
Crafting the Female Sporting Ideal: Netball and the Cultivation of a Women-Centred Sport

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Résumé

The formation of the All England Netball Association (AENA) in 1926 marked a pivotal moment in women's sport, establishing the first dedicated governing body for netball and uniting women educators, physical training college graduates, and community groups in formal leadership roles. The origins of the sport were rooted in physical education; initially developed as a "respectable" alternative to basketball for the educated woman, netball quickly found its way into mass female education and public sensibility, being played in schools, colleges, workplaces and sporting clubs across Commonwealth nations. Its appeal was simple – a female-owned and female-focused sport – an image that was cultivated by the women who administered the sport to delicately balance between societal gendered expectations and expanding women's access and safe spaces for physical culture in an era when women's rights and opportunities were significantly constrained. Through rule standardisation, competition structures, and international outreach, the committee constructed an external image of netball as a reputable, disciplined, and morally appropriate sport for women and girls, whilst internally providing a subtle platform for female physical and social empowerment that managed to operate relatively unnoticed by the male gaze. Considering the AENA committee was such a pivotal collection of women whose influence extended beyond the administrative control of netball, they have unfortunately been hidden by history, with limited acknowledgements of their biographies, stories and achievements provided in academic, public and sporting spheres. Through archival reconstruction of the collective biographies of key AENA committee members (1926–1963), this paper examines how the vision, labour, and practices of netball's early leaders established the foundations for a century-long legacy of female empowerment through the sport.

AENA. *All England Netball Association: The Silver Jubilee Book* (Birmingham: Norse Press, 1951).

England Netball Archive, 1919-Present. Heritage Quay, University of Huddersfield. GB 1103 EN.

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