee April 15-17, 1983). The Australian press did not send any reporters to cover the event and it was left to the Reuters Bureau in Singapore to send stories back to Australia. AANA decided that local pressure on media channels was needed and member associations were to begin media campaigns. As the minutes recorded (1983:232), 'letters, telephone calls from State, District, associated associations, clubs, teams and individuals are essential to convince the media moguls (mostly male)[3] that a World Netball Tournament is a sporting event worth reporting'. Efforts to lobby the media did not yield many dividends and netball continued to be considered

[3] This note about males was in the original document.

a marginal sport in terms of media coverage. Anne Sargeant (1989), a player in the 1983 competition, reflected on the lack of media and public attention when the team returned victorious from Singapore and stated that she felt very upset at the time. Netball Victoria (1994) subsequently commissioned research on the media coverage of netball and found that just 17.5 hours of netball was shown on ABC television in 1986. AANA were worried that the low level of media coverage would be a major barrier to the sport's progress. It began a concerted effort to rectify the situation. Reflecting on her role as the Executive Director for the All Australia Netball Association Helen Edmunds-Jones (1982:3) elaborated on this media challenge:

> ....it soon become evident that, to a large extent, future success of our five year development plan did rely heavily on publicity and sponsorship. To a virtually unexposed sport, this meant that media people had to be impressed, educated in the fundamentals of the game and inspired to report to readers, viewers and listeners.

While the commercial strategies of AANA achieved limited results, the perceived legitimacy of netball as a sport was further advanced in 1981 when the Australian Institute of Sport in Canberra selected netball as one of the eight sports to receive federal government funding for a new sports scholarship scheme. Furthermore, in 1984 AANA proposed the creation of an indoor competition, Super League, to promote netball throughout Australia. The teams suggested were New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia and the Australian Institute of Sport. ESSO Australia was the first major sponsor of the competition. It was decided to test the competition in 1985 after the National Championship to create spectator interest and gain greater television coverage (February 1985, Management Committee minutes). In recognition of the growing need to support and develop elite level netball players AANA also established trust funds for players in 1986, enabling players to retain their amateur status and allowed them access to financial assistance when playing commitments impeded employment. The first-fully funded Director of Umpiring was hired in 1992. Adding to its enhanced status, and some twenty years after lodging its first application, netball was recognised by the International Olympic Committee allowing national association access to membership of their country's National Olympic Committee in 1993. At the 1998 Commonwealth Games in Kuala Lumpur, the Australian netball team competed in a full medal sport for the first time.

Fighting for recognition

The new place of netball in Australian and world sports provided the incentive for a determined campaign to obtain greater media coverage the sport. Those involved in the game felt that it was unfair that netball lost out to the dominant male sports, especially as the Australian netball team was consistently in the top three countries in world championships and had an extraordinary large player base. However, inadequate media coverage was not just limited to netball; women's sport in general was receiving little attention. As a response to this problem the Australian Sports Commission published *Women, Sport and the Media* (1985) a report that called for greater coverage of women's sport. Australian media coverage of Australian netball finally came of age on 13 July 1991 (Smithers and Appleby, 1996). This was when Australia won the World Netball Championships over New Zealand before a Sydney crowd of 12,000. This was netball's first achieved breakthrough in terms of national identity, pride and greater national media coverage. In a reflective article on the media coverage of netball *Sunday Age* reporter Linda Pearce (8 May 1994) observed that the interest of her sports-writing colleagues about netball was usually minimal, however this situation changed after the 1991 World Championship final. Former player Keeley Devery remarked, 'After the World Championships it really turned around. I mean certainly we are not getting the coverage that we think we should be getting, but as far as women's sport goes in Australia we're looking pretty good' (in Duncan, 1994:9). The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) began regular match coverage with the Mobil Super League in 1991. Netball finally received sustained media exposure. In 1995, the national association adopted the business name of Netball Australia. The name change was to facilitate an update of netball's media image and to increase its marketability.

The constant struggle for greater media coverage caused a great deal of internal dissension in the netball ranks. It was felt in some quarters that the game needed to be 'sexier' if it was going to gain wider public attention. However, long-time advocates such as the then national coach Joyce Brown felt there was little need for the use of frills and lace to promote netball. She fought for women netballers to be recognised for their skill and athleticism and was opposed to suggested changes to the uniform that incorporated lycra bodysuits and colourful patterns (Smithers and Appleby, 1996). The game's administrators however otherwise and introduced tight-fitting uniforms. The publicity campaign exploited feminine sexuality to a moderate degree.

Evidence of such moves to make the game and its players more appealing was a photograph of the Australian netball team in black dresses with a single leg exposed, captioned as 'Belles of the (net)Ball' and accompanying text asks: 'Who are these leggy ladies? Are they international models set to knock Elle Macpherson off the catwalk?' (*The Advertiser* (Adelaide) 19 May 1992:53). Linda Pearce of the *Sunday Age* (7 March 1993:39) reported in her article 'Netball looking to bright year' that professional make-up artists, hairstylists and fashion designers were brought in to glamorise the national players. Netball magazines, such as *Netball NSW* and *Netball*: *Australia's National Magazine*, have since been introduced and focus attention on both the technical ability of players as well as the more social elements of their lives. Despite these media advances, the overall coverage of netball remained limited compared to sports such as racing, cricket and the various football codes. In their study of sport marketing Shilbury, Quick and Westerbeek (1998) noted that netball, along with other sports such as hockey and bowls, receive irregular media coverage in Australia. Cashman (1995) further pointed out that netball, despite its large player base, has struggled to get television coverage yet has continued to grow without its assistance. This lack of media coverage was not dissimilar to softball, another sport dominated by women. The evolution of media coverage for netball parallels that of softball, which was almost nil until the 1996 Olympics when 'the United States won the first Olympic gold medal for women's fast pitch softball but through the media Australia won the world' (Embrey, 1997:74). Softball has achieved some benefit from its status as an Olympic sport, though increased media exposure has been largely confined to the Olympic year.

Not all media coverage of netball has been positive. In an article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* Lisa Olsen provided a scathing attack on netball. She asked the question 'What is this sport still doing in the 90s?' and answered it by saying 'It looks like a chapter straight out of that ridiculous new book, "The Rules, on how to catch a man". Somewhere between Rule 3 (Don't Stare at Men or Talk Too Much) and Rule 17 (Act Dumb Even If You Know the Answer), I expect to find a new rule: If You Must Sweat, Choose a Non-threatening Activity Like Netball or Cheerleading.' Although Olsen was wrong when she attributed the rules of netball to Dr James Naismith[4] she did offer some observations about the game that reflect its status as a sport favouring a 'compliant femininity'.

> I may be wrong here, but it seems to me that this is a sport that was conceived by a man, natch, who believed females were weak and fragile dolls, ones that didn't perspire, but glowed. They obviously didn't have the stamina to run full court, so this man, the esteemed inventor of basketball - divided it into three parts in order to prevent those sweet young things from becoming too exhausted.

They weren't co-ordinated enough to move and shoot at the same time, so he decreed they would have to come to a full stop before aiming at the goal, thus guaranteeing a lifetime of knee injuries. They were too delicate for all that bumping and jostling, so he decided a defender must stand arms length from a shooter, thus guaranteeing about as much action under the net as a knitting contest.

Stereotypical comments about netball and its standing as a real sport have not been infrequent. Adair and Vamplew (1997) suggested that many Australian males believed that netball is a female game that requires little commitment or courage and did not see it as serious sport. However, Adair and Vamplew (1997:59) contended that this stereotype is far removed from reality as, 'netball may be a non-contact sport but particularly at

[4] The origins of the sport are outlined earlier in this chapter.

international level the game is highly demanding, both physically and mentally'.

As netball became more reliant on sponsorship and headed to professional sport the amount and type of media coverage it received became increasingly crucial to its continued viability. Netball officials recognised that the sport needed to make itself more marketable. Geary (1995) has debated whether moves to commercialisation would ultimately benefit netball or women's sport. She speculated that professionalising netball might help challenge traditional structures, which have reinforced sport as a site of exploitation and subordination of women. On the other hand there was a danger that such moves would represent conformation to a male model of sport and merely perpetuate a masculine hegemony of capitalist rationality and female discrimination. Broomhall (1993) argued in favour of the latter, that in striving for greater internationalisation, aiming for Olympic competition, and trying to attract sponsorship, women have moved netball closer to a male model of competitive and aggressive sport.

Another perspective on professionalisation is the corporate reinforcement of a women's sport that promotes feminine qualities. A case in point was when the Queensland Netball Association (QNA) announced a $1 million deal with Chevon Furnishers in 1991. Chevon stated that their philosophy in supporting the QNA was that they 'felt the community lacked a structure which encouraged the social development of young women' (*Brisbane Courier Mail*, 1991). The company obviously felt that netball was an avenue for girls to learn and demonstrate appropriate feminine behaviour. Also, as Keely Devery has pointed out, 'our Mobil league is a flashier competition so that teams have come out in new gear, flashier gear … I guess that's made us look more appealing, without losing the femininity of the game … you can still stay very feminine, and be a sportswoman' (in Duncan, 1994:7).

In moving netball into the professional sphere the national body has had to make decisions that have not always been popular within the sport as has been the case in many other sports. Netball Australia fuelled a huge debate in 1996 by proposing changes to the existing national league. Newspaper headlines such as 'Clubs in turmoil amid fierce backlash against radical changes' (*Sydney Morning Herald* 22 March 1996:16) and 'State League future hangs in balance' (*Herald Sun* 27.3.96:80) typified the coverage. These sentiments were fuelled by an AANA announcement of a 1997 National Netball League of eight teams playing two preliminary rounds and a final series. This signalled a move away from club to state teams with all teams were to be named after birds, Adelaide Falcons, Adelaide Ravens, Melbourne Kestrels, Melbourne Phoenix, Perth Orioles, Queensland Firebirds, Sydney Eagles and Sydney Swifts. The responsibility for revenue and marketing was allocated to The National Netball League (NNL) Pty Ltd. The choice of team names may lend support to the contention that the game seeks to retain its association with feminine images of the sport, which at the same time stress grace. However, it is unfortunate that the term 'birds' is an unflattering Australian slang term for women and girls. The justification for bird names was based on the argument that other sporting codes have not over-exposed this grouping. Netball Australia claimed that 'Birds also display grace, speed and strength, attributes displayed by elite netballers'. While it can be reasoned that using bird names gave the NNL Pty Ltd the opportunity to establish identifiable team logos, mascots and merchandising, the overexposure claim is difficult to substantiate. Within Australian sport there are the Sydney Swans, Adelaide Crows, the former manly-Warringah Sea Eagles, Wollongong Hawks, Gippsland Falcons and Newcastle Falcons, spanning men's Australian Rules, rugby league, soccer and basketball.

In other domains of women's professional sport the Australian Women's National Basketball League has chosen to use a mixture of names such as Adelaide Lightning, Perth Breakers, Dandenong Rangers, Melbourne Tigers, and the Sydney Flames. Netball New Zealand's teams include the Otago Rebels, Southern Sting, Canterbury Flames, Auckland Diamonds, Northern Force and the Waikato Wildcats. These are all names that are seemingly much less 'graceful' and convey less feminine images than those the NNL have settled upon. It may be that netball is remaining true to its roots in choosing names that portray a softer more feminine image that is also competitive without being masculine or overtly aggressive. Or netball officials may have preferred a coherent set of brand symbols, whereas other sports have a motley assortment of

birds, animals, vehicles, place names, colours and even saints.

Netball has also been resistant to other trends in merchandising female sexuality in sports. In recent years both male and female athletes have posed in rather revealing photographs for books, such as in the black and white *Atlanta Dreaming* (1996) publication and the *Golden Girls of Sport* Calendar (1994), which were produced to provide Australian female athletes competing in Atlanta an entrée to media coverage. These publications have been the source of academic debate and analysis about gendered bodies and the social construction of masculinity and femininity in the media. Mikosza and Phillips (1999) concluded that the *Golden Girls* calendar articulates a masculine versus feminine dichotomy that works against sportswomen, denigrates their athleticism and reinforces stereotypical feminine models of sport.

In late 1999 the Australian women's soccer team, the Matilda's, followed the golden girls' lead and posed in nude for a calendar to promote their sport. *Sports Today* (27 November 1999) quotes one of the players, Amy Taylor, as saying that she appeared in the calendar to prove to people that female soccer players are not necessarily all butch and masculine. This is further evidence of the pressure on female athletes to prove that they are not 'masculine' and that they fit mainstream societal expectations of femininity. In the same magazine article netball player Liz Ellis commented that it was a shame that female athletes had to go to such lengths to prove their femininity. Ironically, in early 2000 the Australian netball team refused an offer to remove their clothes for a calendar. It was reported that the team had voted decisively against such a move (*Sydney Morning Herald*, April 2000). The *Age* (May, 2000) ran the headline 'Taking a stand for skill over skin this calendar year'. A *Sports Today* (21 April 2000) article claimed that a number of the players were pressured to pose in the nude during the calendar shoot. The sessions had to be re-shot when netball officials stepped in to veto any nude pictures.

8. Commentary

In chronicling the history of netball in Australia it has been argued that the structure and delivery of this sport can be broadly interpreted as symbolic of societal expectations of women and sports. Societal conventions have governed both appearance and actions of women in sports, the sports they played and how they played these sports. The rules of netball, its administration and development have all promoted the social practice of a 'compliant femininity'. According to the rules of the game, players were constrained to a certain space and cannot roam the whole court; they can only take two steps and then must pass the ball. Although they may be in full flight, running hard, they must abruptly stop when they reach the defined boundaries they are allowed to operate within. Players are required to contribute their fair share to netball's operation by umpiring other games in the competition. Dress requirements are still strictly prescribed. Furthermore, netball was defined as a silent game, players were encouraged not to shout or be overly loud when playing. The negotiation of these boundaries and the way in which women have used the spaces created by their netball participation make for compelling analogies about the place of women in Australian society and the social construction of gender relations.

It is too easy to simply categorise and even dismiss netball as an extension of prescribed social practices, a sport that promulgated the subordination of women and reinforced the existing social order. This categorisation would suggest that all women who played netball favoured 'compliant femininity' and did not challenge or resist socially constructed ideals of femininity. Conversely, the female domination of netball could be interpreted as a statement of independence, a form of resistance to the normative model of sport and an act of female solidarity. Netball created an acceptable avenue for women to strive for physical excellence within the established social order by reassuring that the dress, and behaviour of its players was appropriate. This constant reinforcement of femininity ultimately served to define netball from other sports and provided a space in which to applaud women's achievements instead of measuring women against male standards. Jobling (1994) contended that netball has been the

antithesis to traditional domination of men in sport, as it has allowed females to become elite athletes and manage their sport at all levels of participation. As such, netball has had the unique opportunity to challenge hegemonic definitions of masculinity in sport. Netball was able to provide a sport that women could feel free to express their abilities, not just as players, but as coaches, umpires and administrators.

Herein lies the paradox of netball, has it been an avenue of emancipation or one of restriction or both? Have its participants contested societal expectations of women in sport or accepted a compliant adherence by restricting the game to women only for so many years? Have the players accepted and agreed with conservative official rules and regulations or have they been able to develop a form of resistance from within the sport? This thesis suggests that to categorise netball participation in one extreme position or another would oversimplify the complexities of the sport and ignore the fact that women and girls may appropriate netball in various ways.

Netball players do not necessarily believe that they are playing a 'soft' sport that is particularly less athletic or competitive. Within the boundaries of the game these women and girls have been able to negotiate a position that does not directly contest societal expectations but provides women with the space to enjoy the benefits and enjoyment of sports participation. In the world of sports women have typically been allotted to subordinate positions but within netball woman have not had to contend with male claims of superiority. Netball has changed over the past decades from a gentle form of exercise to fast-moving, highly athletic a game that is even occasionally a rough and violent sport.

On its own terrain netball has gone some way to reconstructing gender and breaking down the binary distinctions between masculinity and femininity. However, in public domains netball has reinforced and supported those very distinctions. The female ownership of netball as a sport is juxtaposed with a broader societal perception that netball is just a 'girl's game' and therefore it is unofficially ranked below men's sports in the sports hierarchy. Rules that ensured particular posture and movements that were distinctly feminine have reinforced such notions of inferiority. And while the boundaries were often reached, and sometimes even nudged, netball did not break through and set new standards for female sport. Netball administrators purposefully worked to retain a feminine aspect in the game's playing attire and movements, cognisant of public image and opinion. Netball was seen as one avenue for women to stake a claim on sports participation and still be viewed as ladies. In this way it has been serendipitously used to socialise women into sex-based, socially acceptable roles. Ironically this strong image of femininity associated with netball has served to entice several gay men to take up the sport and enter teams into competitions thus reinforcing the gendered nature of netball (Duncan and Weatherburn, 1997).

On the other hand netball has been a significant institution in the constant struggle by women to change public opinion and exercise their right to participate in physical activities. In this role netball has contributed to the acceptability of women playing sports. At a societal level it could be concluded that netball has both facilitated and stereotyped women's participation in sports. Its conservative approach has constrained female involvement, yet it provided an avenue that was socially acceptable for women to pursue. Thus, netball has been faced with the same dilemmas and contradictions of most female team sports. In striving for mass appeal the adoption of a more 'compliant femininity' has been necessary to attract large numbers of women into the game by avoiding the risk of alienation associated with sports that are labelled as too macho for women.

Netball has taken on a multitude of varying roles in the lives of its participants. It is important not to lose sight of this individual dimension of the sport, as experiences that are empowering for one person may be constraining for another. Netball has contested the dominant male terrain of sports provision and involvement on its own terms and within the shifting parameters of social values and expectations. It has been ahead of its time and it has been behind the times. Given this dichotomous situation the precise positioning of netball in discourses of women in sports is elusively ambiguous.

Netball has had to negotiate its position within the social practices in this country to ensure its continued growth and development. To successfully chart its progress netball officials recognised the contradictions and multiple

realities of gender and worked within these boundaries. In doing so netball has acted to construct a specific feminine identity that has grown from its middle class Anglo-Australian roots and is firmly located and accepted within a patriarchal society. Players demonstrate their femininity through physical appearance, image, dress and behaviour. These elements combine to present the qualities of co-operation, fair play and camaraderie as essential qualities for a netball player. But can this stereotyped image be applied to all netball players? Most likely not, as many girls and women have operated outside these confines in their participation in netball, shortening their skirts, playing aggressively and using physical strength and endurance to their advantage. These forms of resistance were aligned with other tensions faced by netball administrators and players in trying to promote a game that would appeal to women and also support prevailing community values and attitudes.

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