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## Women and LDS Church Sports

*Jessie L. Embry*

In 1969 I played basketball on a LDS Church-sponsored team to complete the requirements to receive an Individual Award, a Young Women Mutual Improvement (YWMIA) annual certificate. I had no basketball skills; I was lucky to get the ball near the basket. I usually was a defensive player, but sometimes I did shoot baskets. My teammates were very kind and cheered my positive moves. I do not remember any particular games; I just remember feeling out of my zone.

At that time women sports were not important in the LDS Church or in the United States. It was two years before federal legislation, Title IX, required equal athletic opportunities for men and women in high school and college. As a result of that law, which stated that no one “shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any educational programs or activities receiving federal financial assistance,” women sports exploded. For example, only 325,000 high school and college women athletes competed in sports before Title IX passed. That number increased to nearly three million in 2001.<sup>1</sup> A new outlet meant that very good female athletes played school ball and could no longer compete on church teams. But even losing these young women, church ball also expanded. For example, Liesl Christensen, a BYU student in 2007, grew up in the LDS Church Olympic Fifth Ward in Salt Lake City, where she loved playing church sports. The young women referred to their team as ATeam Spandex,@ since everyone wore spandex shorts under their regular shorts—“the brighter the better.” Girls who did not attend church often played and became friends with those who attended meetings regularly. The team

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was good; it won the stake and regional tournaments several times. But winning was not the aim; the main goal was to have “a bunch of fun.” No one got really upset if someone made a mistake, as Liesl explained, “messed up.” Instead, “we just laughed and kept on playing. It was a perfect place for girls to come and be hyper and have fun.” Christensen concluded, “I loved [playing church sports] and would do it again if I had the chance.”<sup>22</sup>

In 1957 Thomas O’Dea, a Catholic, wrote in his study of the LDS Church, simply called *The Mormons*, “Recreation—viewed as closely related to work and health—meets with strong Mormon approval and is seen as important in supporting and refreshing man for a more effective life, as well as for its own sake.” After the Mormons ended plural marriage, recreation became “an area in which the church has concentrated much of its organizational talent and a large share of its co-operative energy. It is today one of the most important spheres of activity in which group action under church auspices engages the individual member in the active life of the church.” As a result, Mormon “spiritualized recreation . . . has become an important expression of Mormon activism and group solidarity.”<sup>23</sup> O’Dea’s comments referred to the sports and recreation program for boys and men. There was very little sports for women in the 1950s. That gradually changed and more women became involved. But the goal for Mormon women has always been fitness rather than competition.

### **American Women’s Sports**

The Mormon Church experience with women sports fits into the larger American picture. During the nineteenth and most of the twentieth century, athletics were mainly for males. At first there was little, if any, connection between religion and sports. But over time churches encouraged sports as a way to get young men off the street and into worship. But very few encouraged sports for females. Why? First, there was a sense that girls were not as wild as boys. Girls did not hang out on the street and get into trouble like boys. Second, and more important, many recreational and church leaders believed that females were not competitive. In the nineteenth century, an English paper declared that men competed in athletics because they had the instinct, bodies, and attitudes for fighting. Women lacked all three. In the 1850s those who promoted gymnasium work in Europe believed that women’s exercise should focus on “tender femininity” and not “Spartan toughness.”<sup>24</sup>

A greater fear was that women who played competitive games damaged their reproductive organs. In 1899 Arabella Kenealy, a medical doctor, described a young lady named Clara who went from not being able to walk two

miles to playing tennis and field hockey and bicycling. Yet Kenealy feared these physical activities had negative effects. She worried that strong arms and legs took strength away from the internal organs. In addition, according to her studies, women athletes died young and often suffered from mental diseases.<sup>5</sup>

Others agreed. Luther Gulick, a leader in the Young Men Christian Association, promoted male games: "Boyhood and manhood have . . . for ages been both tested and produced by athletic sports." He encouraged the invention of basketball and volleyball and enlarged the YMCA=s recreational programs. But he believed women should only exercise and not be in "serious, public competition." Gulick formed the Campfire Girls in 1912 to counter the Girl Scouts programs of hiking and playing basketball. Instead the Campfire Girls dressed as Native Americans and sang campfire songs.<sup>6</sup>

These ideas started to change with the invention of the bicycle in the mid-1800s, although it took several decades for women=s exercise to be accepted. Some doctors feared that riding a bike would create large muscles on females, yet but almost immediately women enjoyed cycling. As women became more physically active, teachers gradually recognized the value in women=s physical education. But there remained the competing elements of the beauty queen vs. the "mannish" female athlete. To discourage the latter, physical education instructors introduced "play days" for women in the 1920s. They divided girls into teams that mixed the participants so it was not possible practice team work. The joy was in taking part, so the leaders did not reward the winners. Play days were "spontaneous fun which is unspoiled by the tension of an overexcited audience and an overstimulated team."<sup>7</sup>

In the 1930s and 1940s, play days were often replaced with sports days. Instead of playing with strangers, schools could form teams and practice. The difference between a male intercollegiate competition and female sports days were that the schools had to allow anyone who wanted to play and the competition was only one day. However, sports did not eliminate the debate on women playing to win. A woman physical education professor explained that when she attended college in the 1930s "girls were taught that competition was dirty."<sup>8</sup> It was so dirty that in 1938 the Women=s Division of the National Amateur Athletic Federation asked that women=s track and field events be eliminated from the Olympics. (The International Olympic Committee disagreed.) In the 1940s not only the Women=s Division but seven other national organizations explained that women should compete only on a local level.<sup>9</sup> Still, sports days caught on, and women played basketball at over three-fourths of the college and high school events. It was not the same sports that men played; women adapted the rules to meet concerns for women=s stamina and strength. Lithuanian native Senda Berenson is credited with creating women=s basketball. She

moved to Boston with her parents when she was seven-years-old, but because of poor health she could not attend schools and was educated at home. She loved playing the piano and entered the Boston Conservatory of Music. Her health concerns forced her to leave. A friend suggested she attend the Boston Normal School of Gymnastics to improve her body strength. While there she learned Swedish gymnastics and enjoyed physical education. In 1892 she was hired at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts to replace the gymnastic teacher. That year the college opened an Alumnae Gymnasium.

The year before, James Naismith had invented basketball, and Berenson wondered if the game suited women. She modified the game so it was not too manly. For example, she divided the court into three equal sections. Players had to stay in their own section so they would not tire by running the entire court. To encourage womanly behavior, players could not grab the ball from others. To speed up the game, women could not hold the ball for more than three seconds or dribble more than three times.

Similar to the ad hoc beginning of men's basketball, Berenson convinced the custodians to hang peach baskets. She trained the girls by having them play a tag game and then added the ball and basket skills. Less than a year after Berenson started her program, the first women's game between two institutions took place. Other games followed. But while all women modified the rules, everyone made different changes. Finally, in 1899, official women rules were published. In addition to the rules, the first guide included explanatory articles on basketball. Luther Gulick wrote on "The Psychological Effects of Basket Ball for Men," and Theodore Hough explained the "Physiological Effects of Basket Ball for Women." Gulick stressed the role of teamwork in men's basketball, which he did not believe came naturally to women. Hough said that basketball was good for women's hearts but only because the rules were modified. Finally, Berenson examined the "Significance of Basket Ball for Women." She argued that women need to strength their bodies, but the rules protected them from the "evils of men's athletics." As a result, women did not overextend themselves and damage their bodies.

Over the years the rules for women's basketball continued to be modified to meet concerns for women health. In 1901 halves were shortened from twenty to fifteen minutes. The number of players on a team went from five to ten and to six and then nine. All dribbling was eliminated and then added back over the years. Women continued to play with three courts until 1938. The game then shifted to two sections. Teams had six members when I played—two forwards, two guards, and two rotating players. Not until 1971 did women play on the full court with five team players. Even the ball changed from a soccer ball to a larger ball. In 1982 the ball returned to the smaller size used in Berenson's day.<sup>10</sup>

## Mormons and Women's Sports

Mormon views of women sports also evolved. In the 1860s Brigham Young put a gymnasium in his Utah home and encouraged his children—sons and daughters—to exercise. He believed play should be where members could “enjoy the Spirit of the Lord.” At the same time they needed to have “mastery over [themselves] and command the influences around [them].” He explained that it was not “[their] lawful privilege to yield to anything in the shape of amusement until [they had] performed every duty and obtained the power of God to enable [them] to withstand and resist all foul spirits” and “obtain . . . the blessings of the Holy Spirit.” He encouraged “eight hours work, eight hours sleep, [and] eight hours recreation.”<sup>11</sup> Very little was written about Mormon women's exercise and athletic activities for a half century.

In 1908 E. J. Milne, a physical education professor at the University of Utah, wrote about “ward and gymnasium halls” in the *Improvement Era* because of “numerous inquiries [about] adopting a course in physical education or athletics.” While some wards feared high costs, Milne explained that wards could make an “attractive room” for “basket ball (sic), hand ball and gymnastic work” with little expense. The article focused on basketball because, according to Milne, it was “the greatest of all indoor games in the country, and especially in the state of Utah.” He spelled out room size, window protection, and basketball hoops. While the rules said the basketball floor should not be larger than thirty-five by seventy feet, he explained that the game could be played in a smaller area.<sup>12</sup>

While wards converted cultural halls to gymnasiums, a larger facility was the Church-owned Deseret Gym, the “Temple of Health.” BYU historian Richard Ian Kimball explains that understanding the gym's history can give “a deeper appreciation of how integral recreational activities were to Mormon society.” In February 190, Church President Joseph F. Smith announced that the Church had paid off its debt and would have an income soon. He told the students at the Salt Lake City Latter Day Saint University that he wanted to build a school gymnasium. In 1910 the Church completed the Deseret Gym for use by the school and the LDS community. It provided an alternative to the Young Men Christian Association (YMCA), a non-denominational organization, which had built a Salt Lake City gym in 1904 that was attracting Mormon youth.<sup>13</sup> The Mormon gym provided activities for men and women. So that women would be discouraged from watching men or not have a chance to play, Deseret Gym supported days when only women could attend. But there was a different emphasis between the male and female programs. Gym's ads encouraged men to join to strengthen their bodies. Women were



LDS Pioneer Ward building, built in 1913, located on the northwest corner of 900 West and 100 North, Provo, Utah (2008). The building's design includes a chapel on an elevated first floor, a recreation hall in the rear, and classrooms on the ground floor. The building is typical of LDS meetinghouses built during the early part of the twentieth century which began to include a recreation hall for social, theatrical, and athletic contests. Photograph by Alexander L. Baugh.

encouraged to exercise so they had bathing-suit bodies. A 1930 poem demonstrated the gym goals for women:

You gotta bend down, Sister, bend down, Sister  
 If you want to keep thin,  
 No more messing with French dressing,  
 Sister bear and grin.

Women who exercised would not only look good, they would feel better. Gym advertisements encouraged women:

Got any aches, got any pains?  
 Fallen arches, varicose veins. . .  
 Try exercise and learn how to swim  
 Park your worries at Deseret Gym.<sup>14</sup>

Just as there was a difference between the role of the Deseret Gym for men and women, there was a difference in Mormon men's and women's in-

volvement in team sports. Men participated in athletics, competition sports that taught important lessons and developed character. Paul Hansen, a professor at the University of Utah and the manager of the Edgehill Ward's excellent gym, explained at the beginning of each basketball season, "This is a basketball. Behind me a basketball floor. Across the basketball floor is a chapel. The reason for this game is to put into practice the things you learn in that chapel."<sup>15</sup> The handbooks for the Young Men Mutual Improvement Association (YMMIA) were called "athletic manuals." On the other hand, women participated in sports to gather together, make friends, and enjoy physical activity. The handbooks for the Young Ladies Mutual Improvement Association (YLMIA), or its later name, Young Women Mutual Improvement Association (YWMIA), were called "sports-camp manuals." The designation made a major difference in how Church leaders and members viewed men and women activities.

Although the terms *athletics* and *sports* do not appear in national publications, the concepts that separate men and women sports were the same in the LDS Church as in the United States. In 1936 the *Improvement Era* magazine asked "all those who may be directing physical activities for MIA groups or who may have influence with directors of athletics for girls . . . [to] study . . . the Platform of the Women's Division National Amateur Athletic Federation." The twelve "aims" of the division stressed participation, good sportsmanship, modest dress, and health of women. One asked women to "promote competition that stresses enjoyment of sports and the development of good sportsmanship and character rather than those types that emphasize the making and breaking of records and the winning of championships for the enjoyment of spectators." Another one explained that women should be "protect[ed] . . . from the dangers attendant upon competition that requires travel and from commercialization by interest in gate receipts."<sup>16</sup>

The views of women sports gradually changed in the United States and the LDS Church. In 1952 the *Church News* announced a new women's sports program because "girls must be kept busy in this day when boys are being called in the service in large numbers" during the Korean War. The article encouraged relays, and included pictures of two girls passing a balloon in a forehead relay. Why? "Wards are encouraged to sponsor Saturday night activities . . . to keep girls off the street." If a ward did not have a recreational hall, the games could be in the church's classrooms or halls, in homes, or outside. The Salt Lake Stake, for example, did not have a gym and held games once a month by the Utah State Capitol Building.<sup>17</sup>

The 1952–1953 *YWMIA Camping and Game Manual* stressed that girls should take part in recreational activities. Suggestions included fun days with catchball, softball, relays, individual sports such as deck tennis, badminton,



LDS Young Women participating in a volleyball tournament in an LDS ward building, date unknown, ca. 1950s.

horseshoes, and tennis. Girls could play mixed softball, but the girls needed to play the same position on both teams. So if a woman was a pitcher on one team, a man could not pitch on the other team. According to the manual, "Sports, when properly conducted and supervised, can be one of the best forms of recreational activities for all girls." Besides play days, women could also form teams and compete against each other in volleyball, softball, tennis, badminton, kickball, shuffleboard, and table tennis. YWMIA leaders suggested that a ward select two or three activities that the local young women enjoyed and set up tournaments between ward and stake teams. There could also be multi-stake tournaments as long as the teams did not have to travel very far. The tournaments could be round-robin, where every team played every other team; elimination/consolation, where the winner of first games went into a winner's bracket and the losers continued to compete in a consolation bracket; or sports days, where everyone played for the fun with less organization. If the girls played basketball though, they had to play girls' rules, since girls were not physiologically and psychologically able to play the game, and boys' rules were too "strenuous for the average girl."<sup>18</sup>

To help teach these principles and the games, the June Leadership Conferences for YMMIA and YWMIA extended their women training programs. In 1952 the sports and camp committee added a day of games at a local gym along with camping programs.<sup>19</sup> The 1953 meeting featured YWMIA sports at the Deseret Gym which included form and synchronized swimming. The University of Utah synchronized team, the Agua-Maids, performed. Local teams played basketball and volleyball to demonstrate skills. At half-time during the basketball game, girls played deck tennis and badminton.<sup>20</sup>

According to the YWMIA leaders, all of these efforts paid off. An April 1956 article declared, "The sports and recreation program of the YWMIA is



having far reaching effects,” like “the athletic program of its big brother, the YMMIA.” In 1955, the YWMIA held 15,500 sporting events. For example, the Midvale First Ward defeated the Butler Second in a championship basketball game. Over the year, 113 girls in the stake had played, and each participant received a certificate. The winning wards received equipment for prizes to help develop the program even more. Everyone was looking forward to a swimming program, and 360 girls had signed up. The stake planned to add softball and volleyball, just like the YMMIA program.<sup>21</sup>

With an increased focus, more women were involved (or at least were counted). Betty Killpack, the YWMIA chairman of the sports and camp committee, reported that 1956 was the first year that the YWMIA asked for figures on how many girls, ages twelve to twenty-five, took part in Church sports. Wards and stakes responded with impressive numbers—32,000 girls involved in 25,000 events that included volleyball, softball, safety ball, and basketball. There were more than 8,000 game nights and 800 non-members involved. Equally impressive were the more than 10,000 volunteer leaders, a figure that Killpack said impressed those at the World Congress on Recreation and Leisure Time that so many adults were willing to volunteer and assist with the program.<sup>22</sup>

While most women’s sports were on a ward and stake level, there were multi-stake tournaments where there was a large concentration of Latter-day Saints. In 1956, Division 9, a category also used in men’s sports and which included twelve stakes in Salt Lake City and three stakes in Davis County, held a women’s softball tournament. Only six teams competed that year. The next year, twenty teams and over three hundred YWMIA women were involved. The *Church News* article bragged, “All the teams have been coached and umpired by women. With each team providing an umpire and their own equipment, the tournament has had no expenses involved.” In 1958, twenty-six teams took part in the tournament, the top two teams from each stake.<sup>23</sup> The number of women participating and the activities involved continued to grow. Betty Killpack reported that 63,000 young women took part in the sports program in 1962. She added, “This would include basketball, volleyball, baseball, swimming, boating, bowling, tennis, almost any sport a girl enjoys.”<sup>24</sup>

Women activities were not just sports, though. The YWMIA stressed fitness. Killpack emphasized the 4-F program (Fitness for Feminine Forms), which the leaders introduced in 1959 to unite mothers and daughters.<sup>25</sup> In 1960 the *Church News* highlighted a fitness program in the Taylorsville, Utah Stake, which followed a program announced at the 1959 June Conference. On Thursday nights mothers and daughters met to perform twenty-five fitness skills, such as a sit-ups, catch (a tripod), through the stick, and other exercises. The class had a motto:

Young in heart  
 Young in spirit  
 Broad or lean  
 Tall or short  
 Creaking in joints  
 And waiting to have FUN.

The article complained that mothers only came once, but the daughters had continued the program for two months. One woman said that mothers should come because “too many of us sit and let ourselves get old.”<sup>26</sup>

### YWMIA Manuals

A comparison of the 1955, 1961, and 1971 *YWMIA Sports-Camp Manuals*, and the 1978 *Young Women-Relief Society Physical Fitness, Recreation, and Sports Manual*, is a classic demonstration of the changes in women’s sports during the time when boys and men played all-church sports. In all the manuals the YWMIA leaders combined camping and games because they saw both as “wholesome recreation.” The 1955 manual listed two main goals: (1) “Develop and instill testimonies in the hearts of the young girls,” and (2) “Provide spiritualized recreation to fit their needs.”<sup>27</sup> The 1961 manual also had testimony and recreation goals but expanded on them, namely (1) “To develop the participants spiritually through activities and experiences which will assist in gaining a testimony of the gospel of

Jesus Christ,” and (2) “To assist in the social and emotional development of the participants through spiritualized recreation.”<sup>28</sup> United States President Dwight D. Eisenhower formed the President’s Council on Youth Fitness in 1956, and Mormon Apostle and Secretary of Agriculture Ezra Taft Benson spoke at the second annual meeting of the council. He explained, “Physical well-being is not only a priceless asset to one’s self. It is a heritage to pass on.”<sup>29</sup> John F. Kennedy expanded those efforts with a Presidential Physical



*YWMIA Sports-Camp Manual* (1974-1975).

Fitness Award for children who met the exercise goal. Part of the motivation was to prepare young Americans who might have to participate if the Cold War turned hot. With this focus, the 1961 manual included a new objective—“To teach the importance of all physical fitness and promote the physical development of the participants.”<sup>30</sup>

Betty Friedan’s *The Feminism Mystique* (New York: Norton, 1963) marked the beginning of a women’s movement in which many females questioned the traditional roles of women. Women rebelled against the stereotypes of sweetness and submissiveness and demanded equal treatment. In reaction, a Mormon, Helen B. Andelin, published *Fascinating Womanhood* (Fresno, California: American Publishing House, 1965), suggesting that women and men made a complete whole but women had a unique role. While Andelin’s views were not Church-sanctioned, they reflected a view held by many Mormons that the “feminists” were going overboard.<sup>31</sup> Because of this movement, the 1971 manual included the same 1961 goals but also included several objectives: (1) “to help cultivate and maintain femininity and refinement in each girl,” (2) “to enhance leader-girl relationships,” and (3) “to provide opportunity for development of talents and leadership skills.”<sup>32</sup>

The manuals also reflected changing views of women’s bodies. The 1955 manual stated, “restrain girls from playing if they are having their menstrual period.”<sup>33</sup> The 1961 manual modified this to ask girls to “use wisdom during their menstrual periods in participating in strenuous sport activities.”<sup>34</sup> The 1971 manual did not even mention the subject.<sup>35</sup>

The manuals also showed a change in the views of competition. The 1955 manual discouraged trophies. It suggested sports equipment as prizes but also suggested a play day for all participants after a tournament. The girls should be involved for “the fun and joy of playing and not for the wining of the tournament or a trophy.”<sup>36</sup> In 1961, the manual encouraged trophies that were based not only winning but also on sportsmanship and percentage of girls playing. Each team received fifty points at the first of the season for sportsmanship and then lost those points if they did not follow rules of fair play.<sup>37</sup> In 1971 every participant on the winning team received a necklace or medallion.<sup>38</sup>

The 1971 manual also had a change in dress code. When I participated in church activities, girls were not allowed to wear pants with a front zipper. The rationale, I was told, was that they were too unladylike. The new manual bore a heading “Pants and Zippers,” and explained that any pants—including Levis—that were designed for girls were acceptable. Shorts no longer had to come to the knee, but the manual emphasized modesty.<sup>39</sup>

## Purposes for Women's Sports

Monitor C. Noyce, a *Church News* reporter explained in 1964, "While there are some differences in the program for young women compared with the young men's plan, the ultimate goals are the same. Both are charged with providing wholesome recreation, building testimonies within youth so that they will remain active, strong members of the Church, and influencing non-members to investigate the gospel further by interesting them in specific activities."<sup>40</sup> A 1965 a Church publication explained that the sports program for girls was a means of activating and fellowshipping girls into the Church. Furthermore, the program could also help build character and teach dependability, punctuality, persistence, the joy of fair play, sportsmanship, being a gracious winner and a good loser, and getting along with others. The pamphlet concluded, "If the sports programs in your wards and stakes fails to be character-building, it is not fulfilling its purpose. It should help to bring the light of the gospel into the lives of girls and leaders."<sup>41</sup>

Over the years other statements pointed out the differences between the men's and women's programs. One important aim in the women's programs was to have all girls involved. In 1953 a *Church News* article said that the activities being sponsored that year were "to demonstrate that there is something in the YWMIA sports program for every girl, and that it is the responsibility of the sports director to keep the single girl in the corner of the gym just as busy as the active girls on the team in the middle of the courts." The organization's goal was "seeking and interested in mass participation and not in a specific contest to determine necessarily a winner. Thus All-Church meets and contests are not the goal of the YWMIA."<sup>42</sup> Even those who could not play should be encouraged to be involved. In 1956 Killpack said, "Every girl can fit into the program though she make have a bad heart, a handicap in some way, is backward, or for some other reason may not have participated previously. In the MIA she may now do something, if it is only keeping score." According to El Ray L. Christiansen, an Assistant to the Twelve, this program was "spiritualized recreation through the hearts that know and feel."<sup>43</sup>

One way to encourage participation was to give points for how many girls were involved. After a game, the teams got points not only the runs scored but also for the percentage of girls who took part in the game. Additional points were awarded for each girl who came to the game whether she played or not, and sportsmanship points. Each team started with fifty points and then lost points for poor conduct.<sup>44</sup> The June 15, 1961, issue of the *Church News* carried pictures of the Copperton Ward girls' basketball team, the "score team" Division Four champions, and the Monument Park Seventh Ward girls' team that had won several trophies. The July 15 issue had a photograph of the



LDS Young Women participating in the June 1973 Dance Festival at the University of Utah football stadium. Photograph by Eldon Linschoten.

Pleasant Grove Fourth Ward, the winner of the Division Four trophy. All the girls were dressed in their Sunday best. While the Pleasant Grove Ward won the tournament, the Copperton Ward women were the “score team” winners because of the points they tallied for sportsmanship and participation.<sup>45</sup>

Participation provided an opportunity for fellowship. At one stake tournament, “every available foot of standing and sitting space in the hall was taken by young women rooting and screaming throughout the game as exciting moments developed.” And beyond bringing active Mormon girls together, it was a way to interest non-members and attract inactive members to take part. After this stake tournament, two girls were baptized, two were listening to the missionaries lessons, and five were reactivated.<sup>46</sup> In June 1956, Betty Killpack, chair of the sports and camp committee for the Young Women’s General Board, believed that sports “had great power to convert and reactivate young women.” Sports gave “a feeling of belonging and being loved and wanted.” Non-Mormon Sandra Klienheuver from Layton, Utah spoke at the meeting about how much she enjoyed taking part. The leaders explained that Klienheuver had attended seventy-five percent of the required meetings.<sup>47</sup> The next year at June Conference, Elder El Ray L. Christiansen said that sports were an “indispensable” program to deal with an evil world. It was the reason why three-fourths of young women were reactivated.<sup>48</sup> In 1952 Killpack explained that the YWMIA program was worldwide; and referring to an earlier survey, she claimed one and half baptisms in each stake that participated and “the re-activation of hundreds.” In fact, she said that every time she checked the numbers “we find the story the same, the spiritual blessings are far reaching.”<sup>49</sup>

## Women in All-Church Tournaments

While there was never all-Church tournaments for women's basketball, softball, and volleyball as there was for men, women were allowed to participate in golf and tennis. There is no clear explanation why women were included in these sports. One possibility is that they were not team sports and were competitive only on the individual level. They were also viewed as life-time sports. The golf and tennis tournaments were also very small, and the organizers might have wanted to involve more people. Having women increased participation. The first tennis and golf tournaments were in 1950. In 1959 women were allowed to participate in the all-Church golf tournament for the first time. The women continued to play along side the men until 1962, when the *Church News* announced that the fourth annual golf tournament would not be at the same time as the YMMIA tournament. That year, Barbara Trish, a sixteen-year-old from Pensacola, Florida, won the tournament, and the newspaper reported that participation was up six hundred percent from the year before. In 1963, fifty women took part in three categories: "Nifty-Fifty" for fifty years older, "Senior" for eighteen and older, and "Junior" for ages thirteen to eighteen. Dorothy P. Holt, the activity counselor for the YWMIA, ceremoniously teed off first. Two grandmothers recorded the best scores. While most of the women came from the Mountain States, there were representatives from Chicago and Las Vegas.<sup>50</sup> Still there were not many men or women involved. In 1964 the committee explained, "There isn't a lot of golf activity [on the ward or stake level] for golfers who love the game. You can whet the appetite of golfers for the region by encouraging stake tournaments."<sup>51</sup>

## Changes in Church Sports

About the same time that the federal government increased women's involvement, the LDS Church changed its athletics and sports programs for men and women. At June Conference 1971, YMMIA General Superintendent W. Jay Eldredge announced the "elimination of [the] all-Church championship finals in all athletic events." Eldredge justified the change: "We want to stress that the reasoning behind the new program, which is under the direction of the General Authorities, is we will have the opportunity to hold larger and more interesting events. We anticipate that the area tournaments will increase the activity of the youth and the participation of youth and adult in leadership roles."<sup>52</sup>

This policy was restated with brief announcements in the *New Era*, a magazine for teenagers, and in the *Ensign*, the adult magazine. The *New Era* article stated:

*Young Men's Athletic Program*

1. No more all-Church tournaments. The Church, now worldwide, wants to emphasize sports on a local basis rather than have teams travel to Salt Lake City.
2. Athletic tournaments will be held on an *area* basis. . . .
3. The emphasis on zone or area sports will allow sports that are popular in different countries and areas to be played.
4. Changes in age limitations. . . .

*Young Women's Sport and Camp Programs*

1. Your basketball, volleyball, and softball may be a little different this year—an officials training program is underway so that girls and leaders may serve as qualified officials. [Interestingly, the 1936 platform for women's athletics had suggested that men not coach or officiate girls "competitive activities."]
2. Track and field meets are added, with competition in all major events. Girls are classified by age. [The 1936 platform also stressed age and "capacities" divisions.]
3. Jump rope skills, jogging, and other individual sports programs will receive emphasis this year. [These were activities stressed by the President's Council on Fitness.]<sup>53</sup>

Another change took place in 1973. A special supplement manual was published that year to explain a change in the youth programs from the MIA to the Melchizedek Priesthood MIA and the Aaronic Priesthood MIA, a focus more on the priesthood. Presiding Bishop Victor L. Brown explained the new program in the general priesthood session of general conference on April 7, 1973. With the change, his office would direct the Church-wide MIA. On the local level, the bishopric would be in charge of the Young Men. Four adult women leaders, a president and an advisor for the Beehive, Mia Maid, and Laurel classes, directed the Young Women. A service and activity committee would plan service and dance, drama, sports, and athletic programs for the ward, and a special effort would be service.<sup>54</sup>

A supplement to the 1974–1975 *YWMLA Camping and Sports Manual* explained the differences in organization that Bishop Brown described in his talk. Bishops, stake presidents, and other leaders were to call qualified women to teach, coach, and officiate women's sports and all sports were to follow women's rules.<sup>55</sup> The manual explained the reasons for camping and sports. The six goals were to (1) help participants develop a testimony of the gospel through spiritualized activities and experiences; (2) teach the importance of physical development; (3) assist in social and emotional development; (3) enhance leader-girl relationships; (4) provide opportunity for development of talents and leadership skills; (5) help cultivate and maintain femininity and

refinement in each girl; and (6) help participants develop a testimony of the gospel through spiritualized activities and experiences. Perfect play was not the goal. The plan was to increase participation and enjoyment. The section on sports explained that the program was for enjoyment and should “maintain girls’ femininity. There should be a variety of activities, games should allow for skill level and match age, skill, and experience. There should be a program for all age groups, including adults, and leaders should explain the program to parents. The focus was sportsmanship and health. All girls needed to have a physical examination. Everyone should take part, and possible activities included individual, team, and non-competitive games. Those who could not play could be score keepers, for example. There should be junior and senior teams. Most of the manual discusses basketball, softball, and volleyball clinics. However, a section of the manual encouraged play days, which allowed a large activity and a chance for girls to get to know each other.”<sup>56</sup>

### **A New Direction**

In 1978 the LDS Church published a new sports manual for the Young Women and Relief Society. Since women were considered the primary trainers of children, one of the goals of the Young Women and Relief Society programs was the responsibility that physical fitness be a “heritage to pass on” to the next generation. The new program was for young women (ages twelve and older) and adult women. Its goals were to (1) identify and fulfill individual needs of each woman in physical fitness, recreation and sports; (2) teach women physical fitness skills; (3) motivate women to become physically fit and help family and friends to be physically fit; and (4) provide opportunities for women to participate in recreational, cultural, and physical activities.<sup>57</sup>

The manual contained two sections. Relief Society-age women were to have only ward and stake recreation leaders. On the other hand, Young Women’s programs required sports specialists on the ward, stake, regional, and area levels (regional and area specialists were for training and supervision only). The guidelines clearly stated that there would be no regional or area play. Large, expensive team trophies were discouraged. Instead, it was suggested that winning teams be awarded with a team photograph (which could be displayed by the ward), a scrapbook, gifts of equipment, medals, or, in the case of sportsmanship awards, a traveling plaque.<sup>58</sup>

The primary purpose for recreation and sports was “the practice of gospel principles in daily life,” and that “Good sportsmanship is the Golden Rule in action.” Such programs provided an “excellent way for women to get acquainted, build friendships and sisterhood and gain a sense of belonging.”



Listed were thirty-three individual sports, eleven team sports (including basketball, soccer, softball, water basketball, volleyball, kickball, ice hockey, relay carnival, speedball, water polo, and lacrosse), and eleven types of dance. In addition, twenty-one special sporting events were mentioned, including bicycle races, track meets, spelling bees, parlor games, lectures, and synchronized swimming. Like the 1974B1975 manual, the 1978 manual suggested that play days could be organized where “fun and friendship” would be emphasized as more important than winning. As in the earlier play days, it suggested assigning girls to teams so that they got to know each other. Some ideas were given, for example, recommending that men and women play together, the main goal being that everyone participates. When only women played, the guidelines emphasized that only women should be the coaches and the officials and added, “Good officiating is perhaps the most indispensable part of competitive sports.” The rest of the manual, however, talked more about exercise and included exercise and aerobic dance routines.<sup>59</sup>

## Stories

What impact did women sports have in the Church? In 2003 I sent out a press release asking for stories about all-church basketball. I received many responses from men who took part in basketball and softball. I only got one male volleyball story, and only one woman sports story. Later I expanded my press release to ask for stories about MIA recreational activities. Again, I received only limited responses. Maybe other women’s stories were as limited as mine.

The one woman story I received does explain the impact of Church softball in a small town. The story came from Eloise Godfrey Fugal, a native of Cornish, Utah, a small town (population 100–200) in Cache County, near the Utah-Idaho border. The town had a great community baseball team around the middle of the twentieth century. Everyone went to the games and played unique roles. Many felt that baseball put Cornish on the map because the town always competed for the league championship and often won over much larger communities. The community baseball league folded in 1966, but according to Fugal, that sport was replaced by women’s Church softball. Just as everyone went to see the town baseball team, they came out to the women’s games.

Like many baseball games, the fans played an interesting role. Fugal recalled, “I think we had an interesting fan in the grandmother of one of the girls who came to every game. We tried to be really good sports. She sometimes would embarrass us with the things that she said.” Her comments were

frequently directed at the players and she was “quite free with her advice. . . . If you fouled up, one of the worst things was knowing she was going to be on your case. I think we all didn’t want to make mistakes because she had a pretty good way of expressing herself, shall we say.”

Softball also strengthened community bonds with the girls. Fugal recalled a non-Mormon who played softball because that was what you did in Cornish. She eventually joined the Church, although Fugal was not sure that church sports helped or hurt that. As the coach one year, Fugal recalled a girl who was not a softball player but they needed her to play:

By her choice she played right field where the ball never comes. I don’t know if it was the last game of the season. It probably really wasn’t. My mind probably just made that up to make it more dramatic. [It was] one of the last games of the season and it was against Lewiston Fourth Ward. They were still one of the teams to beat. She accidentally caught a fly ball. It came right to her. It landed right in her mitt. There was not a thing she could do about it, and it just was there. She was carried off the field like an Olympic hero. It was a wonderful, magic moment.<sup>760</sup>

Fugal’s story represents women’s sports before the 1971 change. A Denver region experience demonstrated that sports continued to play an important role where it continued. On March 24, 1973, ten girls and six women’s teams competed in the Denver round-robin regional basketball tournament. According to the *Church News* report, “Athletic prowess on the court was surpassed only by good sportsmanship by the 200 participants and spectators.” The schedule was set up so that everyone continued to play. Some explained, “Winning was fun, but losing was restful” because they could sit out. To cover all the games, the women played in three gyms, the Douglas High School, Wilcox Elementary, and Douglas County Junior High School. The tournament planners explained, “We could have had the girls quit after they lost a game, but the point of the tournament was to meet people and have fun.” The tournament declared the Boulder 1<sup>st</sup> Ward the women’s champions and the Colorado Springs 2<sup>nd</sup> Ward the girl’s champions. But “everyone who played was a winner, and is looking forward to next year’s Round Robin Basketball Tournament.”<sup>761</sup>

In 1982 the Lakeland Florida Stake decided to hold a Young Women’s basketball tournament. The Lake Wales Branch did not have five active girls to play, so they asked friends and inactive members to join their team. “The girls were told that if they didn’t have fun, they didn’t have to stay.” Almost no one knew much about basketball. They did not know the terms “fast break” or even how to dribble. But the girls learned and went to the tournament. It was the first time they had not played outside, so “they had some trouble getting used to having confining walls.” They won the tournament and “the

experience of playing together and fellowshiping [had already] made them winners.”<sup>62</sup>

### **Continued Women’s Sports**

In 1983 Kathleen Lubeck explained the variety of programs participated in by countless numbers of Church members, including LDS young women. In an *Ensign* article, “Activities That Change Lives,” she asks, “What has thousands of legs and is found in climes around the world jogging, clogging, Ping-Ponging, singing, acting, stomping, and serving others?” She responds, “Church members participating in Church-sponsored activities—a delightful alternative to undesirable activities often found outside the Church.” Her reasons for taking part in these programs were very similar to the ones that the recreation program started with. “These activities . . . provide a fun way to do missionary work, reactivate Church members, and develop self-esteem and talents at the same time.” Lubeck then tells of a family ping-pong tournament in Nagoya, Japan; an oral history project to document the conversion stories of members of the North Hollywood Third Ward; a play, *Zion*, presented in Rome, Italy; and a “Mormon Marathon” in Hawaii. She explains that the focus on family activities meant that “dance festivals and road shows . . . now sponsored by the activities committees . . . give families a great opportunity to work together.” The entire family could take part in a dramatic production or a dance. Families also took part in the Church’s physical fitness awards program. The success of these programs mirrored the all-church tournament days. According to Rulon Cummings, the chair of the Clearfield Utah Stake activities committee, “Last year alone, seven young men were baptized in the Church because of our stake sports program. . . . Eight sisters and seventeen brothers became active because of the mixed volleyball and softball programs.”<sup>63</sup>

Similar programs continued throughout the Church. However, in the 1980s in some places, stake and regional sports programs (both women’s and men’s) disappeared. Several factors led to the end of stake and regional sports in the Provo, Utah, South Stake. First, cost was a consideration. Very few wards and stakes had softball fields, so the stakes had to rent community facilities. The cost became more than the local church leaders in the stake wanted to pay. Even if they could have covered the cost, there was the additional problem of finding time to use the fields when so many business and city leagues also played. Second, time was a problem in LDS Church-owned facilities. The Church moved from each ward having its own building to usually three wards sharing the space. On weekday evenings and Satur-



Pleasant Grove Northfield 8th Ward Young Women's basketball team 2003. Photograph by Alexander L. Baugh.

days, youth and adult groups tried to schedule the building. On the one night designated for stake sports, the men and women often disagreed who should use the gymnasium. When other groups scheduled the building, sometimes the athletes immediately moved on to the floor as those attending a meeting attempted to clean up. Some players even felt that they should use the gym all night. Lack of interest was a third concern. As women became involved in many activities, few had time to take part in church sports. The Charles Redd Center (BYU) interviewees tell stories about how their lives revolved around church sports. They would never dream of missing a game. But in a rushed world, full of meetings and all types of recreational activities, often, not enough players showed up for a game. Fourth, there were major problems with sportsmanship. Many Church leaders became less supportive of church sports programs because participants often became too emotional and physical during the games. In one women's regional volleyball tournament when some players disagreed with a call during a game, some fans got involved. Some of the fans even followed players from the opponent's team home. After this event, the stake president announced that the wards under his control would no longer participate in regional sports.<sup>64</sup>

Why was there such poor sportsmanship? From a strictly athletic view, being good sports was no longer the emphasis. Examples from my experience as a fan illustrate some of the changes. When I was in high school, fans sat quietly when their team or the opposing team shot free throws. The gym was so quiet it was almost eerie. But that sense of showing respect for the other team disappeared over the years. In professional basketball, fans started waving tubes to disturb the player who was shooting. Basketball players were required to raise their hand when they fouled and were given technical fouls if they complained too much. Complaining and not accepting a foul became common practice first in the National Basketball Association and then in college and community sports. These “bad boys” of basketball were heroes, and young players often followed the bad examples.

### **Return to the Past**

Although all-church activities ended, sports and recreation programs never completely disappeared in the Church, and wards and stakes were free to adapt programs to fit their needs. Programs similar to those that the 1983 *Ensign* article explained were held throughout the world. However, they were not as organized or as frequent as they had been in the past. In 2004 that changed. The First Presidency sent a letter to all local leaders asking for stake and multistake functions of “music, dance, drama, speech, sports, [and] visual arts.” The leaders explained that these would create “a sense of unity and opportunities to develop friendships, especially among the youth.”<sup>65</sup>

After 2004 local leaders developed more youth activities. Wards and stakes in Orem, Utah, planned dance and speech festivals. Youth choirs are especially important in one stake, and nearly all the teenagers participate. While the Provo South Stake stopped participating in regional sports in the 1980s, in 2007 the region reintroduced a regional volleyball tournament. In November 2007, the Provo South Stake scheduled open-court volleyball play. The announcement offered skills and rules instructions and encouraged all teenagers and adult women to participate. Participants in the stake play could take part in a regional tournament that was held between December 1 and 8, 2007.

This tournament was part of a larger program that started in the Utah South Area in 2004. According to Kathleen Carlile, the Utah South Area Women’s Sports Director, that year Merrill C. Bateman, a General Authority who was assigned to supervise the area from Alpine to St. George, asked that the stakes and regions initiate a sports program for teenagers and adults. Carlile stated, “Since that time, we have been working on developing the program following the priesthood direction given,” emphasizing that like “all auxiliaries and

programs in the church [the sports program] focus[es] on the mission of the church in bringing souls to Christ.”<sup>66</sup>

Barbara Shurtleff, the regional sports director in Orem, Utah, worked under the direction of Carlile. She explained how the program worked in Orem. Of the eleven stakes in her region, only four had women’s teams and only two played in the tournament. Shurtleff explained, “We have some stakes that do not have much participation because of past experiences.” However, she saw changes. “I have seen my own bishop slowly become more accepting over the last few years.” Shurtleff was grateful for area support. “We have been learning and growing with the help of our area leaders.” Each game began with a devotional and prayer. Shurtleff stressed sportsmanship with the players, coaches, and fans, even though a fan who was out of control called Shurtleff “the Gestapo.”<sup>67</sup>

All of these programs were part of the LDS Church’s Utah Area sports program whose leaders have maintained a webpage and sponsored seven sports—basketball, dodgeball, flag football, futsal (a game similar to soccer that could be played indoor on a basketball court or a small field outside), golf, softball, and volleyball. The webpage included guidelines, rules, and purposes for sports. It stressed, “Church activities should strengthen testimonies and foster personal growth. They also should provide opportunities to apply gospel principles and help participants develop friendships in a wholesome environment.” The sports program was to help bring people together for the same reasons that it did in the past.<sup>68</sup>

Ron Gerber supervised the Utah Area sports programs. As with the all-church tournaments, his programs emphasized spiritual aspects. He emphasizes a quote from President Ezra Taft Benson: “Sportsmanship is first tried in sports. The athletic program is a spiritual program. If it weren’t, we wouldn’t continue it. We’re interested in being about men and women of character and integrity.” To emphasize that, Gerber had the Young Men, Young Women, Relief Society, and Melchizedek priesthood groups recite their theme and start with a prayer. He has provided posters that had a picture of Christ and the organizational themes. According to Gerber, “It’s made a difference. We don’t have as much craziness as we once had.” Gerber also worked to teach basketball rules to coaches, players, and officials.<sup>69</sup>

Gerber agreed that sports were not emphasized as much after the 1970s. For example, teams were no longer recognized in sacrament meetings. Still, in the Northern Utah Area more than two thousand wards participated in thirty-six tournaments in 2004. More tournaments meant that more teams participated. Some leaders were very supportive. A stake president from Tremonton, Utah, handed out the award if a team from his stake won. He also talked to stake members on how sports can be used to “fellowship and activate” fami-

lies. Gerber also explained that the tournament no longer gave sportsmanship awards because sponsors did not want to reward people for doing what they should do and because they were not sure how to select the winner. He was on a team that won second place and sportsmanship in 1950, but he is not sure they were the best sports. Even after all-church programs changed in 1971, Gerber and others saw reasons for continuing sports and recreation in the LDS Church.<sup>70</sup>

## Summary

Women's sports were never as important as men's athletics in the LDS Church, but that was because they were not as important in U. S. society. When women's sports started to be more important, the Church was no longer putting as much emphasis on even men's athletics. There is even some uncertainty regarding what role women should play in sports. A "Question and Answer" article in the *New Era* declared, "The Church through its athletic program encourages all young men and to some extent young women to participate in sports"<sup>71</sup> In 1988, Thomas S. Monson, then an apostle and now Church president, explained, "It is only fair that all worthy young men and young women have an opportunity to play, to learn, to develop, and to achieve in Church-sponsored athletic contests."<sup>72</sup> These quotes adequately represent LDS leaders' views regarding women's sports over the years, as well as in the 1970s and 1980s. Sports worked well for women if they brought them closer to the Church. And the focus was always on participation and physical fitness. While American women turned more competitive with Title IX, Mormon women were encouraged to continue play sports to have fun.

In 2008, the Utah Area Sports program plans to celebrate the centennial of Mormon athletics based on the publication by E. J. Milne in the December 1908 *Improvement Era*. In honor of that occasion, the L. Tom Perry Special Collections and the Harold B. Lee Library will have an exhibit and lecture on church ball in October 2008. The Charles Redd Center for Western Studies will also publish *Spiritualized Recreation: LDS Athletic Tournaments and All-Church Dance Festivals* as an e-book on the Center's webpage. Ron Gerber and his male and female associates are planning other activities to celebrate church sports and encourage more men and women to participate. While the focus will be on men's sports, this article shows that women sports have also been important.

## Notes

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14. Kimball, *Sports in Zion*, 72–78.
15. Brent Eagar, oral history interview, interviewed by Benjamin Sandel, 2003, Orem, Utah, 2, LDS Sports and Recreation Oral History Project, Charles Redd Center for Western Studies, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah. All oral histories come from this collection.
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18. *YWMIA Sports-Camp Manual* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1952), I 8–14, I 17, II 2–15.
19. "Extensive Athletic Program Slated for YWMIA Directors," *Church News*, April 30, 1952, 6.
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  24. See Monitor C. Noyce, "Forecast for Church Athletics Greater in '63," *Church News*, December 29, 1962, 16, 18.
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