DOLORES DYER: WOMEN'S BASKETBALL AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

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Thesis Prepared for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS

December 2012

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Dolores Dyer played from 1952-1953 for the Texas Cowgirls, a barnstorming women’s basketball team that provided a form of entertainment popular throughout the United States in that era. The story of Dyer’s life demonstrates how a woman could attempt to achieve the American dream—a major theme in American history—through success in athletic competition. Dyer’s participation with the Texas Cowgirls also provides a look into the circumstances that limited women’s participation in professional sport during the mid-twentieth century. Women’s sports studies, although some are very thorough, have gaps in the research, and women’s barnstorming basketball is one of the areas often overlooked. In light of this gap, this thesis relies on a variety of sources, including primary documents from unpublished collections, archived materials, and original oral histories from several members of the Texas Cowgirls team.

This thesis contains analysis of the socioeconomic factors that influenced Dolores Dyer’s maturation into a professional basketball player, examines what the American dream meant to her, and evaluates the extent to which she achieved it. Overall, it constructs a social history that can serve as a foundational source for further study of women in sports during the twentieth century.
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By

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NOTE TO THE READER

Oral histories work to capture the stories of individuals and events at a very personal level, and often involve the use of unpublished sources. This is not an attempt to avoid rigorous academic requirements and research, but rather to focus on the personal perspectives of those directly involved. As such, interviews and other forms of personal correspondence frequently offer the best form of research and insight.

In researching this paper, I conducted a number of in-person and phone interviews with Dolores Dyer and those who knew her, including family, friends, former teammates, students and co-workers. Given the personal nature of these interactions, none are yet published or readily available to the public. Unless otherwise noted, I am in possession of all interviews, correspondence, notes and other similar materials referenced herein, (either originals or copies).

In an effort to broaden the public's understanding of what I believe to be a formative person and period in the history of Texas, women's sports and the nation generally, I am working with a number of institutions to transfer these materials to public and academic archives. I have opted to distribute the various interview materials to a variety of locations with a two-fold desire. First, by surrounding them with other materials related to their particular community and past, I hope to better place each person's story into their proper context and thereby offer a greater sense of understanding. Second, by dispersing the materials over a wider geographical area and type of museum or archive, I hope to bring the stories described herein into the lives of a wider cross-section of the population. To date, the following arrangements have been made:

Interview materials from Edwin and Dolores Dyer will be transferred to the Dolph D. Briscoe Center for American History in Austin, Texas at a to-be determined date.
Interview materials from Betty Lou Johnson, Patricia Ann Johnson, Leeona Evans Overturf, Joan Rupp and Linda Yearby will be transferred to the Arkansas History Commission in Little Rock, Arkansas at a to-be determined date.

Interview materials from Lance and Susan Kirschner, and Pat Cramer Stessun will be transferred to the Alberta Sports Hall of Fame and Museum in Red Deer, Alberta, Canada at a to-be determined date.

Interview materials from Barbara Leggette will be transferred to the T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge at a to-be determined date.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Dolores Lee Dyer, known to her friends as Delo, is not a famous person in Texas, let alone the broader United States. In spite of her lack of fame, however, her life contributes importantly to understanding a major theme in American history: the pursuit of the American dream. More specifically, Dyer provides an early example of how women used competitive athletics to achieve the American dream in twentieth-century United States. Though many specific aspects of Dyer’s life are distinctive, there are certain characteristics of her American dream that reveal similar trends of other women who aspired to professional athletics at a time when there was little opportunity for women to participate at that level.

The first popular usage of the term “American Dream” is believed to be attributed to James Truslow Adams in *The Epic of America*.\(^1\) In his epilogue, Adams wrote: If, as I have said, the things already listed [about American history] were all we had to contribute, America would have not made distinctive and unique gifts to mankind. But there has been also the American dream, that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement…It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others of which they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of their birth or position.\(^2\)

Adams pointed out that the American dream is each individual’s hope to achieve his or her version of that dream. In the early 19\(^{th}\) century, as historian Jim Cullen chronicled in his work *The American Dream*, Alexis de Tocqueville described the American dream as the “charm of

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\(^1\) In his work, *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation*, Jim Cullen notes that Adams had originally wanted to title his work *The American Dream* but was dissuaded by his publisher, suggesting that the phrase was not in common usage at that time.

anticipated success.” For Tocqueville, the American dream varied from person to person according to each individual’s views towards what constituted success.

In an American RadioWorks program that discussed the American dream, the dream was described as a song sung by the American people; while the melody has remained the same over the years, each person sings his or her own lyrics, and these lyrics are more often than not determined by the socio-economic trends of the time. For example, when Adams wrote in the 1930s, the majority of Americans may have “sung” the dream about economic recovery. Later, following the 1940s, the dream oftentimes centered upon home-ownership and education.

In a cultural article published by Vanity Fair in 2009, journalist David Kamp tracked several trends that revealed commonalities in the way individuals sought to materialize their American dream. The article offered statistics revealing income, spending, and home-ownership trends throughout the twentieth century. Kamp wrote, “From 1900 to 1940, the percentage of families who lived in homes that they themselves owned held steady at around 45 percent. But by 1950 this figure had shot up to 55 percent, and by 1960 it was at 62 percent.” Kamp stated that this housing trend revealed Americans’ desire for stability after the difficulties presented by the Depression and the Second World War. An increasing number of Americans migrated to suburban areas, setting their sights on homes filled with comfortable amenities and forming modest-sized families. Mothers tended to stay home with the children, while fathers worked and

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5 Ibid.

6 For more information and a detailed discussion of the Post-War dream, see Edward Humes’ *Over Here: How the G.I. Bill Transformed the American Dream* (New York: Harcourt, 2006).

provided for the family’s material needs. As an example of this trend, Kamp offered for consideration a Kodak photograph from 1959, titled *Family Romp in the Living Room*, where a “nuclear family” of four played together on the floor of their tastefully decorated living room. The father, still dressed in his work suit, laid on the floor, while his pajama-clad children playfully climbed over him. The mother, meanwhile, was modestly dressed in an ankle-length skirt and sat gracefully aside from the active “rompers” as she laughed and took their photo.

Of particular interest in studying Dolores Dyer’s life is the way in which her American dream differed from that portrayed by the *Family Romp* image. Dyer’s dream also involved stability, but her desire to pursue professional athletics was an unusual path for the 1950s. Dyer hoped for a way to utilize her athletic talents as a means for earning an education and achieving financial independence. A study of Dyer’s life proves valuable in that it reveals the challenges and triumphs experienced by many women born in the 1930s whose American dream also involved the hope of playing professional sports. Furthermore, Dyer’s story opens up an avenue for studying the earliest form of women’s participation in professional basketball, the barnstorming leagues.

Contrary to popular thought, women’s professional basketball did not begin with the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA) nor did it begin with the short-lived Women’s Professional Basketball League (WBL). While the respective incorporations of these

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8 Ibid.
9 Ibid., 2.
two organizations were major landmarks in the history of women’s professional basketball, what is often overlooked by sports historians is the evidence that women’s professional basketball existed in nascent forms long before 1978, particularly with the “women’s division” of the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU).11

The AAU industrial leagues were a curious amalgamation of corporate advertising and sport. As historian Roxanne M. Albertson explained,

The influx of women basketball players in the workforce [led to] the growing interest of companies in broadening their advertising base beyond newspaper advertisements. One of the methods used for increased advertisement was sponsorship of local sports teams. The marriage between sport and advertising, though utilized by men since the inception of trade guilds and fraternal organizations, was a new phenomenon for women.12

Thus, industrial leagues benefited both the players and the companies; the players had a means to play a sport they loved and the companies had a way to recruit athletic new hires and increase brand recognition. Because AAU members were not paid for playing, some of the women migrated into professional barnstorming teams where they might make a living, marking one of the earliest instances of women pursuing basketball professionally.13

Barnstorming basketball began during the 1930s and reached its peak in popularity during the 1950s.14 Instead of having a “home court” or a city affiliation, barnstorming teams

11 Nancy Theriot, “Towards a New Sporting Ideal: The Women’s Division of the National Amateur Athletic Federation,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women’s Studies* 3, No. 1 (1978), 2. Although technically the AAU did not pay its players for competing, players were recruited by companies such as Hanes Hosiery for their athletic skills and then given factory or secretarial work for which they would be compensated. Thus, while players technically earned income for company work, they were implicitly being paid to play sports. For more information seek: Ikard, Robert W. *Just for Fun: The Story of AAU Women’s Basketball*. Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 2005.


14 Women’s participation in barnstorming is most often thought to have begun with the formation of Babe Didrikson’s All-Americans in 1933, though some sources argue for the existence of a women’s barnstorming team
traveled and competed exclusively as visiting teams. Barnstormers traveled to various cities and small towns to play exhibition matches against local talent, usually under the auspices of a community fundraising or charity event. Because there was no formula to determine which towns would provide audiences for women’s basketball, barnstormers had to travel long distances to find eager crowds. While both men and women participated in barnstorming, women’s teams were definitely in the minority. Basketball was traditionally a man’s sport and, as a result, the women’s teams played against local men’s teams and competed according to men’s rules.

Despite these hardships, barnstorming provided a rare opportunity for women to get paid for playing basketball. Amateur opportunities far outnumbered the professional ones; women competed in “high schools and colleges, industrial leagues, community recreation leagues, the military [and] church leagues,” but there were few professional teams for women. As historian Mary Jo Festle explained, “a 1950 study showed that of 10,230 professional athletes in the United States, only 540 (about 5 percent) were female. Clearly, either the opportunities were scarce or not worth the effort.”

While barnstorming offered an opportunity to play professional basketball, its attraction for the public was less about competitive sports and more about popcorn-munching family entertainment. In this pre-television era, barnstorming competition provided an affordable


evening of fun and antics for American families. Eager crowds filled local municipal gyms to see teams such as Babe Didrikson’s All-Americans or Hazel Walker’s Arkansas Travelers play head-to-head against their local men’s team. Didrikson, a native Texan, and Walker, self-described as “part Cherokee, part Arkansas,” were two of the more famous women barnstormers of their time, thus heightening the renown of their respective teams.

Each barnstorming team had its own distinctive “hook” to attract fans. Walker’s and Didrikson’s athletic talents were the main attraction that drew crowds for their teams. Other teams used a variety of novelties to attract crowds. For example, the All-American Red Heads, one of the more successful women’s barnstorming teams, required that all of their players dye their hair red. Like most female barnstorming teams, their performance was a vaudevillian combination of “basketball skills, pulchritude, and comedic schlock,” which kept their audiences coming back for more.

While the audiences came to the barnstorming games purely for entertainment purposes, the same could not be said for the players. For many women, the chance to compete, albeit in a less serious, comedic setting, was a way to achieve their dreams of success. Barnstorming was the avenue by which Dyer pursued her American dream.

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Dolores Lee Dyer was born during the Great Depression into a poor working class family in West Texas. As a naturally gifted athlete, Dyer first took advantage of opportunities to compete in school athletics. After considerable success playing school sports, Dyer sought and found a higher level of competition in the AAU. She continued to compete at the AAU level all through high school.\(^{21}\) When she graduated, the Thompson Motor Mercuryettes gave Dyer a $150 scholarship, which she used to attend San Antonio Junior College. She was able to make the money last three semesters, but even with a job at the San Antonio recreation department, she did not have enough to complete her education. Unable to pay for school, Dyer’s options were limited. There were few jobs available to women that would allow her to both attend school and pay for tuition. And there were few athletic scholarship programs available.\(^{22}\) Dyer believed that her best chance of funding her education was through playing basketball. She took a calculated risk, weighing the benefit of making money for college against the high odds of failure. Dyer decided to join the Texas Cowgirls, a professional women’s barnstorming basketball team.

Dyer’s decision to use sports as a vehicle for financing her education marked a departure from the gender expectations of women commonly held during this time period. Working class women during the 1950s often lived a vicarious existence. Historian Stephanie Coontz wrote, “Families [in the 1950s were] based on male breadwinning and female childrearing,” where the “ambitious, warlike, protective, possessive character of men is [offset by the] women’s commitment to nurturing, care giving, and altruism.”\(^{23}\) Dyer, in contrast, never married and

\(^{21}\) Dyer’s softball team was very successful and qualified for the AAU Softball World Tournament in 1950. Ibid.

\(^{22}\) Prior to Title IX, there was little scholarship for women’s sports; funding for women comprised less than 1 percent of intercollegiate budgets. Steven A. Reiss, introduction to “Sport and American Women Since 1930,” in Major Problems in American Sport History, ed. Steven A. Reiss (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 338.

made her education and career major parts of her life. An early example of today’s “career woman,” Dyer’s accomplishments pre-dated popular norms by several decades.

The study of Dyer’s career raises important questions. Among these questions are: How did Dyer, a girl born poor in West Texas during the Depression, become a professional basketball player? What did the American dream mean to Dyer? Did she achieve her American dream? The first step to answering these questions is to provide the context offered by existing scholarship as a survey of the world of barnstorming basketball.

Women’s sport has been reviewed through several main schools of thought, including the kinesiological approach, the gender-studies approach, and the approach taken by those studying women’s history. Kinesiological approaches have surveyed women’s sports in a linear, historical fashion. In these chronological studies, while some are comprehensive, there are gaps in the research and women’s barnstorming is one of the areas often overlooked. In contrast, scholarship focused on gender-studies has primarily addressed the post-Title IX era. An additional approach is considering the history of women’s sports within the broader context of women’s history, as used by historian Linda Ford’s focus in Lady Hoopsters, which is valuable as it provides context for women’s entrance into the arena of professional sports. Like other research done through the lens of gender-studies, Ford focused on the controversy surrounding the relationship between women’s athleticism and societal gender-norms. Consequently, she did not include significant accounts of women who participated in the barnstorming leagues. To date,

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these approaches have only tangentially addressed women’s barnstorming and have overlooked its historical importance in the development of modern women’s basketball.

Kinesiological approaches have often overlooked the period in which the barnstorming teams played for several reasons. The linear, historical approach favored by kinesiological scholars depends on the existence of historical records. Women’s barnstorming, by nature, was disorganized. The teams were not unified; each team played according to its own schedule without communicating with a governing body.\(^26\) This often resulted in limited, or no, official historical records from which scholars could draw conclusions. Absent a general historical record, scholars are forced to rely upon popular accounts. This means that players and teams who did not make the newspapers are often overlooked. For example, in sports historian Robert W. Ikard’s overview of the AAU, *Just for Fun*, the brief mention of barnstorming is restricted to the players whose legacy is retained in the public memory, such as Hazel Walker, founder of the Arkansas Travelers. The legacy of Walker’s teammates, in contrast, is notably absent from the historical record. Similarly, scholar Pamela Grundy and sports writer Susan Shackelford’s *Shattering the Glass: The Remarkable History of Women’s Basketball* offers a comprehensive history of women’s basketball, but focuses primarily on well-known players. Women’s barnstorming teams never reached the level of public prominence necessary to give many of its players popular acclaim. In short, most of the historical record of women's barnstorming is not public; it is locked away in oral interviews and private collections.

\(^26\) William Wilbanks, “Waco, Dimmitt & Mesquite Dominated TX Girls Basketball in 1920’s, 1930’s & 1940’s,” *Texas Basketball Champions*, accessed on November 13, 2011, http://www.texasbasketballchamps.com. Although records indicated that Texas had an active women's basketball culture, play between teams was highly disorganized. There was not just one governing league: there were multiple programs that governed different high school players. From 1925-1950, two organizations held state tournaments for high school girls. The first was the AAU, and the second was the High School Girls Basketball League of Texas (HSGBLT). To complicate matters further, a third “state” tournament, called the Golden Girls Tournament, was sponsored by the San Antonio Express-News from 1948-1953. The leagues were finally unified in 1951 with the formation of the University Interscholastic League (UIL). Accordingly, records after the formation of the UIL were substantially improved.
Scholars who have approached women’s basketball from a gendered perspective also tend to skip over the barnstorming period. Several factors may have led to this exclusion. First, Title IX, the watershed moment of women’s sport and the focal point of many feminist scholars, was not enacted until 1972, long after the heyday of barnstorming.\(^\text{27}\) Second, there may have been skepticism among scholars as to the legitimacy of barnstorming as an athletic competition. Barnstorming, with its skits, showmanship, and co-ed competition, bears little resemblance to the level and style of competition sought with the creation of the WNBA. Third, relatively few oral histories or primary source materials are available to researchers; many players passed away without ever being interviewed, and those still living are difficult to locate. In instances where interviews have been conducted, they are often inaccessible to researchers. Instead of being archived in a library in a single location, these oral histories are dispersed among private collections and sports history groups, including hall of fame organizations.\(^\text{28}\)

Susan K. Cahn, arguably the preeminent scholar on modern women’s gender and sport, gave little attention to barnstorming for these very reasons. Considered to be one of the foundational works of feminist studies in women’s sport, Cahn’s *Coming on Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Women’s Sport* viewed women’s sport though the lens of gender. Her feminist approach closely examined the making and influence of “sexual orientations, gendered relations and power relations between men and women.”\(^\text{29}\) Cahn concluded that there is

\(^{27}\) According to Joan S. Hult, sports historian, “Title IX was the single most significant piece of legislation to affect the direction and philosophical tenets of women in sport…The effect of Title IX on female athletes was an incredible increase in competitive opportunities and support.” “The Story of Women’s Athletics,” in *Women and Sport: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, 95.


a “gender disorder” in women’s sport where women are treated differently and offered less legitimate competition than men.\textsuperscript{30} Despite the obvious connection between Cahn’s perceived “gender disorder” and the sexualization of women within the barnstorming realm, no conclusions were drawn either because records were not readily accessible or because of a perceived illegitimacy of the sport.

Subsequent iterations of Cahn’s scholarship also tend to gloss over the barnstorming era. For example, Professor Mary Jo Festle’s \textit{Playing Nice: Politics and Apologies in Women’s Sports} eschewed a historical investigation in favor of an analysis of how “gender combines with socioeconomic class as well as with race and sexuality to help determine not only who participates and how but also which sports became socially acceptable to women.”\textsuperscript{31} Although, in contrast to Cahn, Festle devoted some space (two pages) to a discussion of women’s barnstorming, Festle’s interest in barnstorming examined only the apologetic nature of women’s basketball in the 1950s, during which women were expected to be overtly feminine to offset their interest in sports. Consequently, she declined to discuss the struggle for women to obtain professional success in basketball. In other words, Festle’s research did not so much acknowledge the underlying desire of barnstorming women to achieve professional legitimacy as it does view these women as actors struggling to fit into in a male-dominated world.\textsuperscript{32}

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\textsuperscript{31} Festle, Mary Jo. \textit{Playing Nice}, xxii.
\textsuperscript{32} Cahn, \textit{Coming on Strong}, 116; Festle, \textit{Playing Nice}, 22; The conflict between athletic prowess and femininity is perfectly embodied in the career of Babe Didrikson. Didrikson was perceived by some as the “female bogeywoman” of women's sports because of her tough, masculine confidence. Didrikson pushed hard against feminine stereotypes: she had a strong build, short hair, and a plain, unadorned appearance. This led many commentators to believe that athletic accomplishment caused masculine traits to manifest in young women. Bowing to societal pressure, Didrikson changed her looks and dress to appear more conventionally feminine. As historian Susan Cayleff writes, “The greatest character constructed by Babe was the happily married, feminine, heterosexual woman.” Susan E. Cayleff, \textit{Babe}, 2-3.
\end{flushright}
Although Ford’s *Lady Hoopsters* provided a wealth of information on women’s barnstorming, as compared to the works of Festle and Cahn, its limitations were still significant. Ford gave barnstorming a place within women’s history by recording personal experiences of several people closely affiliated with the All-American Redheads. Ford interviewed Orwell Moore, former owner of the team, and his wife, a one time member. Though these interviews provided insight into the barnstorming world, the Moores’ experiences are one of many. By relying solely on interviews from the Moores, Ford’s book did not offer a multi-dimensional view of the barnstorming world, nor did it address the experiences of women from other barnstorming teams.

To address the perceived gap in scholarship pertaining to barnstorming, this thesis utilizes previously unrecorded oral histories of five of the seven Texas Cowgirls who played from 1953 to 1954, along with interviews of various key family members, to construct a more complete social history. The inspiration for this research topic was an 8” x 10” Texas Cowgirls team photograph taken in 1953 and the contact information of one of those players. Despite major obstacles, most of the Texas Cowgirls from the photograph were tracked down and interviewed. Personal information, when correct, was often too dated to be of much use. For example, the photograph provided maiden names that, in many cases, were no longer used. Problems facing identification were compounded by the fact that the promoter of the Texas Cowgirls, Dempsey Hovland, recorded false hometowns for most of the girls. So it was only

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34 Among others, Leeona Evans Overturf, Dolores Lee Dyer, Betty Lou Johnson, Patricia Ann Johnson, (sister of Betty Lou who played professionally for the Arkansas Travelers for several seasons and was able to finance her own education and that of her sister through money earned playing basketball), Linda Yearby, (player for the Texas Cowgirls who coached the Harlem Chicks and eventually formed her own team, named the Arkansas Lassies and Shooting Stars), Barbara Leggette, Patricia Cramer Stessun, Kathryn Mestemaker Gilbert, Grace "Jiggs" Martin, Eleona “Ellie” Panas Gauthier. Informal telephone discussions were also conducted with other team members, including Harlean Hansen were interviewed for this project.
after considerable investigative work that the women interviewed for this research could be located.

Written primary source materials, such as letters from team members to their families, journal entries, receipts and personal notes are incorporated to buttress the Texas Cowgirl's oral histories. Furthermore, interviews with Edwin Dyer, Dolores Dyer’s brother, are used to supplement and sometimes to support her own account. When secondary source accounts of the Texas Cowgirls such as newspaper articles and team advertisements were examined alongside primary source materials, many discrepancies became evident, in large part due to Hoveland's attempts to draw larger crowds. Dyer’s former students, players, colleagues, and coaches against whom she coached provided additional information on Dyer’s life and career. Finally, newspaper articles during Dyer’s coaching career gave additional evidence to further substantiate the information offered by individuals involved in Dyer’s personal life and career.

The goal of this project is to give voice to the women who played professional sports more than fifty years ago, and particularly to Dolores Dyer, whose life exemplifies those who pursued the American dream in an innovative way. It is important to note that the research about Dyer and the other Texas Cowgirls is not exhaustive, but rather provides an accurate and vivid account of personal first hand experiences that may be used to further the current scholarship about women in professional sports.

This thesis is divided into five sections: an Introduction, Chapter 2, Chapter 3, and Chapter 4, each address a period of Dyer’s life, and a Conclusion. This introduction serves to highlight the significance of the research that went into this project. The second chapter explores Dyer’s childhood, the third describes her experiences with the Texas Cowgirls, and the fourth
discusses her college education, professional teaching and coaching career. The thesis concludes with an analysis of the significance of Dyer’s career and recommendations for further study.
CHAPTER 2

DOLORES DYER: DAUGHTER OF THE DEPRESSION

Dolores Dyer was born September 5, 1932, in San Angelo, Texas. Dyer’s parents, Orville Daniel and Ruth Ola Miller, and brother, Edwin, lived a modest existence as dry land farmers in West Texas. Around the time that Dyer was born, the Dyer family lived in a two-bedroom, wood-frame house that stood several feet off of the ground.\(^3\) Orville and Ruth’s day began at sunrise. Orville worked outside, watering the family’s mule and gathering eggs from the hen house. Ruth worked inside, preparing breakfast of homemade biscuits with the eggs gathered by her husband. The hot breakfast prepared every morning by Ruth was a luxury that stood in contrast to the Dyers’ otherwise austere lifestyle.

Orville did not own the land under his home. Instead, he worked as a hired hand for his landlord, Ruth’s sister, Oneida, and her husband, Knox Edmondson. The work was seasonal. In the spring, Orville planted and plowed the fields along the Concho River. During the summer, he irrigated and maintained the field. In the fall, he harvested the cotton crop.\(^3\)

Over the course of the year, the Dyers made time to plant some food crops as well. However, their poverty and lack of resources meant that their harvest yielded far less than a horn of plenty. Edwin remembered with reluctance the year his grandfather decided to plant a crop of turnips. The drought meant that it was too expensive to diversify that year’s crop, so the Dyers

\(^3\) Accounts from Dyer’s early childhood come primarily from her brother, Charles Edwin Dyer, in a telephone interview with the author on January 29, 2012.


\(^3\) Charles Edwin Dyer to the author, January 29, 2012. Subsequent interviews are cited with the interviewee’s name and date of the interview. See the Note to the Reader and the list of References for more detailed information regarding a given item.
had turnips “three times a day, just about. They were fresh and they were fried and they were boiled,” Edwin remembered, his stomach turning, “to this day I can’t stand to eat turnips.”

Field work rarely provided enough income to sustain the Dyers. In addition to planting and harvesting cotton, Orville held a series of part-time jobs throughout the year. “Every morning, [Orville] got up and looked for a job. He got up at daylight and they had places you could go to in various towns looking for work, and he did,” Edwin said in an interview, “he did get him a job about four months one time working on the railroad from San Angelo toward Brownwood, and then…[he] processed turkeys” in the fall of that same year.

Seemingly always without a form of steady employment, Orville was forced to move his family from job to job. As a non-landowning farmer during the Great Depression, Orville’s struggle was shared by many other similarly situated Texans. During the 1930s, Texas farmland was for farming in name only. A record drought in the early 1930s reduced cotton and food crops to wilted kindling and dust. Great winds pushed the dust into great, billowing clouds that “blocked out the sun.”

While many farm owners received government relief, tenant farmers were left to fend for themselves in a meager economy. Many itinerant farmers, wishing to preserve their way of life,

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37 Ibid.

38 Dyer’s experience was typical. According to Ikard, “around forty-four percent of the American population was still rural in the 1930s. Over half of those members were farm families. [These members] relied on the institutions they had always respected and supported – family, church, and community.” Ikard, Just for Fun, 22.

San Angelo and similar cities suffered from the severe effects of the Depression. Unemployment was high and public services suffered. For example, the city of San Angelo could not pay its teachers one year. The unpopularity of the Emergency Economy Act, which reduced veterans’ benefits, and the relative popularity of the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA), which brought money into San Angelo, gives some idea of the socioeconomic conditions of San Angelo: it was a poor farming community. For more information, see Robert Crawford Cotner’s Texas Cities and the Great Depression (Austin: Texas Memorial Museum, 1973), 171-180. See also “Writers’ Program of the Work Projects Administration in the State of Texas,” Corpus Christi: A History and Guide (Corpus Christi: Corpus Christi Caller-Times, 1942), 188-189.

emigrated from the state \textit{en masse} in search of more prosperous farmland. Such long, arduous journeys were so well known that they became a feature of the public’s perception about the Great Depression in the South. John Steinbeck’s \textit{The Grapes of Wrath} serves as a lasting tribute to the trials facing many farmers who emigrated in search of work.

Other farmers, however, decided to adapt to the depressed economy by moving to Texas cities in search of work.\textsuperscript{40} The oil and gas industry, in particular, was a strong attraction to laborers whose experience was limited to working the fields. Texas’ relative abundance of natural resources and the growing need for petroleum products meant that the industry “provided some cushion by expanding…and giving roughly 250,000 Texans jobs in everything from drilling for crude to retailing petroleum products.”\textsuperscript{41}

The Dyers were no exception to these growing trends, and in 1935, when Dyer was three years old, the family immigrated to Corpus Christi on the Texas coast. Orville had been offered a position with the Pure Oil Company, a mid-sized organization operating in south Texas.\textsuperscript{42} Thankful for a rare opportunity, Orville gladly accepted full-time employment and moved his family to Corpus Christi.\textsuperscript{43}

Because of their economic circumstances and the close proximity of his job, the Dyers moved into an African-American community. This experience was formative for Dolores, who was still quite young at the time. In contrast to the racial division of the time, Dolores “played...
and ate” with African American children daily.44 “Kids are color-blind pretty much by then,” Edwin said, “I can’t remember our parents ever saying anything about any kind of racial division, to separate black and white.”45

The adults in the Dyers’ neighborhood, however, did see race as a divisive issue. Edwin’s first job was at a barbeque stand owned and operated by a local African-American, where he bussed tables for spare change. It was here that Edwin first learned about the different treatment that people of color received in his neighborhood. “He [the restaurant owner] only catered to white people,” Edwin recalled. One day he asked the owner, “Why do black people sit in the kitchen and the white people sit in the main restaurant?” The proprietor’s explanation confused Edwin, who recalled his explanation that “blacks and whites don’t socialize with each other, and they don’t eat with each other and each went kind of separate ways.”46

The separate ways of blacks and whites fell along economic as well as racial lines. In addition to living in largely segregated communities, African Americans had a much lower standard of living. It was a similar socioeconomic status that brought the Dyer family into contact with African Americans in predominantly black communities. The Dyers’ financial desperation resulted in their willingness to live next door to Pure Oil’s gasoline refinery. The noxious fumes drove away most families who could afford to move elsewhere. The Dyers soon followed suit. The nearby cotton gin, with its constant deliveries by their home, in combination with the poisonous gasses billowing from the smokestacks of the refineries, were enough to

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44 Dolores Dyer, May 13, 2011. The timeliness of the passage of the AAA and the Dyer’s subsequent relocation to Corpus Christi suggests that the reduction in cotton acreage as a result of the act may have forced the family to relocate.


46 Ibid.
outweigh the benefit of Orville’s two-minute walk to work. As a result, the Dyers moved to San Antonio sometime before 1940.

Orville’s relocation to Corpus Christi and then San Antonio, both notably larger than Dyer’s hometown, provided an auspicious start to her athletic career. There was little in the way of community in San Angelo where the Dyers had worked as dirt farmers. Their house was isolated and the temporary nature of Orville’s job meant that it was difficult to form long-lasting connections with other families looking for work. Had the Dyers stayed in a rural setting, it would have been highly unlikely that Dyer would have had the childhood opportunity to develop her innate athletic ability within the arena of organized sports. Fortunately, Orville’s decision to relocate resulted in the Dyers living in a more densely populated neighborhood of families with children, as well as a community with access to extracurricular activities for Dyer and Edwin.

San Antonio, as compared to San Angelo, proved to be a mecca of sports opportunities for Delo, who took full advantage of the change of venue. Edwin remembered his little sister as athletically competitive even from a very young age. He taught Delo to play marbles, but the student soon surpassed the teacher. By the end of the month, after starting with a mere handful of Edwin’s marbles, she managed to win two gallons of marbles from their next door neighbor. Dyer soon developed a reputation in the neighborhood as an athlete. Edwin recalled that she was always among the first picked to play softball as early as the first grade. Edwin returned from the army in 1946 to find that Delo, then only fourteen, had discovered her talent for basketball. And he also found that his little sister’s personality was taking shape and that she was beginning to form strong opinions about right and wrong.

Many Americans suffered deprivation and hardship during the Great Depression, but did so with their pride and integrity intact. They understood the value of a dollar and the importance
of honest dealing in their affairs. As a child raised by Depression-era parents, Dyer was most certainly raised to prize attributes such as these. A photo from her early teens showed Dyer with a black eye. She recounted that she had gotten into a fist fight with a girl who had cheated during a tennis match. Even though the girl was a teammate, Dyer recalled her indignation and simply stated that “you don’t cheat … ever.” Her inclination toward straight shooting would later surface in her dealings with Dempsey Hovland.

Basketball had flourished during the Depression because it was a relatively cheap sport to field. Any child who could furnish a bushel basket, a ball, and a dirt court could involve a dozen children in a game. By the time Delo began to play, basketball had become a ubiquitous feature of many Texas neighborhoods. Professor Roxanne M. Albertson writes: “On farms and ranches behind barns or in playgrounds, in small school rooms or in large converted warehouses…girls [and boys] practiced skills [and] planned game strategies” to get ready for the next neighborhood game. As Max McElwain, a communications professor at Wayne State College, explained, “Basketball was entrenched in the culture of small towns, and it inculcated cohesion for teams as well as communities.”

As basketball became more popular, structures for competition began to develop for men as well as women. There was no one unifying professional organization like today’s WNBA under which aspiring athletes sought to compete. Instead, athletes tested their skills on dirt courts in local, community-supported leagues: “School leagues, recreation and industrial leagues,

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college teams, and Sunday school leagues all provided competitive opportunities for these young athletes.”

The multitude of different competitive opportunities led to an often confusing structure of overlapping and competing sporting organizations. The confusing nature of these organizations is heightened for researchers by the relative lack of historical information about the development of competitive sports for women in Texas during the time when Dyer was beginning to participate. The Amateur Athletic Union sponsored the first women’s basketball tournament as early as 1926. Historians have made some attempts to fill in the gaps, but many of those works were not widely published. As a result, modern historians know what eventually materialized in the world of women’s professional basketball, but are handicapped in their ability to explain why.

Sporting organizations on the micro level are similarly difficult to describe. In his assessment of Texas high school sports, sports historian Billy Wilbanks found that no fewer than “three leagues emerged” to service the growing demand for competitive high school girls’ basketball between 1921 and 1951. These three leagues each championed their own “state-wide” tournament as being the definitive measure of athletic talent in Texas, even though it was dubious that the respective leagues drew more than local girls. For example, a “‘state’ girls tournament was sponsored by the San Antonio Express & Evening News,” Wilbanks wrote, “[that] was held in San Antonio from 1948-1953 under the name ‘The Golden Girls

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50 Albertson, “Basketball Texas Style”, 155.
Tournament.” Even though this tournament claimed to be “state-wide,” there is little evidence that anyone outside south-central Texas participated.

The presence of the Golden Girls Tournament in San Antonio, however, speaks to the popularity of women’s basketball in the Dyer’s new hometown. As early as age six, Delo accompanied her older brother Edwin to see community-supported men’s semi-professional baseball contests. Community-supported events were only some of the new opportunities that the larger city of San Antonio had to offer. As a youngster, Dyer was exposed to baseball, softball, and tennis in addition to basketball. Dolores also learned about national sports figures, like Babe Didrikson Zaharias and tennis champion Helen Wills. These figures were inspirational to the young girl, who, when reading about their accomplishments in the local paper, thought, “Whoo, maybe I could do that.”

Babe Didrikson was as inspiring to some as she was feared by others. A winner of two gold medals and one silver medal at the Olympics, five AAU championships, and breaker of nearly a dozen world records, Didrikson elevated women’s sports to a new plateau of competition. A multi-sport athlete, (the Associated Press, after naming her Outstanding Woman Athlete of the Year in 1932, joked that “she’s capable of winning everything but the Kentucky Derby”), Didrikson eschewed popular expectations regarding women's participation in sport. Her unfeminine appearance, accepted by some, was a cause of concern for others. Parents of those young girls who displayed even a modicum of athletic talent worried that their

53 Ibid.
56 Ibid., 71.
daughters would turn into “Muscle Moll[s],” or muscular women, like Babe.\textsuperscript{57} Babe, whose “one liners” became famous, did little to mitigate these criticisms: “Is there anything you don’t play?” a reporter once asked. “Yeah,” Didrikson quipped in response, “dolls.”\textsuperscript{58} 

Didrikson was born to poor Norwegian immigrants in Port Arthur, Texas, on June 26, 1911.\textsuperscript{59} A hurricane forced the family to relocate to Beaumont, Texas in 1914. Like the Dyers, the Didrikson’s new home was near an oil refinery, where the air constantly smelled of noxious fumes that poured from the refinery’s smokestacks. And, like the Dyer’s Corpus Christi community, the neighborhood into which the Didriksons moved was a working class neighborhood with a large population of African Americans.\textsuperscript{60} Following this move, Didrikson struggled to find her place in this new home. Even though the discovery of oil had created an economic tide that was raising the boats of many people in Beaumont, racial and economic tensions still made life difficult. Didrikson, as the daughter of foreigners, sought the acceptance of the local children and found that her natural athletic ability made transitioning to a new neighborhood far easier.\textsuperscript{61} 

The interest of self-preservation was a guiding principle for Didrikson in her youth. To survive being “different,” Didrikson often had to be more aggressive and tougher than her peers. Women’s studies professor Susan E. Cayleff, wrote that Didrikson was known as the “worst kid on Doucette Street:”

Any window broken by a baseball was attributed to her. Any squabbles over marbles lost unfairly in a backyard shooting match were blamed on her…Babe’s boisterous

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 85. 
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 9. 
\textsuperscript{59} Susan E. Cayleff, \textit{Babe Didrikson: The Greatest All-Sport Athlete of All Time}, 7. 
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 14. 
\textsuperscript{61} Freedman, \textit{Babe Didrikson Zaharias}, 18-23.
personality and skill in sports made her a natural target for blame. Yet she was developing into a rough and tumble adolescent.\textsuperscript{62}

While Didrikson’s obstinacy was a dark cloud that obscured her personality, it did come with a silver lining that led to success later in life. As Cayleff explained, Didrikson’s existence outside the lines of traditional behavior allowed her to succeed in sports: “Girls were expected to hesitate to take risks, act less boldly, and give up more easily. They were told to be more dependable, awkward, dependent, obedient, easily confused, rational, careful and nervous [than boys].”\textsuperscript{63} Didrikson, in contrast, was bold, brash and aggressive. She was destined to compete in a field dominated by people who shared those qualities: sports.

The comparisons between Dyer and Didrikson abound. They were both native Texans from working-class backgrounds who grew up to be successful athletes in their own right. They both eschewed traditional gender roles during a time when there were hard and fast societal expectations regarding male and female behaviors. Both Dyer and Didrikson were largely self-coached, honing their athletic skills during neighborhood pick-up games. The similarities in the lives of these women exemplify the use of nontraditional vehicles by which one might achieve dreams that were difficult given the times, but obviously not impossible. Didrikson was a world-famous Olympic multi-sport athlete whose success was on the rise around the time that Dyer was inwardly searching for a role model with whom she could identify. It is no surprise, then, that Didrikson became a personal heroine for Dyer.

Though they never knew it, Dyer and Didrikson were sisters joined in the pursuit of their American dream. For Didrikson, it was the desire to be the greatest female athlete of all time – a

\textsuperscript{62} Cayleff, \textit{Babe Didrikson}, 18.

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid.
feat that she arguably achieved in the eyes of many of her admirers. Dyer, in contrast, sought to achieve her dream of educational attainment. Both women, however, pursued their dreams through participation in sports. Their inner dreams of success and their similar means of achievement made their careers truly distinctive in the eyes of their contemporaries.

Dyer’s athletic career began in the 8th grade with her school’s basketball tryout. Her confidence, size and strength made her an easy choice for the team. However, because women’s basketball was not as prominent as its male counterpart, the girls did not have a formal coach. Instead, the leader of the girls pep squad, the Lassies, coached part-time. However, any shortcomings regarding the level of coaching in school were more than made up for on the neighborhood court. Despite their informal structure, the “street ball” games in Dyer’s neighborhood were highly competitive. Players were chosen for teams based purely on talent, and the teams squared off for physical and demanding games. There may not have been a trophy for the winner, but each team sought the popular recognition of being the best in the neighborhood.

Although Dyer had a great deal of natural born athletic ability, she was fortunate enough to benefit from playing with more experienced ball-players in neighborhood pick-up games. Dyer had an African American mentor and friend, Chester Lyssey, who showed her the finer

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65 Dolores Dyer, November 7, 2011. Years later, Dyer credited the competitive nature of the street basketball games with local boys and girls as making her physically and mentally tough. It is important to note that the gender differences often perceived in retrospect by scholars, where boys and girls played on separate teams and did not mingle, did not occur to Dyer. In fact, it was Delo’s experience that talent, not gender, was the dominating criteria to deciding who could play and who could not.
66 Dyer’s lack of a full-time female coach was not uncommon. Two factors contributed to this: first, women’s athletics was viewed more as physical education and less as competitive sports; second, there was an overall shortage of female coaches. After WWII, there was a surplus of men desiring coaching positions. As a result, they would be willing to take any positions available: even coaching women’s teams. There was an increase in women’s coaching during the 1950s, but, unfortunately for Dyer, this occurred after she had graduated high school. Hult and Trekell, *Century of Women’s Basketball*, 210.
points of the game. Lyssey was a popular neighborhood boy admired for his athleticism, and he and Dyer often played on the same team. He taught her how to place her hand on the basketball, how to rebound and half-step, and the importance of following through her shots.67

Dyer’s informal coaching translated to success in formal games. She enjoyed success on the basketball court while she attended Hot Wells high school. Her 5’9” frame intimidated other players, and her farm-worked build made quick work of the competition. During her junior year, she and her team began to compete in district competition. They performed well, but ultimately lost to city-rival Sam Houston.68

Her success in sports caught the eye of Amos Miller, an AAU softball and basketball coach, who asked her to join the Thompson Motor Mercuryettes the summer between her junior and senior year.69 At the time Dolores was asked to participate, the AAU was becoming the “epicenter of women’s basketball.”70


68 Dyer’s height may seem standard by today’s norms, but contemporary health statistics reveal that Dyer’s height was in the top 1% of females surveyed. National Center for Health Statistics. “Weight, Height and Selected Body Dimensions of Adults: United States 1960-1962,” Vital and Health Statistics Series 11, no. 8 (Washington: U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, 1962), 11. The comparisons between Dyer’s high school and Sam Houston highlight not only the socioeconomic disparities between the south and east sides of San Antonio, but also Dolores’ raw talent. Dolores, who was from the south side, said that they lost, “because [Sam Houston] had better athletes. They had a coach; a lady coach who knew what she was doing and they were on the east side of San Antonio and they had not only good white athletes, but they had some good black athletes also.” Thus, even when going up against a better trained, better-rounded team, Dolores was a formidable opponent. Dolores Dyer, May 13, 2011.

69 “To Mrs. and Mrs. Clint Thompson from the Thompson Motors Mercuryettes,” a collection of newspaper clippings and photographs supplied by Dolores Dyer.

70 Ikard, Just for Fun, 30.
The AAU created a “women’s division” in its previously all-male athletic structure in 1922. Before the AAU’s intervention, national competition was confined largely to the realm of intercollegiate sport. Those who were not privy to the world of college life participated in local industrial leagues after they had graduated from high school. These “industrial leagues” were created by industries and local business who, “forced by progressive reformers to provide some healthful activity for employees, found that women’s teams not only fulfilled this health requirement but also provided good publicity for their companies. The most popular game for industrial teams was basketball.” The AAU, in creating a women’s division, sought to impart some degree of national regulation to the ad hoc mixture of local and collegiate sporting competition. The AAU’s decision to unify the diversity of teams was successful. By the time Dyer began to become competitive, the AAU dominated the larger world of local and collegiate sport.

The AAU’s presence was especially strong in Texas. As Robert Ikard explained, “Though women's basketball began in the cloistered academic gymnasiums of the Northeast, by the late twenties the center of its excellence was in the plains states of the Southwest.” Part of the reason for this success was the strength of women’s high school basketball. Another reason was because of Texas’ relative “star power.” Didrikson was a native Texan who began her career in the industrial leagues of Dallas, Texas, as did a number of other gifted athletes who migrated

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71 Nancy Theriot, “Towards a New Sporting Ideal: The Women’s Division of the National Amateur Athletic Federation,” 2.
72 Ibid.
73 Ibid., 3.
74 Ikard, Just for Fun, 14.
75 Ibid, 17.
to the major metropolitan cities in Texas, especially Dallas. In fact, “Teams from Dallas, Texas would dominate the first few years of AAU competition.”76

Despite the growing popularity of the AAU, the general public was not entirely supportive of women’s participation in some sports. This prejudice, by and large, fell across class lines. For example, it was acceptable for elite women to play tennis and golf, which were more congruous with their perception of femininity. But women who played more aggressive sports like basketball, softball, and track and field, which were largely working-class sports, ran the risk of being deemed unfeminine.77

The public’s ambivalence about the appropriateness of girls’ participation in organized sports, like basketball, was a major reason why high school organizations were slow to develop. The present day organization that governs Texas’ high school athletics is the University Interscholastic League (UIL). James McLemore, in his history of the UIL, wrote that,

The UIL actually sponsored girls’ basketball from 1918 to 1928, but only at the county level and there was no state playoff as we have today. [Records state] that with extreme pressure from the National Health, Physical Education and Recreation Association, the program came to an end in 1928, and the schools did not have UIL support of girls’ basketball. The association's main contention was that it was undesirable for girls; that it was harmful, and it created undue competitive stress. The association also contended that girls were not able to handle the emotional pressure.78

Communications Officer for the UIL Chris Schmidt wrote competitive high school girls’ basketball was prevented from being an accepted part of high school athletics until the mid-1940s when coaches A.L. Faubion and W. Curlee Cummings indicated that there was “extreme interest” in girls’ basketball. However, even with demonstrable “extreme interest,” almost half of

76 Ibid.
77 Festle, Playing Nice, xxiii, 24, 26.
the schools polled in 1946 opposed the introduction of girls’ basketball.\textsuperscript{79} Because of reluctance on the part of some groups, it was not until 1949 that girls’ basketball was successfully introduced as an organized sport in Texas schools.

During the period that the UIL and other similar leagues were reluctant to add girls’ basketball to the lineup of sponsored high school sports, the AAU sought to fill the gap by allowing high school athletes to compete and actively worked to change the public’s perception of girls’ sports. The AAU saw that success would come if women’s competition in sport was seen as more socially acceptable and competitive. Through sponsored competitions, the AAU reminded “an American public still equivocal about women in rough team sports that femininity remained foremost, though the basketball was pretty good too.”\textsuperscript{80}

For Dyer, the AAU provided her first exposure to serious, competitive, amateur sport. As a member of the Thompson Motor Mercuryettes, she traveled across Texas to compete in local softball and basketball tournaments. Dyer was both excited to compete at the AAU level and relieved, because, “I was among, and this is terrible to say, equals...somebody that could throw as hard as I could or hit as far as I could.”\textsuperscript{81}

The larger socio-political circumstances surrounding Dyer’s tenure with the AAU led to a greater public interest in women’s sports than one would expect. The late 1930s and early 1940s not only heralded the winding down of the Great Depression but the “winding up” of World War II. During the period leading up to the war, the population of San Antonio, which had several major military installations, grew rapidly. The Handbook of Texas explains that,

\textsuperscript{79} Chris Schmidt wrote that 288 supported the creation of a girls’ basketball competition, but that 215 opposed the creation of such a league. February 22, 2012.

\textsuperscript{80} Ikard, \textit{Just for Fun}, 30.

\textsuperscript{81} Dolores Dyer, October 21, 2011.
After a period of slow growth during the 1930s, San Antonio's population increased by 61 percent during the wartime boom of the 1940s, to reach 408,442 in 1950. The First United States Volunteer Cavalry was organized in San Antonio during the Spanish-American War, and in both world wars San Antonio was an important military center for the army and air forces. It has retained this status. Fort Sam Houston and Kelly, Randolph, Brooks, and Lackland Air Force bases were the city's leading economic generators for many years. In the 1950s the city grew by almost 44 percent to reach 587,718 in 1960.82

This boom stood out among other Texas cities, and San Antonio moved toward its twenty-first century status as one of the ten largest cities in the United States.

This wartime boom brought money and talented young athletes to San Antonio. Women looking for competition who played in the city leagues, like Dyer, were often coached by men from the nearby military institutions. For example, the Thompson’s Motor City Mercuryettes was coached by Irv Weinman, the communications director for Kelly Air Force Base.83 Service teams, basketball teams whose players served in the military, also provided ample, diverse competition for the semipro industrial leagues. There were no female African-American players in the industrial leagues, Dyer said, but we did “encounter them when we played the service teams.”84

The commencement of the war led to new opportunities for women to excel in the public eye. An all-male war effort meant that there was a shortage of men to play competitive sports. As a result, many Americans began to see women’s athletics as a viable alternative to men's sports. As Margaret Downing argued in her dissertation “Women’s Basketball: An Historical Review of Selected Athletic Organizations,”

83 Dolores Dyer, May 13, 2011. Amos Miller was the assistant coach for the Thompson Motors Mercuryettes.
84 Ibid.
World War II dictated a new life style throughout all phases of existence for citizens of the United States. The traumatic situation required that all individuals, male and female, put aside traditional influences and customs in an attempt to support the war effort. Hence, the role for women in particular changed drastically from that of wife, mother, and homemaker to one of mechanic, truck driver or assembly line worker – whatever job needed to be performed in order to free men for military service.  

The same sense of “role reversal” extended to sporting competitions. With men off to the front lines, women were left to pursue the full-court press at home. In his history about sports in San Antonio, Chris Foltz wrote that, during World War II, “The San Antonio Missions and the rest of the Texas League [two semi-professional men's’ baseball teams] stopped play for three years.” This void in the world of men’s sports provided an opportunity for women to step into the spotlight.

The general public followed women’s sports with zeal. In particular, the level of competition offered by the AAU was especially well known. The popularity of the AAU is evidenced by a series of documents provided by Dyer. These documents, mostly clippings from contemporary newspapers, show that local reporters covered women's AAU basketball in much the same way that reporters cover top high school and professional teams today. Half-page photographs of teams, including Dyer’s Mercuryettes, accompanied celebratory headlines like “Kaufman [Clothier’s] Girls Own City Crown,” and “Gals Battle for Title.” Importantly, the public who followed the games saw them as athletes; scores and statistics were printed alongside game highlights that extolled the athletic talent seen on the court the night before.

87 “To Mrs. and Mrs. Clint Thompson from the Thompson Motors Mercuryettes.”
During her tenure with the AAU, Dyer became accustomed not only to a certain level of competition, but also to a certain level of comfort and notoriety. AAU athletes could not be paid for their talent, but there were a lot of benefits bestowed on the players by their grateful sponsors. Dyer, when she played for the Thompson Motors Mercuryettes, enjoyed traveling from game to game in late model cars from the dealership, staying in upscale accommodations when they traveled, wearing brand-new, well-made uniforms, and having access to top-flight coaching.  

Dolores continued to compete at the AAU level through her high school years. Her talent was well-respected by her contemporaries. Margaret Zepeda, who played opposite Dyer, wrote in an email to the author,  

Delo Dyer and I played women’s fast pitch in the city league in San Antonio. She played shortstop on the number one team and I played on my mother’s team alongside my other two sisters. At first we were no match for the talented team that Delo played on, but we hung in there. Delo was tough as nails but smooth as silk as she mastered her position. Strong legs and a dead-on arm made her hard to beat. And that was when she was playing defense. At the bat she was one of those hitters that all pitcher[s] hate [because] just one wrong pitch can send the ball over the fence. She received many awards and accolades for her playing skills. The only time I could best her was on the tennis courts. Fastball [softball] and basketball were her true talents.

When she graduated, the Thompson Motor Mercuryettes gave Dolores a $150 scholarship to attend San Antonio Junior College. Dolores was able to stretch the money to last three semesters, but even with a job at the San Antonio recreation department, she did not have enough

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89 Dyer’s softball team was very successful and qualified for the AAU Softball World Tournament in 1950. Ibid.
90 Margaret Zepeda, January 31, 2012.
to complete her education. Unable to pay for school, Dolores’ options were limited. There were few jobs available to women that would allow her to attend school and pay for tuition. There were also few scholarship programs available. Her best chance of funding her education, she found, was by playing basketball.

In the spring of 1951, while attending San Antonio Junior College, Dyer came across an ad in the newspaper about an exhibition match between the Arkansas Travelers and a local men’s team in nearby Fredericksburg, Texas. She attended the game with a friend. The game was both her first encounter with women’s professional barnstorming basketball and a moment that forever remained in her memory. Recalling the game, she said that, “Everything looked so neat and so organized and [the Arkansas Travelers] knew what each other were going to do. They’d just take a look [before making a pass or taking a shot]. Of course, there was a lot of behind the back passes and stuff like that.” This was the only time she had seen women playing the same level of basketball as her childhood friend, Chester Lyssey. The level of play impressed Dyer so much that she described the Arkansas Travelers’ style of play as “show ball.”

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91 Dyer’s receipt of an athletic scholarship was not unheard of, but it was certainly far from the norm. The idea that a student, especially a female student, would attend college more for athletic than academic purposes was far from widely accepted. Wayland Baptist College in Plainview, Texas, for example, offered scholarships to sixteen female athletes, totaling about $800, as early as the late 1950s. Sylvia F. Nadler, “A Developmental History of the Wayland Hutcherson Flying Queens from 1910 to 1979,” (East Texas State University. PhD diss., 1980), 59. These were not exactly “athletic scholarships,” but rather incentives to attract good students who also happened to enjoy sports. The money for the scholarships was furnished by successful cattle rancher Claude Hutcherson. Jere Longman, “Before UConn, There was Wayland,” New York Times, December 18, 2010. Harley Redin, athletic director and coach for the girls’ basketball team, rationalized the expenditure on scholarships, saying that, “We [the University] think it’s a good investment…It gives us wonderful national publicity, creates interest in the college, gets us new students and furnishes an important phase of school life. [Redin added that he thought] it would be a good idea for most any college to follow this plan [of offering scholarship money] if it’s only for basketball.” Nadler, 59. Thus, Redin saw the scholarships as a way to attract students to the college’s academic programs.

92 Prior to Title IX, there was little scholarship money for women’s sports; funding for women comprised less than 1 percent of intercollegiate budgets. Reiss, in Major Problems in American Sport History, 338.


94 Ibid.
Dyer witnessed the emergence of professional, competitive women’s basketball, and also saw some growing pains as players balanced real sport with showmanship. The level of basketball skill was high, but the competitors were also expected to perform skits to engage the audience. As Pamela Grundy and Susan Shackelford, explained,

“Like other barnstorming teams, the Travelers exhibited showmanship as well as skill. The players had a repertoire of ball handling tricks. They also developed a handful of comic, often flirtatious routines. At base, though, they were top ballplayers who kept their winning percentage high with talent, not with gimmicks. ‘We played it straight,’ [Hazel] Walker [the founder of the Travelers] wrote. ‘We told the men to play us just like we were men. We couldn’t fast break as long as they could, but we did when necessary, and we learned to conserve our energy and put it out when it counted.’”95

To the young Dolores, the Arkansas Travelers were nothing short of magical. More important, she saw in that moment a way to pay for school while playing a sport she loved. Her long awaited opportunity came in spring of 1951 when she saw an advertisement in the newspaper to try out for the Arkansas Travelers in Fredericksburg, Texas.96

Dolores’ brother, Edwin, drove her to the tryout. Arkansas Travelers coach Hazel Walker conducted the tryout along with her fellow teammates. Dyer was the only one trying out. The pressure was immense. All eyes were on her, but one pair, those of basketball pioneer Hazel Walker, were the only ones that counted. Dyer recalled being nervous, but as the tryout progressed, “She forgot about being nervous and got into [her] zone.”97 Even though she made seven out of ten free-throws, she was disappointed to find out that she was not up to the standards that Walker looked for in her team. Walker, Dyer recalled, was very honest in her assessment of Dyer’s abilities. “She told me to practice on my ball handling skills and keep in

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95 Grundy and Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass*, 106.
97 Ibid.
touch.” Unsuccessful and disappointed, she rode back to San Antonio and continued to work for the recreation department.

Unbeknownst to Dyer, one of the Arkansas Travelers had a more positive appreciation of Dyer’s talents. Patricia Ann Johnson was impressed by Dyer’s abilities. Even if she was not what the Travelers were looking for in their organization, Johnson believed that Dyer would be a valuable addition to another team. Some weeks after the sting of the tryout had faded from Dyer’s memory, she received a note from Johnson letting her know about tryouts for a barnstorming team called the Texas Cowgirls. Intrigued, Dyer decided to pack her bags and head north to Beloit, Wisconsin, for the tryout. It would be Dyer’s first trip outside the state of Texas.
Dyer scraped together the money for the bus fare for her first journey out of Texas—a long and arduous ride to Wisconsin. Some twenty hours after boarding the Greyhound in San Antonio, Dyer finally arrived at the tryouts in Beloit, Wisconsin, ready to showcase her skills. 98 Immediately, Dyer was disappointed with the Cowgirls’ apparent lack of organization. They did not practice in a gym; instead, they practiced outside on a public concrete court with a chain basketball net rather than a cotton one. She remembered thinking to herself, “When are we going to play in a gym? Something is not quite right here.” 99 Dyer had expected a team like the well-organized and practiced Arkansas Travelers, but she found a less organized, less professional, and poorly funded team. 100

The Cowgirls were founded in 1949 by Dempsey Hovland, based out of Beloit, and his partner, Jack Kearns. 101 Even though the team was founded by a partnership, the team’s de facto owner and operator was Hovland. Born Dempster Hovland on December 11, 1918, he lived with his grandparents most of his childhood in Janesville, Wisconsin. 102 He showed an interest in business at a young age, and as a teenager, he booked local bands and sports teams for public

99 Ibid.
100 Ibid.
events. He would later use the skills he developed during his high school years to start his own career as a booking agent and manager.  

Before beginning his career with the Cowgirls, Hovland was a basketball player in his own right. As a team member of the House of David men’s basketball team, Hovland witnessed firsthand the showmanship and business of barnstorming. Initially, his inspiration to create the Texas Cowgirls was a Wild West Show that he saw as a young boy. The show featured women, dressed in full cowgirl regalia, who showed off their roping skills and fired their pistols in the air like actors in Hollywood westerns. The show made such an impression on Hovland that it remained fresh in his memory for some twenty-five years and eventually led him to form the Cowgirls in his early thirties.

Unlike team owner Hazel Walker of the Arkansas Travelers, Hovland did not appear to have any affinity towards women’s basketball. Walker, as one of the most accomplished

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103 Franz, “Before WNBA, There Were Cowgirls.” 
104 Hovland’s participation on the House of David team from 1941-1942 is confirmed in a newspaper article. Bismark Tribune, “Cow Girls Brandish Six-Shooter Tonight” (Bismarck, ND) January 27, 1953; The House of David was not just one basketball team but several teams. The very first teams from the early 20th century were comprised of members of the House of David religious colony whose members lived a life of “Christianity, vegetarianism, celibacy, and love for mankind.” Basketball became part of the House of David repertoire much later. “The House of David Sports Teams,” The House of David Museum, www.houseofdavidmuseum.org/sports/index.htm.

105 Erin Hovland, November 18, 2011.
106 Generally considered the first women’s barnstorming basketball team, the All-American Red Heads team was organized by C.M. “Ollie” Olson in 1936. A former barnstormer himself, Olson had a true love of the game. Olson was both a player for and the owner of the Olson Terrible Swedes. In 2012, the Red Heads were inducted into the Naismith Hall of Fame. Graham, Roy, “Graham’s Sportographs,” Florence Morning News, January 9, 1949.; Young, Royce, “Reggie Miller, Ralph Sampson among 2012 Hall of Fame Inductees,” CBSSports.com, accessed on April 4, 2012, http://www.cbssports.com/nba/blog/eye-on-basketball/18245695/reggie-miller-ralph-sampson-among-2012-hall-of-fame-inductees. Though many consider the Redheads as the first women’s professional basketball team, there was an all-women’s basketball team based out of Chicago called the Taylor Trunks. The Trunks were founded as an AAU team in 1921, but in 1927 they were banned from AAU play. According to the Taylor Trunks, being banned was a result of playing at too high of a level and was also due to the fact that two members of the team “were playground instructors.” On January 8, 1930 the Taylor Trunks played the men’s barnstorming team, the “The House of David,” and in December of 1932 the Chicago Tribune stated that “The Trunks have been forced to play men’s teams to find competition.” “Taylor Trunks,” National Basketball Association “Hoopedia,” accessed September 1, 2012, http://hoopedia.nba.com/index.php?title=Taylor_Trunks.
female basketball players of her time, was chosen for the All-American team eleven times during her fourteen year career and saw basketball as an important sport for women. After her AAU career, she played professionally with the All American Red Heads and eventually went on to form her own team, the Arkansas Travelers. As a player, coach, and team owner, Walker had firsthand experience with the limits of competitive opportunities for women athletes. Accordingly, she deemphasized showmanship and highlighted the legitimate athletic abilities of her players. Throughout her long career, Walker sought to achieve greater social recognition for women's sports, especially basketball.

Walker’s love of pure basketball was rewarded by the admiration of her players and the interest of potential players. Women, including Dyer, sought out Walker because she provided the opportunity to play with a competitive basketball team. And, in turn, Walker recruited players with as much zeal. The Johnson sisters who played with Walker remembered her coming to their home to meet and become acquainted with their parents and to ask permission to have their daughters join the team. This visit was especially important because Walker was recruiting the girls to participate in somewhat of an unorthodox lifestyle for the times and asking their parents to allow them to travel all over the country. Walker undoubtedly wanted to reassure the parents that the girls would be chaperoned and well-cared for during their travels.

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109 Oral interviews with Dyer, Johnson and Evans confirmed their desire to play with the Arkansas travelers. Contemporary correspondence between Leona Evans and Hazel Walker show that Florence Holder also desired to join the Travelers.

Compared to Walker, Hovland had a very different approach to managing his team and developing talent.\textsuperscript{111} As sole proprietor of his own sports marketing firm, called the 20\textsuperscript{th} Century Booking Agency, whose slogan was “You Only Grow by Giving the Public What it Wants!”\textsuperscript{112} Hovland saw women’s basketball as a money-making opportunity. While he valued the players’ talent, he expected them to be able to entertain as well as perform. Hovland, coming of age in a time of “crazy fads, flag pole sitters, and dance marathons,” was undoubtedly influenced by this era of variety shows, spectacle, and exhibition of the unusual.\textsuperscript{113} After all, his other booking engagements featured “trapeze artists, plate spinners, [and] donkey basketball” in a “vaudeville” atmosphere.\textsuperscript{114} Consequently, he tended to spend more energy on promoting the girls and less on organizing workouts and training. The result was a lack of structure that, to onlookers, appeared chaotic.\textsuperscript{115}

Some of these onlookers would eventually go on to try out for Hovland’s Texas Cowgirls. Betty Lou Johnson, who attended a try out session for the Cowgirls in Chicago in 1952, played for the Arkansas Travelers in 1951.\textsuperscript{116} Johnson, the youngest of twelve children, was a native of Edgerton, Ohio. In contrast to Dyer, Johnson grew up lacking opportunities to

\textsuperscript{111} In contrast to Hazel Walker’s promise of a chaperone, the Texas Cowgirls had no official chaperone. According to two of the Texas Cowgirls, Hovland began a relationship with Florence Holder, who he would later marry, that caused discord among the players. Pat Cramer recalled that it “started the separation” of the team and “you couldn’t say anything bad or it would get back to Dempsey [Hovland].” Pat Cramer Stessun, October 5, 2011. Leeona Evans recalled that “it upset me because he inched in on Florence, you know, because she was my roommate and she wouldn't come in till the wee hours and I knew.” Leeona Evans Overturf, April 30, 2012.

\textsuperscript{112} “Basketball Texas Cowgirls: Official Souvenir Program,” from Joan Rupp’s personal collection.

\textsuperscript{113} The 1930s was described in Berlage’s “Women Stars in Exhibition Baseball Games in the 1930s and 1940s” as a time of publicity stunts and gimmicks, with promoters using “antics” designed to draw maximum attendance numbers. With limited forms of advertisement at the promoters’ disposal, a single advertising poster needed to garner as much buzz as possible, and resulted in exaggerations such as billing women’s barnstorming teams as “world champions” and “all-American.” Gai Ingham Berlage, Women in Baseball: The Forgotten History (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1994), 73.

\textsuperscript{114} Franz, “Before WNBA.”

\textsuperscript{115} Betty Lou Johnson, May 23, 2011.

\textsuperscript{116} Ibid.
play competitive sports. Her only real competitive interaction with basketball was shooting a ball into a peach bushel basket with the bottom holed out and nailed to the barn door. Her brothers and sisters were her teammates on the dirt home court.\textsuperscript{117} As the youngest and smallest member of the family, Betty Lou developed excellent outside shooting skills.\textsuperscript{118} The Johnson children played an “away game” against their neighbors, the DeGroff brothers. This game was somewhat of a big deal in the area, as community members were proud of the athleticism of the children in their town.\textsuperscript{119}

There were few opportunities in Johnson’s home town for girls to compete in organized sports. The rural location of the Johnson home and the surrounding community meant that there were limited extracurricular sports opportunities for boys, much less for girls. The lack of extracurricular sports was mirrored at the curricular level. Edgerton High School, where the Johnson children attended, did not offer sports teams for girls. Betty Lou Johnson had to settle for cheerleading because “that was things girls could do in those times.”\textsuperscript{120} She remembered watching her brothers play organized sports and wishing that she, too, could play on a team. She recalled that she “always wish[ed] we had a girls’ team because we thought we were pretty good.”\textsuperscript{121}

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\textsuperscript{117} Betty Lou Johnson, May 23, 2011.
\textsuperscript{118} Dyer remembered that Betty Lou Johnson’s most formidable shot was from the top of the key, which would today be a three-point shot. This was before the inception of the three-point shot rule. Dolores Dyer, May 13, 2011.
\textsuperscript{119} Johnson remembered that she and her siblings played the DeGroff brothers from nearby Bryan, Ohio, “a little town not far from us, and we were known to be a big basketball family in our town. So we played against them -- and the Bryan people are always bragging about the DeGroff brothers and the Edgerton people were always bragging about the Johnson family. And we played for the benefit of [Red Cross].” It was this game in which Betty Lou and Patricia Ann made their competitive athletic debut. Betty Lou Johnson and Patricia Ann Johnson, May 23, 2011.
\textsuperscript{120} Betty Lou Johnson, May 23, 2011.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid.
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Unlike Dyer, the AAU and city leagues offered only limited opportunities for the
Johnsons. The Johnson sisters were able to play softball during the summer when they worked
for the Ohio Art Toy Company, which sponsored an AAU team.\textsuperscript{122} Betty Lou’s older sister,
Patricia Ann, tried out and earned a spot on the revered Arkansas Travelers in 1950.\textsuperscript{123} Patricia
Ann, already Betty Lou’s idol, became a role model Betty Lou could follow in her pursuit of
competitive sports. In 1951, Hazel Walker asked Betty Lou to join the team. She gladly
accepted.\textsuperscript{124} Unfortunately, after a few months with the team, the stress of traveling made her
susceptible to illness, and poor health ultimately curtailed her career with the Travelers.\textsuperscript{125}

In 1952, Betty Lou Johnson was ready to attempt a return to professional basketball. She
caught a bus to Chicago to try out for the Texas Cowgirls. Her initial reaction to the team was
nearly the same as Dyer’s. The tryout was not as well organized as the Travelers’, and the pay
was not as good. Johnson recalled negotiating her salary with the team’s coach and owner,
Dempsey Hovland. While Johnson had made $10,000 a year with the Travelers, Hovland offered
her only $75 per week, or about $3,900 per year.\textsuperscript{126} Johnson went from earning what in today’s

\textsuperscript{122} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{123} Patricia Ann Johnson, Betty Lou Johnson’s older sister, earned a spot on the Arkansas Travelers after
watching Hazel Walker’s squad play against a local men’s team in Bryan, Ohio in 1948. Johnson, after watching the
game, approached Walker and asked her how a girl could join the team. Walker told her to come out the next day
and work out with the team. After seeing Johnson’s ball handling skills, Walker offered her a contract with a salary
of $15,000 per year. The tryout was the first time that Johnson had played on a real basketball court. Patricia Ann
Johnson, May 23, 2011.
\textsuperscript{124} Joe Molony, “Arkansas Travelers to Play at Hannah; Hazel Walker to Lead Girl Pros In Show,” Sports
Section, \emph{Florence Morning News}, December 22, 1951, 6.
\textsuperscript{125} Betty Lou Johnson, May 23, 2011.
\textsuperscript{126} In 1937, C.M. Olson offered Olympian athlete Helen Stephens a two year contract with the All-
American Red Heads, paying $250 a month plus all transportation, lodging and meal expenses included. Olson
provided his players with “blanket insurance” to offer coverage so the “player loses nothing” and Olson was
protected against a “loss of services” from players. Letter from C.M. Olson, November 7, 1937, Helen Stephens
Papers, The State Historical Society of Missouri, WUNP6118, f. 224; Letter from C.M. Olson, December 1, 1937,
Helen Stephens Papers, The State Historical Society of Missouri, WUNP6118, f. 224; Telegram from C.M. Olson,
November 11, 1937, Helen Stephens Papers, The State Historical Society of Missouri, WUNP6118, f. 224. Olson is
also cited as offering to pay Stephens $1,500 for the 1937-1938 season plus expenses and a cut of the gate tallies.
dollars would be, accounting for inflation, roughly $80,000 to earning $31,000 a year.\textsuperscript{127} She remembered thinking, “[The pay was] every two weeks and I thought, boy, I said [to Hovland], “You don’t pay as much as the other team [the Arkansas Travelers].” “No,” he responded, “We don’t have as much money behind us as the other team.”\textsuperscript{128}

The salary Hovland promised his new recruits was of particular importance to Dyer. The pursuit of her American dream necessitated that she earn enough money to pay for her college education. To ease her parents’ anxiety about her journey north, Dyer reassured them she would save some of the money she earned to pay to finish her college education.\textsuperscript{129} The monetary needs facing Dyer were a reality in the back of her mind as she shot free throws during the try outs.

The tryouts were on an outdoor public concrete court in the middle of summer. Leeona Evans Overturf remembered the heat as nearly unbearable. They walked to the practice court in the morning, practiced all day long, and then walked back to the hotel, sweaty and exhausted.\textsuperscript{130} Throughout all of this, it was Dyer’s naturally competitive nature and her desire to earn money for college that pushed her onward. Her efforts paid off and she made the team and convinced her parents to allow her to play.

Dyer was not the only talented athlete to try out for the Cowgirls in Beloit. There were others who tried out but did not make the team, such as Eleona “Ellie” Panas from Canada and

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\item Sharon Kinney Hanson, The Life of Helen Stephens: The Fulton Flash, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004), 156.
\item Ibid.
\item Dolores Dyer, December 3, 2011.
\item Leeona Evans Overturf, April 15, 2011.
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Joan Rupp from Minnesota. Panas was a friend of Evelyn and Pat Cramer, all three from Edmonton, Alberta, in Western Canada. Panas recalled being devastated when she did not make the team. Joan Rupp was similarly disappointed.

Leeona Evans, a native of the small town of Winthrop, Arkansas, had made a similarly long journey to Beloit in search of competitive basketball. Dyer and Evans grew up in similar circumstances. Both were daughters of the Great Depression who grew up in rural America, and both watched their families struggle financially. Both girls learned to play basketball on dirt courts against neighborhood children. Their stories diverged, however, as the girls entered their respective high schools. While Dyer’s family moved into the relative comfort of San Antonio, Texas, the Evans family remained on their small Arkansas farm for the duration of her teenage years.

Although there were similarities between Dyer and Evans, the differences in their respective backgrounds may have had an effect on each one’s outlook. Evans was the seventh of eight children, whereas Dyer was one of only two children. Although both women had family support for their participation in sports, Evans’ father was a disabled World War I veteran and could not tolerate the noise level in the gymnasiums where his daughter played. The Evans family relied upon his meager pension for support, even though he was able to make a small

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131 Evelyn Cramer was older than her sister, Pat, and had played on a feeder team for the Edmonton Grads, but the team had disbanded. When asked if it was a dream of hers to play professional basketball, Pat replied that “it wasn’t a dream because there was nothing here for us to go further in Canada at the time.” Pat Cramer Stessun, October 5, 2011.


133 Joan Rupp recalled her try out in Beloit: “Dempsey Hovland put us in there and we’d train in the hot sun, and I thought holy cow. It was pretty tough at first for me because I wasn’t used to that kind of stuff, running up and down steps outside, and the stadium was horrible, but it got your legs in shape and it was interesting and fun.” She also related her reaction to not making the team: “So I was disappointed, hopped on the train, went back to Minneapolis and bought a basketball, went back to the insurance company and practiced real hard and monkeyed around to be better. I kept in contact with Dempsey and the following season, I went back and made the team and played for six years.” Joan Rupp, August 14, 2011.
amount of money selling vegetables. Leeona’s father died when she was sixteen years old, leaving behind her mother and a younger sister.\(^{134}\) “Times were hard,” Evans said as she recalled her high school days, “my mother sold eggs for me to have a little money to go to the ball games.”\(^ {135}\) In contrast, Dyer had the benefit of two fully employed, supportive parents, as well as the moral and financial support of her older brother Edwin.

While the Dyer family was not wealthy by any means, they were certainly better off than the Evans family. Not only was Dyer’s brother Edwin supportive of her playing sports, he wanted her to be more than “a clerk in a department store” and, thus, encouraged her to further her education beyond high school.\(^ {136}\) Whereas Dyer was raised in the much larger San Antonio that had a population of over 400,000 in 1950, Evans’ hometown had a population of only 284.\(^ {137}\) That same year, Dyer’s high school graduating class alone had sixty-seven members.\(^ {138}\)

The divergent circumstances surrounding Dyer and Evans’ lives resulted in different motivations for attending the tryouts in Beloit. Dyer was seeking to earn money by playing a game she loved, with the ultimate goal of paying her way through college. Evans just wanted an opportunity to continue her basketball career. She had enjoyed success as an athletic standout on her high school basketball team, but graduation meant the end of competitive sports in her

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\(^ {134}\) Marietta Evans Humphrey, March 25, 2012. Marietta Humphrey is Leeona Evans Overturf’s sister.

\(^ {135}\) Leeona Evans Overturf, April 15, 2011.

\(^ {136}\) Charles Edwin was able to offer Dolores financial support, as well. On May 31, 1950, shortly after her high school graduation, he bought her a 1940 Ford Tudor convertible so she could attend classes at San Antonio Junior College. At a cost of $359.76, the car was dark metallic blue with red interior and had been restored by a neighbor and was “the prettiest convertible in this town.” Charles Edwin Dyer, January 29, 2012.

Dolores recalled that Charles Edwin bought her the car because she had no transportation and that Thompson Motors gave him “a good deal.” Charles Edwin made all twelve monthly payments, which were $29.98 each. Dolores Dyer, October 21, 2011.


\(^ {138}\) Dolores Dyer, May 13, 2011.
hometown. There were no AAU or industrial leagues in which young athletes could participate like there were in San Antonio, Texas. According to Evans, Winthrop, Arkansas “didn’t even have paved roads back then.”

 Evans’ introduction to the Cowgirls came from an unlikely source. Florence Holder, who grew up in the nearby town of Gillham, Arkansas, played against Evans in high school. Holder’s older sister, Mamie, played for the All-American Red Heads, another women’s barnstorming team. When Hovland tried to recruit Mamie for his team, she recommended her sister, Florence, who easily made the team. Then, when Hovland asked Florence’s opinion concerning new recruits, she recommended her high school friend, Leeona Evans.

 In 1953, Evans received a letter from Hovland with money for the bus fare to Wisconsin and an offer to try out. The letter could not have come at a more auspicious time. Years later, in an interview with the *Texarkana Gazette*, Evans Overturf recalled sitting on the porch of her parents’ home wondering, “How am I ever going to get away from this dust bowl?” When the letter came, it was the opportunity she was hoping for. She remembered that she,

Never really prayed about [getting the offer from Hovland], but it was a prayer answered. I can’t explain the feeling that this little ole’ country girl got when she opened it up and they were interested in me playing basketball and traveling with the girls’ team.

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140 Florence Holder played for the Texas Cowgirls for one year before Leeona joined the team in 1952. Leeona Evans Overturf, April 15, 2011.


142 Ibid. During an interview in which Overturf recounted her reaction to Hovland’s offer, she remarked, “Was I [interested]? Shit fire, yes I was.” Leeona Evans Overturf, April 15, 2011.
Both Evans and Dyer suffered through the grueling practices and tryouts on the outdoor court in Beloit. Their efforts paid off when they both made the team.

The girls had different reactions to the level of organization shown by Hovland’s Texas Cowgirls. Evans, who was the least traveled and experienced of the girls, still had stars in her eyes as she traveled into the “big world” to pursue her passion.143 Dyer and Betty Lou Johnson, in contrast, had both played basketball for other organizations before trying out for the Cowgirls. They both recalled feeling uneasy about the lack of organizational structure and substandard facilities. But they felt more uneasy about going home empty handed.

Their misgivings about joining the team were ameliorated somewhat during salary negotiations with Hovland. He offered the girls a relatively generous weekly paycheck. According to a contract signed by Evans, Hovland agreed to pay a salary of $60 per week.144 Hovland also agreed to cover “traveling and hotel expenses with the exception of the payment of food,” as well as “furnish[ing] all necessary equipment and clothes used in connection with the team.”145 For a girl who once sold eggs for extra spending money, Hovland’s offer was the promise of more money than she had ever seen. Not only was he offering employment, he was also offering enough money for Evans to live on as well as to send money back home to her widowed mother and younger sister.146

Hovland’s offer to Dyer was even more generous than the one made to Evans. Hovland was impressed with Dyer’ strength, height, and, most important, that she was a native Texan.

143 Ibid.
145 Ibid.
146 Each member of the Texas Cowgirls who was interviewed remembered the Great Depression and mentioned the importance of saving money and of sending money to their families back home . Dolores Dyer, May 13, 2011; Leeona Evans Overturf, April 15, 2011.”
Even though Hovland marketed the Cowgirls as an authentic Texas team, none of the players were from the Lone Star State. Dyer was not only from Texas, but also had the Texas drawl, swagger, and roping skills. The addition of Dyer gave the team a huge dose of authenticity.147

But for Hovland, that authenticity came with a hefty price tag. He promised to pay Dyer $125 per week, whereas he had contracted to pay most of the Cowgirls $60 per week.148 Adjusting the amounts for inflation puts Hovland’s offer in a modern context. According the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), $40 per week, the average income in the late 1940’s, equals slightly less than $400 per week in 2012.149 Thus, comparatively, Dyer was faced with the proposition of making nearly $1,100 per week. In reality, the Cowgirls were paid, usually in cash, from proceeds of the gate receipts, which meant that they were at the mercy of the crowds for their income. When attendance was low, Hovland used the excuse of inadequate gate receipts to pay less than the promised salaries.150

The contractual salary agreement was a considerable amount of money to the young girls who were vying for a position on the Cowgirls. In comparison, the All American Girls Professional Baseball League (AAGPBL), the all-women league made famous by Hollywood’s

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148 Contracts of Pat Cramer and Leeona Evans, Dyer’s teammates, indicated that they earned $60 per week. Dyer, however, was surprised to find out how much more she made than the other girls. She was paid in cash, so she had assumed that they would all make the same amount. Dyer was offered $100 a week for her skills and an additional $25 per week if she would help drive the station wagon. With this potentially lucrative arrangement, Dyer planned to save most of her earnings to pay for college. Texas Cowgirls, Inc. Employment Contract, Dempsey Hovland and Pat Cramer, September 14, 1953. Texas Cowgirls, Inc. Employment Contract, Dempsey Hovland and Leeona Evans, August 17, 1954. Dolores Dyer, May 13, 2011. It should be noted that Dyer’s salary, when compared to other families in the United States, was nearly double the average. The average family made around $60 per week. For more information, see William H. Young, “Life and Youth During the 1950s,” in The 1950s (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2004).


portrayal in *A League of Their Own*, paid only slightly higher salaries.\textsuperscript{151} Attracting over one million spectators in its most profitable year, the AAGPBL could afford to compensate its most junior members at $55 per week and its most talented players at a much higher rate of up to $375. In *Women in Baseball: The Forgotten History*, historian Gai Ingham Berlage wrote, “In those days [1949] $85 was considered a lot of money, since the average wage was only about $40 per week.”\textsuperscript{152} According to historian Merrie A. Fidler, Philip Wrigley, heir to the Wrigley chewing gum fortune, was the driving force behind the formation and promotion of women’s professional baseball in the 1940s.\textsuperscript{153}

Although the salaries were somewhat comparable, there were some distinct differences between Hovland’s Texas Cowgirls and Wrigley’s AAGPBL. Wrigley made an initial investment of $250,000 in the development and promotion of the women’s baseball league. He organized the league as a professional entity based on the men’s major league baseball model. It was well-funded, professionally administered, and chartered as a non-profit organization. Wrigley was aware of the appeal to the public of this civic-oriented team concept that also promoted high ethical standards for its players.\textsuperscript{154} His approach to publicity included the promotion of AAGPBL as “entirely a women’s show and therefore a unique spectator sport separate from men’s baseball.”\textsuperscript{155} The role of femininity and the continuing social expectations of “traditional feminine roles of wife, mother, and homemaker” were evident in Wrigley’s

\textsuperscript{152} Gai Ingham Berlage, *Women in Baseball: The Forgotten History*, 144.
\textsuperscript{154} Ibid., 48-50.
\textsuperscript{155} Ibid., 57.
administration and promotion of the league. 156 Promotion of a women’s team playing within a traditionally male arena was a balancing act for both Wrigley and Hovland. Wrigley was aware of the publicity value of promoting his female players as wholesome, feminine all-American girls. He attempted to capitalize on this image by “design[ing] a special ‘feminine’ uniform, by employing team chaperones, by establishing player conduct rules similar to those in vogue on college campuses, and by educating players in the finer points of ‘feminine’ charm.”157

In the conservative environment of the 1950s, the line between feminine and racy was a fine one. Hovland promoted the femininity of his players, but did so in a way that emphasized their “womanly” appearance and feminized their performances on the court. Pat Cramer remembered Hovland asking her to “go blond.”158 Edwin Dyer remembered from conversations with his sister while she was on the road with the Texas Cowgirls how she described the “racier” nature of some of their performances. He said that it was just “part of the show that Old Dempsey wanted to put them on.”159 He recalled that Dyer was uncomfortable with some of the antics Hovland required of them, such as having to kiss their male opponents during free throw attempts, hoping that the men would miss their free throws.160 Yet, Dyer had been unaware of those realities at the time she signed with Hovland; she was determined to earn a living in order to pursue her dream of eventually becoming an athletics coach and teacher.

156 Ibid.
157 Ibid, 50.
158 Pat Cramer Stessun, October 5, 2011. Barbara Leggette, who played for the Cowgirls during the 1958-1959 season, remembered that during the player warm-ups, Hovland had the women perform a striptease of sorts for the audience. When a player made a shot, she would have to “take something off.” “We’d get all the way down to our uniform, and the crowd would start yelling ‘More! More!’” She recalled thinking, “Lord help me if my daddy could’ve seen that.” From player interviews, it is known that the articles removed included cowboy hat, guns and holster, and bolero vests. “The crowds were hooked,” Billy Watkins, The Clarion Ledger (Jackson, MS) September 25, 2011, Style section.
160 Ibid.
With the promise of a paycheck in hand, Dyer’s initial misgivings gave way to hopes of future success. Dyer remembered thinking, “‘Well, if he’s going to pay for all of this, I can save $80 a week and how many weeks would I have to do this, not only to fulfill my dream, but to have enough for a year’s tuition and books back home for college.’”\(^{161}\) This vision, coupled with the fact that Dyer was further from home than she had ever been in her life, with limited money and options, compelled her to sign a contract with Hovland’s Texas Cowgirls. By signing her contract, Dyer joined her fellow teammates Betty Herrmann, Betty Lou Johnson, Florence Holder, Leeona Evans, and sisters Evelyn and Pat Cramer.\(^{162}\)

Once she had signed the contract, Hovland explained to Dyer her role during the basketball games. Hovland provided the players with shiny bolero vests, cheap plastic holsters with painted silver cap guns, and a “dime store felt Kress’ kids hat” to represent his idea of commercialized Texas attire.\(^{163}\) The costumes were shockingly different from the uniforms that Dyer was accustomed to wearing. When Dyer played for the Thompson Motor Mercuryettes, her

\(^{161}\) Dolores Dyer, May 13, 2011.

\(^{162}\) The teammates were from all over North America. Betty Herrmann, a veteran star of the Texas Cowgirls, was from Brooklyn, New York. Herrmann, who was advertised as the star attraction, was known for her ability to shoot free throws. A program from one of the events showcased a competition where a member of the audience could win $100 if they managed to out shoot a blindfolded Herrmann. Anon. “The Texas Cowgirls v. The Erie All Stars,” All Star Show Lucky Number Program 1727, Sponsored by St. Paul’s R.C. Church, Erie, PA, 1953. (From the collection of Leeona Evans Overtun.) Teammates remember Herrmann for her fancy dribbling routines and her accurate shooting from any angle, and the fact that she was the only woman on the team who was married. (Pat Cramer Stessun, October 5, 2011.) Evelyn and Pat Cramer were sisters from Edmonton, Canada. The Cramers crossed the border into the United States by train. Lacking the appropriate paperwork to work in the United States, Hovland instructed the sisters to say that they were from different Texas towns. (Pat Cramer Stessun, October 5, 2011.) Ellie Panas Gauthier also remembered the train trip with the Cramer sisters when they entered the United States without papers. “In those days it wasn’t hard to get across the border. We told them we were going on a holiday. Dempsey [Hovland] was supposed to get all the paperwork done for us, but I never heard anything more about it, in either year.” Eleona Gauthier, March 16, 2012. The Crammers’ reaction to Hovland’s showmanship was decidedly different than some of the other girls. Instead of viewing the showmanship as a departure from “pure” basketball, the sisters saw the whole experience as an adventure. The money, in their view, was incidental. Pat Cramer stated that “I always knew I would get married.” Pat Cramer Stessun, October 5, 2011. For team biographies as authored by Hovland, see “The Texas Cowgirls Professional Basketball Team,” Official Souvenir Program, 1953.

\(^{163}\) Ibid., 45.
uniforms were of a high quality. Moreover, the uniforms were not revealing, like those of the Cowgirls. The Thompsons provided “the best of uniforms and always two sets of everything,” Dyer wrote, “even shoes black and white.”\textsuperscript{164} Dyer felt that the quality of the uniforms was a reflection of how the Thompsons wanted their business portrayed to the public. “As Mr. & Mrs. Clinton Thompson were concerned,” Dyer said,

\begin{quote}
I’m sure that they had their dealership in mind. We were representing their dealership and they didn’t want any ragtag uniforms on us and I think, too, we were good, another reason. And I just don’t think that they wanted us to represent them and their dealership in a bad manner because we did get to go and play everywhere in Texas. As far as the Cowgirl uniform, that was sad. It really was.\textsuperscript{165}
\end{quote}

In contrast, Dyer believed that the Cowgirl shorts were too short to be appropriate for athletic play. Further, they were made of a cheap synthetic material that scorched when she tried to iron it. By the end of the season, repeated washings in the hotel bathtub (the girls rarely had access to a laundromat) made the shorts as thin as onion skin.\textsuperscript{166}

Hovland did not do much to market the girls as serious, competitive athletes, even though many of the girls saw themselves as such. Promotional literature used by Hovland as advertising showed modelesque women, who were not actually members of the Cowgirls, posing in cowboy hats and Las Vegas-style, low-cut, strapless, sequined costumes.\textsuperscript{167} In the players’ biographies, Hovland wrote that the “team averages 20 years of age and is made up mostly of girls from Texas. Beauty may be attested to,” he added, “by the fact that many of the girls are models in the

\begin{footnotes}
\item[164] Dolores Dyer, March 8, 2012.
\item[165] Dolores Dyer, December 3, 2011.
\item[166] Leeona Evans Overturf, April 30, 2011.
\end{footnotes}
off season.”168 The players, however, did not appreciate the impression created by the promotional literature. Betty Lou Johnson, when asked about her reaction to the advertising, recalled being offended and that “so many people thought that we probably were just showgirls and traveling around. I just didn’t like the impression I got from that.”169 Johnson stated that she wanted to be taken seriously as an athlete and as a basketball player.170 And while their average age may have been around the age of twenty, none of 1953-1954 girls modeled nor were any of them born in Texas, except for Dyer.

The discovery of the routine was met with shock and apprehension by the new recruits. Both Johnson and Dyer, who considered themselves to be competitive serious athletes, were appalled by the showmanship that Hovland promoted and expected of the girls. Johnson stated that Hovland’s introduction of the uniforms “Came as a shock to me. I didn’t realize we were going to be wearing guns and cowboy hats and vests and that sort of thing when we would run out on the floor. I did not like that part of it.”171 However, despite the exploitive and demeaning nature of the proceedings, Hovland believed that the girls should keep complaints to themselves. As demonstrated by a note written on the script by Hovland, “this farce [the antics] has been used to sell quite a few tickets. Please Cowgirls, don’t be offended [sic]. There will be no coarseness or insults. Go along with the gag and we’ll all have fun.”172

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168 Ibid.
170 Ibid.
171 Betty Lou Johnson, May 23, 2011. Sisters Betty Lou and Patricia Ann Johnson both played for the Arkansas Travelers, and Betty Lou, at one point, also played for the Texas Cowgirls. The sisters considered themselves serious athletes, and Patricia Ann saved enough from her salary as an Arkansas Traveler to finance both her own and her sister’s education. The two sisters completed their bachelors and masters degrees in education, eventually becoming high school and collegiate level coaches.
While the antics forced upon the Texas Cowgirls may strike readers today as ridiculous or offensive, it is important to consider the social setting of the late 1940s and 1950s in which these female athletes lived. The traditional roles of women would eventually be challenged in later decades, but during the 1940s and 1950s, many sexist stereotypes were very much alive. A 1947 Collier’s magazine article featuring the All American Red Heads, written by Edwin Shrake, reveals the views of a male writer in regards to female basketball players—a view perhaps needed in order to “sell” to his readers the entertainment value of women playing a men’s sport.173 While the article did mention the All American Red Heads’ grueling schedule, reporting that the team would “travel some 30,000 miles … to play 180 scheduled games in thirty-eight states,”174 it mostly highlighted the players’ good looks and feminine “wiles.”175 The writer focused heavily on the “formula” of the “age-old contest between male brawn and feminine guile,” “still sure fire as the day Eve opened a new era by splitting the apple,” which he stated small town audiences “lapp[ed] … up.”176 Even though the writer reported that the women won about half their games, and that they were “fast and tricky,” the writer stated that “they’re [the players] the first to admit that the best girl players in the world don’t have a real chance against a male team of average speed and stamina.”177 He wrote that the Red Heads relied upon “feminine guile” to “ensnare, bedizen, slow down and generally foul up” the male players.178

176 Ibid. 66.
177 Ibid.
178 Ibid.
One excuse for the men being outscored was that “a man just can’t play his best defense against a pretty blonde.”\textsuperscript{179}

Throughout the twentieth century, participants in women’s sports were subject to the societal expectations that they, as women, were to look and act according to what was considered feminine at the time. As was the case in the era of Babe Didrikson, female athletes were harshly judged for appearing to be too masculine. The \textit{Collier’s} article mentions that the Red Heads were “very easy to look at.”\textsuperscript{180} In Festle’s \textit{Playing Nice}, a \textit{Sports Illustrated} writer in a 1972 article noted his pleasant surprise at the good looks of the women who played on the then newly-formed women’s tennis circuit, writing that the women were “an amazingly good-looking group of people, especially when one thought of the stereotype of the woman athlete. Nobody had a beard. Nobody looked or sounded like Ernest Borgnine… Nobody waddled, not a lumberjack in the group.”\textsuperscript{181} Festle wrote that the task for women in the 1950s “was for players to convince people that women could somehow participate in sports and still be feminine.”\textsuperscript{182} One woman observed in 1958 that “as long as the woman athlete typified[d] the image of the ideal American woman, she [was] accepted.”\textsuperscript{183} This reality was a very difficult challenge faced not only by the Texas Cowgirls but many other women’s barnstorming teams as they traveled throughout the country and walked the tightrope of being both an athlete and a woman.

Dyer did not appreciate that, for Hovland, “Texan” was a showbiz hook. Hovland orchestrated a scripted routine that was a mix of cowgirl-themed antics and playful flirting for

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{179} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{180} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{181} Festle, \textit{Playing Nice}, 155.
  \item \textsuperscript{182} Ibid., 45.
  \item \textsuperscript{183} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
Dyer and the rest of the girls to follow. The event would begin with the song “The Eyes of Texas” and the introduction of each girl as being from a different Texas hometown, untrue for all except Dyer. She resented these antics because for her Texas was home. As a native Texan, Dyer was shaped by the state in which she was raised. She had worked on her uncle’s ranch in Trickum, Texas, as a youth and learned how to rope, ride, and “work like a man.”184 These and other formative experiences for Dyer meant that Texas was a real part of her identity, not just something she put on at show time. To Hovland, however, Texas was a caricature of a faraway land where everyone wore leather chaps and fired revolvers in dust-filled towns. In other words, Hovland’s Texas was Hollywood’s version of Texas, and as the season progressed, his expectations were increasingly in conflict with Dyer’s Texan identity and desire to play competitive “straight” basketball without the skits.

Some players remembered with reluctance the embarrassment of playing “show basketball” in front of an audience. Pride in one’s hometown and state was not limited to Dolores Dyer. Betty Lou Johnson, in particular, remembered one evening when she played in front of people from her hometown at the Coliseum in Fort Wayne, Indiana. “Practically the whole little town [Edgerton, Ohio] would be here and all my friends, of course, from high school,” Johnson remembered “running out with these guns on and this vest and this cowboy hat, and they [the announcer] said, ‘And here comes Betty Lou Johnson from Galveston, Texas!’ And they all stood up and clapped and laughed. I was a little embarrassed.”185 Johnson also remembered that she did not care for how the girls were played up in the media and that Hovland promoted her as

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from Texas, “when I was from Edgerton, Ohio. I was proud of being from Ohio.” Leeona Evans had a similar reaction when she was announced as being from Texarkana, Texas, when in reality she was from Winthrop, Arkansas. She remembered, “I didn’t like it, but I wanted to play basketball.”

Other players, Dyer in particular, were upset because of the stereotypes that Hovland used to attract audiences. Fifty-eight years later, Dyer still remains frustrated by Hovland’s portrayal of Texas. “I had to go along with it,” Dyer said, “because it was a job. But deep down it was very cheap. A cowgirl, a Texas cowgirl, would not dress like that.” Dyer, in contrast to her teammates, was a Texan both on and off the court. She proudly recalled:

That this Mexican fellow [in Mercedes, Texas] made these boots to fit your foot. Custom made. And my style was Chile Verde. I made the mistake of wearing them up there because the snow just ate them up, just ruined them, and I paid $88 for them. That was a lot of money. But I had the boots, you know, when we were off court, I had the boots on, I had the blue jeans on, I had the belt buckle, Texas belt buckle. I had the western shirt, you know, and I had the Texas swagger. I really did.

The humiliation of the Cowgirls uniform was compounded by Dyer’s growing realization as the season progressed that the skits they were required to perform during their game nights were far worse than the outfits. Capitalizing less on the skill of his players and more on the sexualization of the Texas Cowgirl image, Hovland had the girls perform increasingly more skits and less “straight” basketball. Dyer was humiliated when she learned that one of her teammates

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186 Betty Lou Johnson remembers that, while signing autographs, fans asking her about living in Texas at “King’s” Ranch. She was obviously referring to the King Ranch in South Texas, a place well-known to many Texans, about which Johnson knew nothing. A common refrain among the women was this discomfort with lying about being from Texas, a lie which was perpetuated not only at the games, but in radio and television advertising as well. Ibid.

187 Leeona Evans Overturf, April 29, 2011.

188 In the time of Dyer’s AAU participation, it was customary to award winning teams Western-style belt buckles as trophies. Dyer received one as a player selected for the All-City team, which she regularly wore. Dolores Dyer, May 13, 2011.

189 Ibid.
would always go to the opposing men’s team before the game and ask them not “to go too hard” on them. During the game, Dyer gritted her teeth and watched her teammates perform routines that included waltzing with the opposing team, hanging a cowbell on the men, and jumping in the lap of an opposing player on the bench and refusing to return to play until prodded by the referee. Drawing upon her farm experiences, Dyer, in her own particular skit, roped men in the stands like “calves.” Dyer would form a looped lasso behind her back and lure someone out of the audience. She would rope them, pull them down, and “gently” tie their hands and pull their feet up behind them to complete a “hog tie.” “To be honest,” Dyer said, “This is not what I signed up for. I signed up to play basketball. I didn’t sign up to rope somebody and tie them up like a little calf.”

Even though the skit-basketball style of play bothered Dyer, Hovland’s exhibition was similar to other women’s barnstorming teams. As sports historian Robert Ikard explained, women’s barnstorming basketball teams borrowed their style of play from none other than the Harlem Globetrotters, the original men’s show-basketball team. For example, the All-American Red Heads were “willing to use almost any shtick to amplify the entertainment aspect of their performances….including the Referee Chase and the Old Pinch Act.” In an interview with the long-time owner and coach of the Red Heads, historian Linda Ford wrote in Lady Hoopsters that Coach Orwell Moore admitted that “for women to succeed professionally they must play good basketball and put on a show.” He also related to Ford an anecdote about the Red Heads playing “against a men’s team at a local high school. They had requested no ‘show,’

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190 Highlighting the differences between her new home in the North and Texas, Dolores’ boots were nearly destroyed when she wore them in the snow. Dolores Dyer, May 13, 2011.
191 Ikard, Just for Fun, 25.
192 Ibid., 26.
(‘No-o!’) but straight basketball. So by the third quarter, the Red Heads were leading the men by 16. ‘Then,’ Moore says, they wanted a ‘show’.”

It is important to understand that the men’s basketball rules of the 1950s are not the rules of today’s game. The style of play has changed significantly, as have some of the rules. Moore qualified the differences in an interview with Ford, who had asked him how the Red Heads “beat men’s teams.” One critical rule difference is that in the 1950s there was no shot clock to limit the time of possession of the basketball, so if a team could control the ball, they could control the pace of the game. This highlights the importance of dribbling in the 1950s, when players were able to possess the ball indefinitely. And for the barnstorming women who learned to dribble on dirt courts, making control more difficult, the hard polished gym floor provided an arena in which to highlight their superior ball handling skills that were critical for the 1950s style of play. The game of that time prominently featured set shots, hook shots, drives to the basket, and screen and rolls. To be competitive against men’s teams, outside shooting accuracy was a necessity for the barnstorming women players. Moore related that the Red Heads took advantage of the men’s rule that “after a foul, the team fouled could take one foul shot and then take it out of bounds.” The women perfected an inbounds play that featured a screen and quick set shot that could result in three points from a single foul. This was before the time of the three-point shot and the dunk shot, which was illegal at that time. The women’s traveling teams played together as a cohesive unit almost every night. But, in the end, the women were competitors at heart and

194 Ibid., 103.
195 Ibid., 102.
196 Ibid.
197 Ibid.
198 Ibid.
wanted to win. According to one former Cowgirl, “[A]ny jock is competitive, whether you're a
girl or a boy jock. You know … you can’t just have a friendly game. You’ve got to win and
that’s built into people.”\textsuperscript{199} And it was this competitive nature that was so at odds with the
exhibition style of “show” basketball.

Dyer’s discontent was symptomatic of a growing trend among barnstorming players who
desired to play “straight,” competitive basketball without all of the skits and antics.\textsuperscript{200} Linda
Ford wrote, “Any woman or team playing "straight" all-out basketball in the 50s was really
suspect. Although some did, on the AAU teams and on the Red Heads. That was not really
acceptable, both in the official rules or socially, at least until the 1970s. And not then really.”\textsuperscript{201}

One of the most well-known women’s barnstorming basketball players of the time, Hazel
Walker, exemplified this trend. Walker, disillusioned and frustrated with the style of play on the
All-American Red Heads, founded the Arkansas Travelers in 1949, becoming one of the first
women to own a professional barnstorming basketball team.\textsuperscript{202} Instead of skits, Walker’s team
“had showmanship but still featured basketball – something between the much criticized
masculinity of Babe Didrikson’s various athletic tours and the emphasis on silly sexiness of the
Red Heads.” Eschewing the practice of asking the men to “go easy,” Walker’s team sought a

\textsuperscript{199} Pat Cramer Stessun, October 5, 2011.

\textsuperscript{200} Dolores Dyer would join a list of athletes who battled to “play it straight.” This conflict could be traced
back to Babe Didrikson and others, who found that making a living as a professional athlete included promoters’
schemes that required them to be “sideshow exhibitionists.” Some stunts included a stint on the RKO Vaudeville
circuit, where she sang, played a harmonica, and ran on a treadmill to entertain audiences. This is surely reminiscent
of Jesse Owens’ struggle to pay for his senior year in college after winning the gold in the 1936 Olympics. A
promoter booked him in a race against a horse for the paying public’s viewing entertainment. William Oscar
Johnson and Nancy P. Williamson, “Whatta-Gal”: The Babe Didrikson Story (Boston: Little, Brown and Company,
1977) 118-19; Ford, Lady Hoopsters, 96.

\textsuperscript{201} Linda Ford, April 22, 2012.

\textsuperscript{202} Helen Stevens was the first woman on record to own a women’s barnstorming basketball team. Stevens
met with Abe Saperstein, owner and manager of the “all-Negro” Harlem Globetrotters, to discuss the possibility of
an all-girl team playing men’s team, a virtual “battle of the sexes” on the basketball court. Hanson, The Life of Helen
Stephens, 159.
more competitive game. In an interview with the Arkansas’ *Little River News*, Walker said that “the thing that bothered me about the Red Heads was that they wanted a setup. They didn’t want the men to fast break and they didn’t want the referees to call fouls too closely on us. That stuff bothered me. I didn’t like it.” As a result, Walker reworked the skits to make them more about skill and less about skirts. During the half time shows, in contrast to the carnival-like atmosphere of the Texas Cowgirls, Walker would wow the audience with a free-throw demonstration, where she would make shots “consistently while standing, kneeling, or sitting down.” This is the level of professionalism that Dyer first encountered when she saw the Arkansas Travelers play, which influenced her expectations about the Texas Cowgirls.

Initially, Dyer was excited about the prospects of professional basketball – the freedom of travel, the promise of a regular paycheck, the camaraderie with the other players – but the excitement soon gave way to the realities of the barnstorming lifestyle. Every day, the seven team members, plus “The Portly,” as one of the players called Hovland, crammed themselves and their gear and luggage into a 1946 Ford station wagon and drove several hundred miles a day to their next competition. The six month season included games that required travel from Nova Scotia all the way to Washington State, playing throughout the Maritime Provinces of Canada and as far down south as Pennsylvania. They were required to play seven nights a week and

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204 Ikard, 28.

205 Dyer remembered that in the beginning she was “very, very excited the first two or three weeks and we were probably in 10 or 12 different cities and probably a couple of states by then and I would write home and be very excited about it.” Dolores Dyer, December 3, 2011.

206 Pat Cramer Stessun, October 5, 2011.

207 Leeona Evans Overturf, log of hotel locations from 1953-1954 season.
sometimes twice on Sundays, which resulted in extreme exhaustion for the women.\textsuperscript{208} This constant travel and play quickly began to wear on the players, especially Dyer, who was the designated driver.\textsuperscript{209} For a Texas girl who had never driven in ice and snow, the travel through the Northeast and into Canada and Nova Scotia during the dead of winter was especially harrowing.\textsuperscript{210} Leeona Evans Overturf, when asked about dents in their station wagon that were evident from a photograph, said that she thought that another vehicle had slid into them while on the road. She remembered Dyer driving in those icy conditions, where “we were in the snow blowing. You couldn’t even see the highway.”\textsuperscript{211}

Dyer kept the details of her difficulties on the road from her letters home to her parents. They had not been too keen on her leaving home and traveling all over the country to play basketball, but ultimately supported her decision.\textsuperscript{212} Many of the young women, ranging in age from roughly eighteen to twenty-one, had never traveled far from home and some began to get homesick. As long distance telephone calls were too expensive, the girls relied upon letters to

\textsuperscript{208} The grueling nature of the travel and play schedule was verified by every Texas Cowgirl interviewed. Betty Lou Johnson, May 23, 2011; Linda Yearby, July 23, 2011; Dolores Dyer, May 13, 2011. Joan Rupp, who joined the Cowgirls after Dyer left and who played from 1954-1960, recalled the schedule being “very strenuous” and that the women were “worse than pooped out.” She also stated that “there was one city back East [Philadelphia] and we were told we could go there [and get] pep pills we did that and they did help us and they made us feel better” and “a lot of us needed them.” Joan Rupp, August 14, 2011.

\textsuperscript{209} Although records were unavailable to pinpoint exact start and finish dates for the 1953-1954 season, Joan Rupp kept detailed records of the six seasons she played with the Texas Cowgirls. For those years, the season lasted about six months, generally starting in October or November and ending in April. Joan Rupp, records of game wins and losses from 1954-1960.

\textsuperscript{210} Pat Cramer Stessun, who remembered the icy conditions and Dyer driving, said that “when we got up into Maine and Vermont those windy roads and she’d be going wheee, wheeee, and we’d all be scrunched down in our seats.” Pat Cramer Stessun, Oct. 5, 2011.

\textsuperscript{211} Leeona Evans Overturf, April 29, 2011.

\textsuperscript{212} Dolores Dyer, May 13, 2011.
receive news from home. Leeona Evans remembered that “some of the girls would cry” when they arrived at their hotel and found they had received no letter from home.213

The exhaustion from travel and continuous play was compounded by the physical toll from playing men’s teams, particularly the Canadian teams.214 Dyer played the post position under the basket, which put her in very close and constant proximity to her male opponents. As a post player, as opposed to a point guard, she was constantly engaged in physical contact as she fought for position on the court. Some men, as they pushed and jockeyed for position, would hurl insults at Dyer as well as throw their elbows.215 Each of the Cowgirls handled the roughness of the male players in her own way.216 Dyer remembered that, upon out scoring a men’s team, “the guys that were high school hot shots … and … their ego was taking a beating and they weren’t to have that.” And that she would “get hit in the ribs with an elbow” and that, eventually, she “start[ed] retaliating.”217 Pat Cramer Stessun said that she flirted with the men to try and “balance out” the disparities “otherwise the men would just run all over us because they were just too big and too fast.” When asked if Betty Herrmann, the team’s star player, flirted on the court, Stessun replied, “no, she didn’t have to [flirt] because she was very very good.”218

As the year continued, the barnstorming lifestyle began to take its toll on Dyer. As revealed through correspondence sent home to her family, Dyer’s initial optimism began to fade

213 Leeona Evans Overturf, April 15, 2011.
215 Dolores gained nearly twenty pounds to compete with men in the post position. Ibid.
216 Barbara Leggette remembered that “men resented us playing at all, so it would burn the men up when we beat them.” One male player “kept trying to get fresh with me every time I brought the ball down the court. It really hacked me off. So I reared back and slapped the hell out of him. That guy didn’t know who he was messing with.” Watkins, “The Crowds Were Hooked.” Leggette also related that the player was “getting fresh” by trying to pinch Leggette on the breast. Barbara Leggette, August 28, 2011.
217 Ibid.
218 Pat Cramer Stessun, October 5, 2011.
due to physical and mental stresses that she suffered as a result of the lifestyle. In a letter from Nova Scotia dated October 11, 1953, Dyer wrote: “Howdy – Gee Pebby [Edwin Dyer] I’m sure sorry about the money but Demp [Hovland] didn’t have it to give to me so he only let me have ten. I was saving my ‘lunch’ money so it’s a darn good thing. Here’s another ten, its Canadian money, hope you can get it exchanged.”

The physical and mental stresses experienced by Dyer and the other players may have been bearable if Hovland had paid his players regularly. The $125 per week he promised Dyer rarely materialized. By November 3, Dyer’s frustration was evident in correspondence home. In a postcard to her parents from Erie, Pennsylvania, Dyer wrote: “Here we are in Erie. Hope to make lots of $ - ha! Audry Williams [the wife of the late Hank Williams] flew up for a show and she’ll take 1/2 the gate. Things are pretty rough here. But maybe things will pick up here. I certainly hope so.”

In a postcard from Great Falls, Montana dated December 16, 1953, Dyer wrote to her parents:

Well here me [I] am again, same old story. But now what – car was stolen! So we [are using a] bus now! Will write you about it later. I don’t think car was stolen as we can’t believe anything. Hope it all turns out alright. I’m O.K., so don’t worry please. My love – Sis.

In another postcard dated January 4, 1954, this one from Sandpoint, Idaho, Dyer wrote to her parents:

Hi. Well I’m still here for awhile any way. Lots of snow now. Across the bay is Washington. I didn’t call New Years because I’m saving my money. It costs 49. [cents] to go [call] home from here and only have 30.[cents] so I’ll stick it out [a]while longer.

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220 Dolores Dyer to Mr. & Mrs. O.D. Dyer, Erie, PA, postmarked Nov 3, 1953.
221 Dolores Dyer to Mr. & Mrs. O.D. Dyer, Great Falls, MT, postmarked December 16, 1953.
Don’t worry. Lots of love, Sis.222

Per their contract with Hovland, the girls expected to be compensated through gate receipts or the total ticket sales. However, for a variety of reasons, the money never made it from the front of the house to the girls on the team. Dyer remembers with derision when Hovland hired Audry Williams to play during the half time show. “Dempsey, all of a sudden announced that we were going to have some different halftime entertainment,” Dyer said, “He had hired Audry Williams and her band for halftime. And I know that probably Leeona [Evans] and I looked at each other and said, ‘There goes our salary.’ We didn’t make enough to pay us, much less somebody like that.”223

At first, the girls were confused by the lack of revenue from gate receipts. Audry Williams would perform at half-time and would “take half the gate.”224 This may have been one reason that the players were not being paid what they had been promised in their respective contracts. It would have been one thing if the turnout for the performances was low, but the opposite often proved to be the case. In a postcard from Pocatello, Idaho dated January 10, 1954, Dyer wrote to her parents that “Been having good crowds but still not caught up on the dough [money].”225 The Cowgirls often played in major venues, including New York’s venerable Madison Square Garden. They even opened for NBA teams, meeting some of

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222 Dolores Dyer to Mr. & Mrs. O.D. Dyer, Sandpoint, ID, postmarked January 4, 1954.

223 In an interesting aside, Dyer remembered Audry Williams, who was the wife of the then-recently deceased Hank Williams, Sr., arrived in “a big ole car like a Lincoln” and would come into the dressing room to put on makeup and fix her hair but “never talked to us.” Dyer remembered that Audry Williams “would put on the show and leave and never said ‘boo’ or ‘how are you girls’ or anything to us. Except when two or three different times she didn’t have anybody to watch Bocephus [Hank Williams, Jr.] so we had to watch him, which was fine. And then she spoke to us.” Evans-Overturf stated that Mrs. Williams “didn’t last long because we [Texas Cowgirls] didn’t make enough money for her.” Dolores Dyer, December 3, 2011. Leeona Evans Overturf, April 15, 2011.

224 Dolores Dyer to Mr. & Mrs. O.D. Dyer, Erie, PA, postmarked Nov 3, 1953.

225 Dolores Dyer to Mr. & Mrs. O.D. Dyer, Pocatello, ID, postmarked January 10, 1954.
basketball’s most famous players of that era, including George Mikan and Bob Cousy. In addition, the team was sponsored by a number of companies, including Levi Strauss, Acme Boots, and Converse. Given all of these revenue streams, it seemed incomprehensible to the girls that Hovland always seemed unable to make his promised salary payments to his players.

Even at the time, Dyer found Hovland’s excuses for his failure to pay his players to be unpersuasive. She recalled, “There was always some excuse about the car or the motel charging more than what it was supposed to. It was always some excuse.” She described her irregular pay in terms of thirds: one third of the time she was paid in full, one third of the time she was paid some, but one third of the time she was not paid at all. To make things worse, there were signs of greater money problems aside from the lack of gate receipt revenue. Dyer remembers vividly one instance when spending started to take a bizarre turn:

All of a sudden [Hovland] shows up with these red jackets, kind of velvet/velour type and we [the Cowgirls] thought ‘Oh my God, you know.’ And then our second thought was and I speak mainly I guess for the group because it just kind of went around with the eye contact, you know, ‘who’s gonna pay for those?’ You know, do we have to pay for those? Well I don’t know how he got the jackets; he gave them to us.

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226 The girls met George Mikan after playing the Syracuse Nationals in a preliminary game in Syracuse, New York. (Cleghorn, 4.) Evans, Dyer and Johnson commented that this was one of their highlights of their time with the Cowgirls, since all three admired Cousy and Mikan. Johnson specifically remembered that Bob Cousy helped her with a fancy dribbling routine. Dolores Dyer, May 13, 2011, Betty Lou Johnson, May 23, 2011., Pat Cramer Stessun, October 5, 2011.

227 “Tour Schedule,” from Leeona Evans Overturf’s personal collection. The women traveled exclusively in the north, because there, women's basketball was a novelty. The Texas Cowgirls could draw bigger crowds in rural, northern towns where basketball was viewed as an exciting import and didn’t have to compete with other types of entertainment. Additionally, the Cowgirls played in the Madison Square Garden on Christmas day. “Knicks to Battle for Lead Tonight,” *New York Times*, December 25, 1952. *Basketball Official Souvenir Program*, Leeona Evans Overturf’s personal collection. The sponsorship by Levi Strauss was confirmed by Lynn Downey, Levi’s official brand historian. Lynn Downey, May 31, 2011.


229 Ibid.

230 Ibid.
The outstanding bills and lack of food and gas money were just a small piece of what turned out to be much more serious financial problems that became evident during the final weeks of the Cowgirls’ season. Teammates remembered money becoming increasingly scarce. Evans Overturf said, “I knew something was wrong. Dempsey was not a good businessman.” She also stated that he is “not a good manager because half the time we didn’t have anything” and that “he was a shrewd guy.” Dyer remembered not having enough money for basic necessities, like food. And when the team was treated to a meal, Dyer recalled “we ate like piggies because we didn’t know where the next one was going to be [and if it would be] a hotdog and a soda or what.”

Pat Cramer Stessun remembered running out of gas “many a time.” She recalled that the women, after running out of gas, would “just try to get somebody to help us.” And Dyer’s suspicions about the financial stability of the organization increased when one night she was asked to pay for a flat tire. She said, “He [Hovland] didn’t have enough money for a new tire and a couple of us had to go up top [station wagon luggage rack] and get our make-up kits down and get five or ten dollars out to buy a new tire.” It was then that Dyer began to realize that it was highly unlikely that she would ever be paid. But the players were not the only ones that Hovland failed to pay.

232 Ibid.
234 Pat Cramer Stessun, October 5, 2011.
235 Ibid.
237 Linda Yearby, who played with the Texas Cowgirls in the late 1950s-1960’s, recalled Hovland not paying the players. She recalled, “I remember Christmas we was playing in Richmond, Virginia, or went into Richmond, and I know that we didn’t have hardly any money. There was no money. And my brother-in-law and
The source of the money to pay for the red velvet jackets had remained a mystery until a promoter wrote to Florence Holder and Leeona Evans shortly after the Texas Cowgirls broke up.238 Russ R. Anderson, the manager of Bismarck Olympics and a former teammate of Hovland’s on the 1941-1942 House of David team who contracted with Hovland for promotional services, wrote in a letter dated January 28, 1954, that “Demp still owes me [$88] for the jackets.”239 Anderson also wrote that Hovland “hasn’t paid me for the games that I booked [for the Cowgirls] since you left Bismarck [North Dakota] the last time… I have a $150 telephone bill for games I booked.” Anderson also wrote:

If you girls feel free to tell me just what happened I would appreciate it very much – he told me someone locked up his car so he couldn’t move. Said he owed $425.00 on it and didn’t have the dough to pay it off. Then an A.P. story came through to the effect he owed Mariana [booking agent] for booking and Mariana was after him so really I’m in the dark on the whole thing. So if you gals could help me get my bearings on this so I no [sic] what to do I sure would appreciate it.

The Associated Press article to which Anderson referred, titled “Cowgirls Face Court Action,” was published in January 22, 1954, on the front page of The Daily Inter Lake in Kalispell, Montana:

Members of the Texas Cowgirls basketball team who played in Kalispell last night in a benefit games for the March of Dimes got bad news during half time. A writ of attachment was served on Dempsey Hovland, team manager, tying up their share of ticket proceeds, about $500. The writ was filed Wednesday in Missoula District Court by Attorney Edward T. Dussault for Nick Mariana … Mariana brought suit to recover $351.89 which he alleged was due him as subagent in booking the Cowgirls at sport attractions in Montana during December. He alleged that he was to receive 10 per cent

238 This occurred after Dyer had already left the team.

commission on one-half of proceeds of such attractions and that he had received no part of his commission although he was to be paid after each performance. ²⁴⁰

The article also mentioned fifteen towns where Mariana had booked the Cowgirls for which he was never paid. ²⁴¹ Anderson also wrote in his letter to Holder and Evans that he had tried but had been unable to get in touch with Hovland. In it, he expressed his opinion that he thought Hovland “could have had more respect for you girls. From what I was able to observe … he had you gals so confused the way he carried on that you hardly knew what to expect next.” ²⁴²

After finally realizing that she likely would never get paid, Dyer’s instinct to cut ties with the team and return home proved to be a good one. Her dream of saving money to finish college by playing professional basketball dissolved. Frustrated and jaded, she began to see her original goal as a naïve “fairyland.” In January 1953, less than a year after she started playing with the Texas Cowgirls, she confronted Hovland. “We weren’t getting paid enough or at all,” Dyer said, remembering when she left, “so I just felt like we were really being exploited. I just told the girls [that I was leaving] first and then I told him [Hovland]…‘I’m ready to go home, I’ve had enough. This is not what I thought it would be and I’m tired of playing every night for nothing and it’s time for me to go home and go back to college.’” ²⁴³ Pat Cramer Stessun remembered about Dyer that “she was a Texan and they stand up for themselves.” ²⁴⁴ Dyer recalled that “he [Hovland] was pretty upset.” ²⁴⁵ She said he made “more promises” but that she had made up her mind and was leaving. Edwin Dyer remembered the Sunday morning she called:

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²⁴⁰ “Cowgirls Face Court Action,” The Daily Inter Lake (Kalispell, MT), January 22, 1954.
²⁴¹ Ibid.
²⁴⁴ Pat Cramer Stessun, October 5, 2011.
She was in Billings, Montana, I think it was, and it was 30 degrees below zero. She’s about to freeze to death, and that old boy that run the team was already cheating them out of their money. So she decided she’d enjoyed about as much as she could stand. She wanted to come home, but he owed her two or three week’s salary, but all he was giving them was subsistence pay to pay for their meals. …she said, “I want to come home.”

Edwin Dyer wired Dolores Dyer some money since she did not have enough to get back home. That night, she walked to the bus stop in Pocatello, Idaho, and bought a ticket back to Texas. Dyer only told her brother she was coming home, not her parents. When asked if her parents would have been worried or aggravated, Dyer responded “maybe so” and that she “kind of had the feeling, a little guilt feeling that maybe I was a failure.”

After Dyer said her “goodbyes” to her teammates, with whom she had become quite close after such a grueling season spent together, she never came in contact with them again. And soon after Dyer left, the entire Cowgirls team broke up. Although the women interviewed were reluctant to speak of the break up, there seemed to be a mixture of fear and embarrassment about what transpired after Dyer left the team. Stessun and Johnson both stated that the sudden appearance of suspicious men carrying guns made them uncomfortable. Stessun remembered that after the arrival of the armed men, Betty Herrmann and her husband, Arnie, left for good in the

247 On the bus back to Texas, Dyer was sort of a celebrity—not as a basketball player, but as a Texan. “The funny thing is about it, I left from Pocatello, Idaho, on the bus and the driver told me at our first stop, he said ‘You’re going to change buses in Colorado Springs and the bus leaving there will wait for you about 20 or 30 minutes. They’re anxious to see a Texas Cowgirl.’ And I said ‘What?’ And he kind of grinned and he said ‘Yeah, they’re going to hold the bus for you in Colorado Springs.’ And I said ‘Really?’ And he said ‘Oh yes I just told ya!’ or something like that you know. Fortunately I was Texas-duded out because I didn’t want to pack, my little suitcase didn’t hold everything that I had and so anyway I looked like a Texan and sure enough when we got to Colorado Springs, I got off the bus and got my little suitcase and makeup kit. Bus driver came out of the terminal and he said ‘Miss Dyer?’ I said ‘Miss Dyer?’ And I said, ‘Yes sir.’ He said, ‘We’ve been waiting for you!’ And there were 5 or 6 people at the window on the bus just clapping like that. He said, ‘We’ve been waiting for the Texas Cowgirl, let’s go home!’ I said, ‘I’m ready!’” Ironically, Dyer had the respect and admiration of her fellow travelers in a way that had been denied her during her career as a stereotype of a Texan. Dolores Dyer, May 13, 2011.

249 Ibid.
middle of the night. Betty Lou Johnson admitted that her worst memory of her time with the Texas Cowgirls was when she was afraid to tell Hovland she was quitting the team. She said her motivation for leaving was that, in spite of “good crowd[s],” “we did not get paid on time and all of a sudden somebody was stealing our cars and we would have a different car and a chauffeur [armed men] picking us up to take us to our next ball game and I wasn’t making any money.”

Johnson’s mother wired travel money to Johnson, which she in turn used to buy bus tickets for her remaining teammates who did not have the money to leave. Johnson recalled being so scared to leave the team, particularly given the circumstances, that she “called the police department because … we were all scared. And we got police protection all the way.” Evans Overturf was reluctant to discuss her departure with any specificity. Florence Holder and Evans Overturf would return to play for the Cowgirls the next season. When the other teammates heard during their respective interviews that Holder and Evans Overturf had returned to play again, each

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250 Pat Cramer Stessun, somewhat confused by the presence of armed men, said her reaction was “oh, my goodness, what’s this, you know? But for Betty Herrmann, coming from New York, and I guess knowing what they were [“hoods” or “the mob”], it scared the bejeebers out of her and that’s when she left. Just overnight, her and Arnie packed up and we never heard from them again.” Patricia Cramer Stessun, October 5, 2011.

251 Betty Lou Johnson further related that, rather than just leaving alone, she “got all of the girls together and we all talked about it and we thought it was very strange that all of a sudden we were having all these different cars picking us up and we thought it was very strange why we weren’t making any money because we always had a good crowd, but all of a sudden, we weren’t making any money.” One teammate’s response to the idea of leaving highlights the women’s youth and naiveté: “And so [Johnson] said, ‘Well, I’m for us getting together and hanging together and just leave.’ Oh, we were all scared. They said, ‘Oh, can we do that?’” Betty Lou Johnson, May 23, 2011.

252 Ibid.

253 Existing correspondence from Leeona Evans Overturf’s collection indicated that Evans and Holder were in contact with Hazel Walker before returning to the Texas Cowgirls for the 1954 season in an attempt to join the Arkansas Travelers. Walker wrote in a letter to Evans that she was “sorry that the Texas Cow Girls did not pan out as you had hoped or thought. They just have no organization and I’m not surprised at it turning out the way it did but it is unfortunate for girls like yourself (sic) to be disappointed. What I tell my ball players, I do exactly that and never promise one thing I don’t do.” Hazel Walker to Leeona Evans, Trinidad, CO, April 27, 1954. By June 2, 1954, in a letter from Hazel Walker to Leeona Evans, she stated “Had letter from Florence Holder – what kind of player is she and is she only 5 feet 1 – you all must had (sic) a mighty short ball team with those cowgirls.” Hazel Walker to Leeona Evans, Little Rock, AR, June 2, 1954.

254 Leeona Evans Overturf, April 15, 2011.
expressed disbelief. Aside from Holder and Evans Overturf, none of the Texas Cowgirls from the original 1953 team who were interviewed ever spoke again after playing that season.255 While the identity and purpose of the armed men is unknown, it would be speculation to define their role.

Thus, frustrated and demoralized after her experience with the Texas Cowgirls failed to materialize into her original dream, Dyer returned home poorer than when she left. Added to this disappointment, she was worried that her parents would see her as a failure and be ashamed of her. However, this fear proved to be completely unfounded—Dyer said that she and her parents never discussed why she came home, several years later she learned that her parents had been very proud of her throughout the entire journey; in her absence, her parents showed her pictures to customers in their cafe, telling them about their daughter who was “up north playing professional basketball.”256

Dyer’s time playing with the Texas Cowgirls did not earn her enough money to attend college and get the degree she needed to become a coach, but it did leave her with unexpected benefits that would prove essential to her in the future as an athlete and a well-rounded individual. Dyer recalled that she “didn’t learn so much about basketball; there was no coaching whatsoever. We just went on the court and played.”257 However, she did learn a lot about people, and the experience of playing on the Texas Cowgirl’s helped shape and reinforce her understanding of what it meant to be a person of character and integrity.

Thus, Dyer’s brief excursion north was a formative experience. Even after the setback, Dyer never lost hope that she would one day achieve her American dream and become a coach.

257 Ibid.
She also never lost sight of the fact that “[she] had to have a degree before anything [could] happen, before anything could go forward.” If anything, her time as a Cowgirl made her more resilient; if playing professional basketball with the Cowgirls was not going to pay her way through college, she would find something that would. The lyrics of her own American dream were changing and adapting, but the song and the dream remained the same.
CHAPTER 4
DYER RETURNS HOME: A MEASURE OF SUCCESS

After a few weeks of being back home in Texas, Dyer was contacted by an old friend, Janie Sheppard, asking if she would be interested in playing softball for the Fort Worth Motorettes, an AAU team sponsored by Tandy Leather.258 Excited to have an opportunity to play again and eager to be a part of an elite team, Dyer went to San Antonio’s Superintendent of the City Recreation Department, American Athletic Union (AAU), TAAF Board of Directors member and former employer, Lou Hamilton, to find out how and when she could be reinstated as an amateur to play softball and basketball.259 “She sat me down in her office and made me tell her what happened,” Dyer said, “I was $105 in the hole and I [had] thought I was going to get half way rich.”260 The distinction between amateur and professional athletics was a fine one, and Dyer had returned home in debt because the professional organization, the Texas Cowgirls, did not fulfill its contractual obligation. Because of Dyer’s situation, Hamilton promised to “take care of it” and Dyer was reinstated to play softball without missing a season.261 “Yes, it meant a

258 Sheppard was the catcher and manager for the Motorettes during this time. Dolores Dyer, May 2, 2012.
259 During the summer between her junior and senior year of high school Dyer was hired by Hamilton to work for the Recreation Department filling equipment requests for playgrounds. Dyer worked for Hamilton and the Recreation Department many times, teaching swimming, summer school, or working on the playgrounds. Ibid.
261 About the same time that Dyer was reinstated, her childhood playmate, Alva Jo Fischer, was also seeking to be reinstated and regain her amateur status after playing as a pitcher for the Rockford, Illinois, team in the All American Girls Baseball League in 1945 and helping them win the championship. Dyer explained that because Fischer had “made pretty good money” playing professional ball, she had to wait a couple years before being reinstated to play softball again in San Antonio. “Of course Fischer was probably the number three pitcher in the State of Texas and she didn’t like that too well because here I was reinstated right away,” said Dyer. In fact, Fischer was “furious.” Dolores Dyer, June 2, 2012.

Fischer’s exceptional baseball talents were apparent early on. At eleven years old she was playing on adult teams, and before her twelfth birthday she was “drafted by the Grand Rapids Furniture Company to play first base in the state championship tournament in Harlingen.” Dyer recalled “Alva’s sport ability really amazed me. She could play every softball position and made money off her pool playing ability!” As children, Fischer and Dyer lived six blocks apart and played baseball with their brothers. They also played on the same rec teams for many years—Dyer was a star hitter, while Fischer pitched. Fischer went on to establish an after-school sports program for children.
lot to me,” said Dyer.\textsuperscript{262} She played with the Fort Worth Motorettes in 1954 and 1955, hitting .917 in one tournament, and maintaining the best batting average in the league both seasons. 

Dyer recalled that after becoming part of the Motorettes, “I got my swagger back real quick!”\textsuperscript{263} Playing softball in the Texas Amateur Athletic Union was a welcome change after six months as a Texas Cowgirl. Dyer was relieved to return to playing true competitive sports and was content with the sponsorship offered by the various companies involved in the AAU. By playing for several different sponsors, Dyer was aware of the inconsistencies among them.

Before she left to play with the Texas Cowgirls, Dyer had played for the Thompson Motor Mercuryettes from 1949-1950; “the best times,” as Dyer recalled. The Mercuryettes were transported in nice cars, played in other cities, stayed in hotels or motels when traveling, and ate in nice restaurants, “which I’d never experienced before,” said Dyer. Instead of the cheap costumes Dyer had worn as a Cowgirl, the Thompson Motor Mercuryettes were issued “the best, classy uniforms,” (two sets of everything), “even shoe black and white.”\textsuperscript{264} The Thompsons took pride in the team and enjoyed going to the games. This appreciation and pride cultivated a mutual respect between them and the team, and the girls did not mind when they had to “dress nice—no tee shirts or shorts—when Mr. and Mrs. T” were around.\textsuperscript{265} Dyer recalled the Thompson’s sponsorship, saying, “We respected them and were thankful for their sponsorship.”\textsuperscript{266}

\textsuperscript{262} Dolores Dyer, May 2, 2012.
\textsuperscript{263} Dolores Dyer, April 25, 2012.
\textsuperscript{264} Dolores Dyer, March 8, 2012.
\textsuperscript{265} Dolores Dyer, March 8, 2012.
\textsuperscript{266} Ibid.
In contrast, when Dyer played for Kaufman’s Clothiers in 1952, a western clothing store, the players had fewer privileges. “What a difference,” said Dyer about the new sponsor. “They bought us one set of uniforms and paid for entry fees to Recreational League and tournaments, but that’s all—no food, gas, or motels.”267 She also played for the Pepsi-Cola Girls, a team sponsored by Jody McCauley, a “character” who played in the minor leagues in his younger days. McCauley had sponsored softball and basketball teams for many years and Dyer said he was “a good guy, an OK sponsor, but stingy,” often feeding the girls ham and cheese sandwiches from the trunk of his car instead of stopping at cafés. He did, of course, always have cases of sodas for the team. Most of the teams McCauley sponsored were talented and they often won city championships. Dyer enjoyed playing for him because he wanted to win and was passionate about the game. Dyer remembered that “when the catcher, Dotty Rich, and I were the ‘older players’ we had to stop Jody several times from going after an umpire.”268 Of all the teams and sponsors for which Dyer played, she spoke most highly about the Thompson Motor Mercuryettes and the Fort Worth Motorettes.269

When not playing softball in 1954-1955, Dyer lived in Fort Worth and worked at the Universal Window Company in Dallas. Every day Dyer woke up at 4:30 a.m., ate breakfast at the same little café at 5:10, and went to work at 6:00 a.m., where she was paid $3.45 an hour to weld aluminum windows. Dyer wrote fondly about this time in her life. The Fort Worth Motorettes and her co-workers at Universal Window provided an encouraging support system she had not known outside of her own family. In fact, the men’s softball team sponsored by Universal Window “embraced [her] like a player,” and in 1954 and 1955 when Dyer went to the

267 Ibid.
268 Ibid.
World Championship with the Fort Worth Motorettes, her co-workers took up a collection ($100 and $150, “a lot at that time”) to help her with expenses.\(^{270}\) In 1954 and 1955 the World Championship, known today as the Nationals Championship, was held in Orange County, CA, and Seattle, WA, respectively. Playing in the World Championship with such talented teammates and opponents was an honor for Dyer, but what she remembered more clearly than the scores and rankings were the people with whom she formed friendships. Dyer had this to say upon reflecting back on this time in her life:

> I know we came out seventh in ’54 (’55). Don’t remember the next year—we had good pitchers. I do remember we couldn’t wait to get back to the dorms.\(^{271}\) We would all go down to the laundry room at night because the team from New Orleans brought their odd music instruments and played and sang all these great “Cajun” New Orleans songs. That was a blast. If we got there after 10 pm there was nowhere to sit, we had to sit on the floor in the hall outside, but it was worth it. Great time—‘till they got beat out and went home.\(^{272}\)

Looking back on her days as a Motorette, Dyer stated that her training and experience with the team taught her a lot about the need to instill confidence in her students and players. “That’s where I got the saying, ‘Walk in like you own the joint,’ because the Motorettes walked in the park and everybody looked.”\(^{273}\) Dyer did not value arrogance, but she never forgot the fact that the confidence needed to compete came not only from being skilled, but also by carrying oneself with dignity and class.\(^{274}\)

\(^{270}\)Dolores Dyer, May 2, 2012.

\(^{271}\) The teams stayed in the dorms at Lewis & Clark College during the championship.


\(^{274}\) The Motorettes commanded so much respect that when they were running late for the national championship opening ceremony in Orange County California, the coach called the local police and explained their situation. The police sent the Motorettes an escort who guided the team all the way to the gates of the ballpark. Ibid.
After playing for the Motorettes and working at Universal Windows from spring of 1954 to spring of 1956, Dyer saved enough money to return to college and pursue the dream of completing her education. She enrolled at Incarnate Word College, a Catholic school founded in San Antonio, Texas, by the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word (hereafter referred to as the Incarnate Word Sisters).275 “It was the cheapest college in town,” Dyer said, “but it was a prestigious college,” so she enrolled even though she was Baptist. Included in her course load were classes in physical education, biology, and special education. The administration of Incarnate Word recognized Dyer’s athletic talent and offered her a coaching position at their high school, which was located nearby. “They probably already knew I was a Baptist from my first semester,” Dyer recalled, but they did not care—they wanted someone who could coach.276 The Incarnate Word Sisters took a special interest in Dyer, attending many of the volleyball and basketball games that she coached. Prior to Dyer’s employment at Incarnate Word, the athletic department had no exposure to a coach who possessed any significant amount of experience, much less the level of expertise that Dyer brought to the program. Thus, Dyer’s competitive level of coaching generated a significant amount of excitement on the part of the Sisters. Dyer’s older brother, Edwin, recalled one particular basketball game at a school in Austin with whom the Incarnate Word Sisters had a “natural rivalry.”277 Appealing to Dyer they asked, “Can we just win that game at Austin? They beat us every year.” Several of the Sisters traveled to Austin with

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Dyer and her team in order to watch the game, and when Dyer’s coaching led to a win, the Sisters were ecstatic. “From that day on,” Edwin said, “she was their hero.”\textsuperscript{278} Once again, the relationships Dyer formed with her peers, students, and players were worth just as much as winning any game. “I loved it,” Dyer recalled, “I really did. [The parents] would send their daughters up to Incarnate Word to be educated, to be refined—but I turned them into little champions.”\textsuperscript{279}

Dyer’s athletic talent translated seamlessly into coaching. She was able to obtain the skills necessary to understand and play sports with which she had no previous experience and, moreover, she was able to instruct her players in these unfamiliar sports in a way that was both intuitive and effective. Dyer explained her method of coaching as walking through moves and skills—sometimes as much for her own benefit as for her players.\textsuperscript{280} Always insisting that she had no precise coaching philosophy, Dyer’s method was practical and hands on, she learned from watching other coaches and her own experience as a player. “I think she looked at sports from a player’s viewpoint and a coach’s viewpoint at the same time,” said her older brother, Edwin. “She just had a way, [and] her players always looked up to her.”\textsuperscript{281} On one specific occasion, Dyer’s resourcefulness emerged in a particularly notable way. In the fall, when she was a junior at Incarnate Word College, physical education majors were assigned to coach and play a sport—field hockey—with which they were not familiar. Dyer’s blue field hockey team was matched against the red team, whose captain was a senior. Dyer’s solution was to “march up

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item Ibid. Before the enactment of Title IX in 1972, it was not uncommon for mothers to drive their daughters and their teams to games, as transportation was not provided for many women’s athletic programs.
\item Dolores Dyer, May 10, 2012
\item Dolores Dyer, April 25, 2012.
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to the dorm and get all these northern boarders [who] already knew how to play field hockey. So, old smart-aleck me, I had a ready-made team."

In May 1958, Dyer graduated from Incarnate Word College with a degree in physical education and valuable coaching experience from her time at Incarnate Word High School. The achievement was a milestone not only for Dyer, but for her entire family, as she was the first Dyer to graduate from college. A major step towards developing a coaching career was finally completed. However, the celebrations and joy were cut short when her father passed away. The death of her father was extremely difficult for Dyer, and following his death she devoted her time to applying for jobs, hoping to leave San Antonio and put distance between herself and the recent loss.

She began her job search by submitting applications to Northside High School, Northeast High School, and San Antonio High School. There were no openings at San Antonio High School, so Dyer considered Northside and Northeast, visiting their school campuses and touring the facilities that would potentially become her new work environment. The visits proved disappointing to Dyer, who could not imagine being employed at either of the schools. Walking around Northeast’s facilities did not generate any excitement or inspiration for Dyer; instead, she was reminded that girls not only received less encouragement when it came to athletics, but they

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also received less money and fewer resources.\footnote{Dyer toured the facilities in 1958, and it was not until 1972 that Title IX of the Education Amendments Act was signed into law by President Nixon, “prohibit[ing] discrimination on the basis of sex for all educational programs or activities that receive funding from the federal government.” Sarah Kwak, “Title IX Timeline,” \textit{Sports Illustrated}, May 7, 2012.} The girls Dyer would teach or coach, like the young girls at many other junior highs, high schools, and colleges, would have to cope with a lack of quality coaches, sports facilities, weight rooms, athletic scholarships, and competition if they hoped to pursue sports, whether as a career, an extracurricular activity, or simply a class in school.\footnote{Cahn, Susan and Jean O'Reilly, “Title IX Media Helper, Woman and Sports in the United States,” Women’s Sports Foundation (Northeastern University Press: Boston, 2007) 338.} Just as Northeast’s athletic facilities were disappointing, Northside’s campus also fell short of Dyer’s expectations.\footnote{These assessments are according to Dyer, who was reluctant to settle for anything below her expectations. However, prior to Title IX it was not uncommon for women to have substandard facilities for athletic competition.} Dyer described the girls’ locker room at Northside as a “big restroom,” made up of multiple shower stalls, mirrors, and benches for the girls to do their hair and makeup. In addition, the girls’ gym was more like a “cafetorium.”\footnote{Dolores Dyer, June 10, 2011.} Conversely, the boys had a big gym and better facilities. Dyer was concerned about the kinds of athletics that would be possible in Northside’s space: “Where do we shoot? Where’s the volleyball net going to be? We’re not just going to sit at these tables and play dominos. I was thinking ahead.”\footnote{Ibid. According to the Women’s Sports Foundation, “In 1971 fewer than 295,000 girls participated in high school varsity athletics, accounting for just 7 percent of all high school varsity athletes.” Studies revealed similar statistics at the collegiate level, with fewer than 30,000 females competing in intercollegiate athletics. “Low participation rates reflected the lack in institutional commitment to providing athletics programming for women. Before Title IX, female college athletes received only 2 percent of overall athletic budgets, and athletic scholarships for women were virtually nonexistent.” Cahn and O'Reilly, “Title IX Media Helper,” 338.}

Before Dyer decided between Northside and Northeast, her cousin told her about a full-time position at San Angelo’s Lakeview High School. Dyer, still upset about her father’s death and eager to leave San Antonio, replied to her cousin, “Put in a good word. Here I come.”\footnote{Dolores Dyer, May 10, 2012.}
recommendation proved to be useful and landed her the job. At Lakeview, Dyer taught physical education to eighth and ninth grade girls and coached various sports, including basketball, volleyball, and track. She enjoyed the job and her teams did well, which led to the school’s decision to offer her the position of head basketball coach. But for Dyer, the year spent teaching at Lakeview proved ultimately to be “a means to an end,” and she turned down the position to look toward different opportunities. Though she stayed at Lakeview only a year, the relationships she formed have survived for years, and she still keeps in touch with several of her students.

At the end of her year at Lakeview, just before being offered the job of head basketball coach, Dyer was contacted by a friend of hers working in the payroll office for the San Antonio Independent School District about a job opening at Thomas Jefferson High School for a physical education and biology teacher. An interview was arranged, and Dyer eagerly rushed home to pursue the exciting opportunity. Dyer recalled, “I was sent right then from the superintendent’s office to Jefferson High School to meet with the principal, [Bob Chambers], and I got the job.” Her new contract with Jefferson High paid her $3,600 per school year, which was quite a good salary at the time and allowed Dyer to be financially independent. Edwin Dyer remembered his sister getting the Jefferson job and explained that “Thomas Jefferson was the silk stocking school in town… ‘Sis’ had worked hard to get where she was and [she] earned it.”

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292 With the salary she earned at Thomas Jefferson High School, Dyer was able to buy a house for herself and her mother, and pay it off in seven years—an impressive feat for a single woman of her time. Dolores Dyer, May 2, 2012.
293 Charles Edwin Dyer, January 29, 2012. Thomas Jefferson High School (TJHS), with its “Spanish-Moorish design,” was an architectural feat of its time, and when it was built in 1932 it was the first million-dollar high school in the United States. The school was featured in Life Magazine in 1938 as “the most outstanding High School in America,” and was also featured in two full length feature films by Twentieth Century Fox. As the TJHS Historical Preservation Society states on its website, “By the close of 1938, Thomas Jefferson had appeared in Life,
From the time Dyer was hired at Thomas Jefferson High School (TJHS) in 1959 to the time she began to coach girls’ competitive sports in 1972, almost fourteen years had passed—more time than Dyer ever anticipated. During this time, she demonstrated her commitment to the TJHS school community and athletic program when, in 1966, the school became a four-year high school. Previously, the school had included sophomores through seniors, so when the freshman class was added, Principal Chambers decided “We needed something for the freshmen to do, something [for them] to belong to.” Dyer responded to this call by starting a card section to perform for half-time at the school’s football games. Dyer worked closely with Principal Chambers and together they named the card section the “Lariats” and designed their uniforms.

During this fourteen year period from 1959-1972, major pieces of Civil Rights legislation were passed by Congress, several of which were directed at establishing women’s rights. Included in this wave of legislation was the Equal Pay Act of 1963, which ensured that individuals with the same skill level who performed the same jobs were paid equally, regardless of sex. The next piece of major legislation was the 1964 Title VII Civil Rights Act prohibiting

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294 Dyer wrote, “my experience with Incarnate Word was a great experience—little did I know I would have to wait so long to coach again!” Dolores Dyer, May 2, 2012.

295 “Equal Pay Act,” U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, Accessed August 10, 15, 2012, http://www.eeoc.gov/laws/statutes/epa.cfm. When asked her thoughts on the equal rights legislation, Dyer stated that the Women’s Rights movement did not really have much of an influence on her day to day life. She was aware that the football coaches were paid more, but she was also aware that “extra duties = extra pay.” Also having an effect on pay scale was varying levels of education and experience. Dyer articulated that she was careful to maintain positive relationships with the male coaches at TJHS, because she knew at any point one of them could become her principal. Dolores Dyer, July 22, 2012.
employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, and national origin. In 1972 the Education Amendments Act followed, and a statement released by President Richard Nixon gave an overview of its purpose: “This legislation includes comprehensive higher education provisions, authority for a new effort to revitalize our educational research effort, and authority to provide financial assistance to school districts to meet special problems incident to desegregation.”

While Nixon’s statement did not specifically reference equal educational opportunities for women, One portion of the bill, Title IX, quickly became the most controversial piece of the Act because it opened up doors for the equalization of athletic opportunities made available to men and women. While it did not explicitly reference athletics, Title IX stated that “No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.” As exemplified by Dyer’s visits to Northside and Northeast High Schools, it was clear to many that the education programs most discriminatory to women were the athletic programs, and it was thus within the realm of sports that Title IX’s effects were most keenly felt.

While the primary theoretical implications of Title IX upon athletics were immediate to legislators, it took time for the practical benefits to materialize for coaches like Dyer. “I didn’t see much of a difference,” said Dyer. “It was just like all of a sudden in PE we got all this gymnastic equipment. Nobody knew how to teach gymnastics. We might have gotten six more

volleyballs. We might have gotten a little better quality of uniform, but I [didn’t] see a big difference. We kind of paid our own way.  

While those that benefited from Title IX were undoubtedly relieved and happy that it was passed, the Act garnered very negative reactions from many people. In 1974, Texas Senator John Tower, attempted to pass the “Tower Amendment,” which would have exempted revenue sports such as football, basketball, and baseball from complying with the statutes of Title IX. This backlash against Title IX was not only seen at the legislative level, but was also found within the general public, as evidenced by a popular sports reporter at the time. Dan Cook worked at KENS, a local San Antonio news station, and also wrote for the *San Antonio Express-News*. Oftentimes Cook referred to himself as “Old Dad,” and he was known for writing with a dry and sardonic tone. He once wrote that he “just [didn’t] think those girls and young women ought to be playing sports.” Hence, it came as no surprise that he responded quite negatively to the passing of Title IX and maintained this attitude even into the 1990s. As a Texan who lived during the height of Cook’s career and the controversial passing of Title IX, Edwin Dyer did not

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301 In addition to the Tower Amendment, other legal issues surrounded Title IX arose, such as a 1976 lawsuit filed by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) arguing that athletic programs do not receive direct federal funding. Like the Tower Amendment, the NCAA’s lawsuit proved unsuccessful. Kwak, “Title IX Timeline,” 53.


303 In 1993, Cook’s negative sentiments toward Title IX emerged in a column titled “Gender Issue Still Causing Confusion,” as he wrote “But now the cry is louder than ever before for ‘total gender equity,’ and the loudest voice belongs to…Donna Lopiano. She now serves as executive director of the National Women’s Sports Foundation in New York.” I’m not real sure about the primary purpose of that group, but right now it’s busy driving college football coaches up walls they can’t climb.” Cook went on to recount the words of Texas A&M football coach, R.C. Slocum, who stated, “It just can’t be done. You can’t dump many more scholarships to create more sports for women and then tell football coaches to cut their staffs, cut all expenses, and still generate more money for these sports.” Dan Cook’s comments reflect the common fear and frustration generated by Title IX—namely, that it threatened men’s football. Considering the fact that these comments were made in 1993 by one of the most well known and loved sports reporter in Texas, one can imagine the negative tone that arose on the part of many Texans twenty years prior when the bill was actually passed. Dan Cook, “Gender Issues Still Causing Confusion,” *San Antonio Express News*, July 20, 1993.
forget Cook’s negative sentiments towards women and women’s sports. He recalled that at the
time when Dyer coached, from 1972-1994, Cook refused to mention the girls going to state,
much less their results.304 Dan Cook was one of many voices that continued speaking out against
women’s involvement in sports after Title IX, yet there were reporters who gave women’s
athletics a kinder treatment. Dyer remembered that “some of the young reporters picked up [and
reported] on [women’s sports],” including the young woman hired to split Cook’s time slot.305
According to Dyer’s brother, “she treated Sis real fair with her reporting. She kind of liked Sis
and she went out and interviewed her on TV several times.”306

Though Dyer did not personally think that Title IX seriously changed the circumstances
for her high school girls at the time of its enactment, 1972 marked a significant year in Dyer’s
career. She had spent thirteen years as a P.E. teacher and in this capacity had coached non-
competitive basketball. Dyer recognized and believed in the athletic potential of her students
and, beginning in 1971, she began seriously pushing for Jefferson High to join the University
Interscholastic League, (UIL).307 “I just got up and told [the Board] about the merits of joining

304 Charles Edwin Dyer, January 29, 2012. Charles Edwin Dyer is not the only one to criticize Dan Cook
for his treatment of women athletes. In 1993, one “semi-angry reader” wrote to Cook, accusing him of being
prejudiced against women athletes: “In your column of Sunday, May 2, you were writing about the bad time
(jockey) Pat Day had at Churchill Downs and you stated that he had not had a winner in 34 races, including two
races that he lost by a nose to “women jocks.” I assume that you had something in mind by that reference to “women
jocks.” It sounds like you are implying that a fate worse than losing by a nose is losing by a nose to a woman.”


306 The time slot for San Antonio local sports was split between Cook and the young woman, but not
evenly. The reporters were given eight minutes total, and Charles Edwin related, “Dan Cook, he took five minutes
and gave her three minutes, but she did a pretty good job of reporting girls’ sports here in town then.” Charles Edwin

307 In 1913, the UIL was created when the Debating and Declamation League of Texas Schools, founded in
1911, merged with the University of Texas Interscholastic Athletic Association, also founded in 1911. The UIL’s
overarching purpose was to enrich high school education by providing opportunities for students to excel in co-
curricular and extra-curricular activities. “A Look Through Time,” University Intercollegiate League, Accessed
the UIL for the girls,” said Dyer, “it had done so much for other districts. And better yet, it would provide the girls with a [more] rounded education.”\textsuperscript{308} Looking back, Dyer said she was “[shooting] them a line of bull,” but whether it was “bull” or not, Dyer’s determination to give her girls the best opportunities possible fueled her fire. Despite her fierce conviction, Dyer faced opposition from a number of individuals who were under the impression that physical education was still “stretching and playing dodge ball and ping pong and the little lady-like stuff.”\textsuperscript{309} In the end, Dyer’s determination and the support of Principal Chambers won TJHS official entrance into the UIL. While Principal Chambers’ support lent influence to Dyer’s argument, he insisted that it was her reputation and zeal that ultimately swayed the decision of the administration. He told Dyer, “We won’t call you a hot head, but you do get flushed.”\textsuperscript{310} Dyer admitted, “When I talk about passionate things I throw my arms around and I don’t have a command of the English language, so I use my own language.”\textsuperscript{311} Dyer’s was the language of opportunity, challenge, and dedication, and in 1971 Thomas Jefferson High School joined the UIL.\textsuperscript{312}

However, even after the school’s admission to the UIL, Dyer was not satisfied. There were few girls’ sports involved with the UIL, and her Mustangs could only play B teams for their first year in the organization. It was not until 1972, the year of Title IX, that Dyer’s girls were able to play varsity teams and show what they were truly capable of doing. At that point, Dyer

\textsuperscript{308} Dolores Dyer, May 10, 2012.
\textsuperscript{309} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{310} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{311} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{312} In anticipation of Thomas Jefferson High joining the Interscholastic League in volleyball, Dyer had been sponsoring the Girls Sports Club, and already had five or six girls lined up. “We would play a little after school when the boys weren’t in the gym, or we would play with and against the boys.” Dolores Dyer, May 10, 2012.
remembered that she “got on the telephone and got us some pretty good competition.” When Dyer and her team were able to “play for real,” for their district championship, they “hit the floor running,” she said. “Everybody was just amazed at what we did.” Winning thirteen district championships in sixteen years, winning nine straight league championships, and playing a ninety-two district match winning streak were just a few of the accomplishments of the Mustangs during Dyer’s time coaching volleyball at Jefferson.313 Dyer’s exposure to women sport’s prior to Title IX had instilled persistence and resourcefulness that were useful when the time came to make her athletic vision for the TJHS Mustangs into a reality. Dyer’s brother believed that she “made her mark at the right time—to be in before and after that change took place—because she did her part.”314

Dyer did more than her part for the Mustangs at Thomas Jefferson High School. No matter what obstacles were presented, the strenuous and ceaseless work Dyer put in with her players and the success they earned in return were impossible to ignore.315 In recognition of her success, in 1978 Dyer’s volleyball team was chosen to help make the rules and regulations film for the National Federation of the State High School Associations, titled "Volleyball: The Winning Points."316 It was a proud moment for the girls, the school, the community, and Dyer.

313 Upon ending her volleyball coaching career, Dyer’s record was 410-80, with a winning percentage of .837. Her district ledger was 215-11. In addition, during Dyer’s last season coaching volleyball at Thomas Jefferson the Mustangs were ranked No. 1 in the city for the majority of the season. Tim Price, “Dyer steps aside as Jeff Spiker coach,” The San Antonio News Express, June 5, 1987.


315 In an article for the San Antonio Express News, Ven Griva wrote that “anyone visiting the Mustangs’ gym could never tell that Jeff had ever won a volleyball game, let alone dominated its competition. The walls are bare; there are no championship banners, nor trophy cases filled with awards. And Dyer would have it no other way. She does not want her players to get cocky. ‘Why do we need all that stuff?’ Dyer asked. ‘We know what we’ve done. We do our horn blowing on the court.’” San Antonio Express News, “Jeff Spikers Win the Dyer Way,” 1986.

However, she never let the excitement distract her from coaching. In fact, exemplifying her loyalty to the game itself, Dyer said of the experience, “If the school board president and my principal [had not] put so much pressure on me to make that film I’m certain we would have won state. Those three days broke our concentration.” Dyer’s extraordinary discipline was one of the characteristics for which she was most known and admired. Dyer was once told that if her coaching philosophy could be bottled and sold she would be a millionaire. She replied that it would be unlikely because her coaching was based on something that had never been taught or explained to her: strict self-discipline. In an article Dyer wrote for a coaching clinic in 1981, “Preparing for Strong Competition...Winning Volleyball: A Positive Approach,” she stated that “whatever method of coaching you use, be positive that you sincerely believe in it.” Dyer’s method of coaching was the same as her method of playing—and living. It was the same way she had learned to play games and sports with the neighborhood children: who you were on and off the court was the same person. How you play should reflect how you live, and vice versa. For Dyer, this meant respecting yourself and others, feeling confident in your abilities, and never giving up just because something was difficult or did not work out. “We want to win with class and we want to lose with class,” Dyer wrote.

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319 When she considered where her self-discipline may have come from she told this story: “Maybe it went back to when I was in eighth grade and a bunch of us skipped school and went to what we called the Gar Hole at the river a few blocks from school. I thought I was smart, but when I went home my hair was still wet. My mother picked up this milk bottle and whipped the daylights out of me. I gained discipline right then.” Charles Edwin Dyer, January 29, 2012.
321 Ibid., 28.
Dyer also stressed the importance of a team’s time practicing together and learning to communicate with each other. She believed that practice was much more than a time to run repetitive drills and practice skills with the same activities. “Each practice session must produce—in addition to the skill-building drills—an atmosphere that inspires motivation and concentration,” said Dyer, “If drill sessions are not related to a team’s ultimate goals, they will become boring and the players will become restless.”

Coaching proved to be more gratifying to Dyer than playing. In fact, she was so successful that she was named West All-Star Coach, and the San Antonio Express News honored her as Coach of the Year in 1980, 1982, and again in 1986, her final year coaching volleyball for Thomas Jefferson High. It seemed that everyone was impressed with and curious about Dyer’s remarkable talent and in 1982 she was contacted by Jack Leach, Sports Editor of Parker Publishing Company, Inc. about writing a book about her successful coaching methods. To add to these distinctions, in 2002 Dyer was named one of the “30 Most Influential South Texans in Women’s Sports,” by the San Antonio Express News. Yet, for Dyer, the most valuable of all her honors were—and continue to be—the accomplishments of her students and the relationships she built and maintained with them. By 1986 Dyer had coached four UIL all-state performers, six Texas High School Coaches Association All-Stars, eleven all-city players, and twenty-one

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322 Ibid.
324 Dyer was interested in publishing the book and sharing her methods and ideas with other coaches, but after writing two chapters, she felt as if she had exhausted the subject. She “ran out of words” and felt she could not just “string the same words out” into an entire book. This instance exemplified perfectly her belief in basic, fundamental coaching methods. Dyer that claimed writing just was not for her and that she did not have the time to do it justice. In spite of her sentiments toward writing, in May of 1981 Dyer compiled a two page article about her approach to coaching, and this article was published in a pamphlet for a women’s coaching clinic.
girls who received college scholarships for athletics. Some of her former students have since received other honors as well. As recently as 2011 Laura (Neugebauer) Groff was inducted into the San Antonio Sports Hall of Fame. In an article in the *San Antonio Express News*, Groff’s athletic success was credited to two major role models: Laura’s mother, Frances, and Dolores “Delo” Dyer. Groff said that her former high school coach was “instrumental in forming the character, work ethic, and toughness that has helped [me] in everyday life.” Dolores Dyer had stated that she wanted her players to be “strong, independent thinking women…not robots.” Groff was a perfect example of this philosophy and the confident attitude she learned from Dyer was something that stuck with her through her college athletic career and her own days of coaching volleyball at the University of Texas at San Antonio.

As Laura Groff was entering Thomas Jefferson High, another of Dyer’s students, Frances Bippert, was graduating. Bippert said that Dyer placed great responsibility on her and the other captains; their relationships were built on trust, respect, and loyalty. “If she said it,” Bippert explained, “it was gospel. She made you believe in yourself and in her.” Dyer expected her players to be the best students they could be, decent individuals off the court, but fierce competitors. She said that she and her teams, and most athletes in general, “did not mind paying the price for winning because our pride will accept nothing less than being first.”

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327 Groff said that in high school as one of Dyer’s players, she quickly “realized what it took to earn her respect. That was to become a good kid, not just a good athlete.” Jerry Briggs, “Role models.”


329 Among her memories of Dyer, Groff recalled a particular comment made while the Mustangs were losing a volleyball game and spirits were low and tense. The girls were in a silent huddle, waiting for Dyer to say something serious and motivational. Instead, she cracked a colorful joke, instantly drawing laughter from her players and putting them all at ease. “She did things like that a lot to break the ice,” said Groff. Laura Groff to the author, November 7, 2011.

strong personality also made impressions on her peers and co-workers. Bob Wagner, a football coach at Thomas Jefferson and former coworker of Dyer’s, remembered her “air of confidence and how she stood up for her program and the girl’s athletic program when girl’s athletics was considered secondary… [She] influenced my style of coaching, and I have always appreciated her as one of the best in her field.”

Not only was Dyer highly respected by those at Thomas Jefferson High School, she also served as a role model for rival coaches. In 1981, the then twenty-two year old Karen Funk took a position coaching volleyball at Highlands High School in San Antonio and through this position often interacted with Dyer. When recently asked to comment on Dyer’s influence in her career, she related an anecdote about a situation that she experienced with Dyer in her first year of coaching. One time, before playing the Thomas Jefferson Mustangs in the Highlands gym, her volleyball players asked if they could put up posters on the walls. After Funk gave the girls permission, her players created posters about “beating Jefferson and corralling the mustangs and breaking [Jefferson’s] winning streak.” Funk went on to write that Highlands “lost miserably,” to the Jefferson Mustangs, and did not score a point in the first game.

After the match her kids came in and tore down the most obnoxious poster in the gym. I was mortified at that and just before Miss Dyer took her team to leave the gym and get on the bus, she came over to see me. She took my hand and told me her girls had asked to destroy the sign and she had given permission. Then she looked me in the eye and told me to never give the opponent anything to fire up their team. ‘Don’t give them a way in…’ Once again, she was the teacher and I was the student.

331 Bob Wagner, November 13, 2011.
332 Karen Funk, August 20, 2012.
333 Ibid.
334 Ibid.
335 Ibid.
After this humbling learning moment Funk did not come to resent Dyer, but rather befriended her. Funk stated, “I learned from her every game and every match for 5 years and we became very good friends…We always met for a cold beverage after a Tuesday/Thursday night match and she would teach and I would listen…other coaches joined us and it was a regular party often with great comradeship on all sides.”\textsuperscript{336} Eventually, Funk’s team did come to break Thomas Jefferson’s 92-0 district winning streak, and “in her usual fashion, [Dyer] acknowledged her loss and my win by giving me a T-shirt with the date, the scores and her winning streak screened on it in my school colors.”\textsuperscript{337} Dyer made a very positive and lasting impression on many of the coaches with whom she came into contact, teaching them lessons not only in the technicalities of different sports, but more memorably in the arena of positive communication and leadership. Currently, Karen Funk serves as the Director for Athletics in Northeast ISD in San Antonio.

In 1987, at the age of fifty-five, Dyer stepped down from her position as the head of the volleyball program at Thomas Jefferson High, stating that it was “time for the young people to take over.”\textsuperscript{338} She stayed at Thomas Jefferson as a golf coach starting that fall, but after sixteen years of coaching junior varsity basketball and varsity volleyball, during which her days often lasted twelve to sixteen hours and her weeks often lasted six days, Dyer was ready to take a break and make “time for other things!”\textsuperscript{339} After stepping down as the head volleyball coach, Dyer remained at Thomas Jefferson until 1994 when she retired at the age of sixty-one. When asked her reason for retiring, Dyer responded by giving insight into the negative changes she experienced within the realm of education during the early 1990’s: “I retired in ’94, not because

\textsuperscript{336} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{337} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{338} Price, “Dyer Steps Aside.”
\textsuperscript{339} Dolores Dyer, August 21, 2012.
of my age, but because they [the administration & board] could hire two for my price…They had already cut down on PE classes and I had been assigned two alternative center (A/C) classes—the very bad kids they didn’t want in class or on the street.”

Dyer later found out that she was actually scheduled to teach four A/C classes, which were oftentimes given to the young male coaches because they could be physically dangerous. Dyer referred to the administration, stating that “‘They’ just slowly made your day so miserable that you wanted to quit.” So, after witnessing this sort of situation happen to many teachers of subjects other than English, math, and science, and after experiencing this treatment herself, Dyer decided to quit. She wrote, “I decided I wasn’t going to be thrown to the wolves. That…is what I was tired of…”

Though Dyer was ready to leave her career at Thomas Jefferson behind, her experience of coaching was still very important to her and she admitted, “Of course you always miss something you enjoy.” During her retirement, Dyer never fully cut ties with Thomas Jefferson High School and continued to attend Mustangs games often. Dyer also maintained her ties to the softball world in which she played for so long: “I can go to any ballpark here in San Antonio and walk in free,” she said, “I really, really, really appreciate that because it has taken years and years of my own dedication to gain that respect, it lives today and I am very proud of that.”

When she was not attending volleyball, basketball, or softball games, Dyer spent quite a bit of time with her widowed Aunt Lois, and the two traveled around Texas sight-seeing and visiting family. Dyer also owned thirty-four acres in Pipe Creek, Texas, upon which was a

341 Price, “Dyer Steps Aside.”
log-cabin. Dyer explained that much of her time was spent working on her property: “I was always having to fix fences, paint, or re-caulk the cabin. It was hard work, [and] physical, which I enjoyed very much.” In addition to working on her cabin, Dyer spent time with her past softball teammates and also enjoyed playing golf for leisure.

Though Dyer was happy to have the time to invest in other things, she is satisfied and content with her thirty-five year career in education. The dedication she showed to her students, herself, and to her own dreams not only transformed the lives of many students and players, but served to prove that one’s potential can be exercised and achieved in many different situations. When asked about the legacy she left, Dyer said, “Legacy? What is a legend? Who has the right to say they are a legend? Legend to me is in what you leave behind—the good will, etc.—not you, yourself. I would hope that I influenced those young ladies to be strong, good decision making women.”

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344 Ibid.

345 The length of Dyer’s coaching career was actually nineteen years, which included two years at Incarnate Word, one year at Lakeview High School in San Angelo and sixteen at Thomas Jefferson High School. She taught for 35 years at Jefferson High School. Dolores Dyer, October 15, 2012.

CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

A review of American women’s basketball scholarship reveals significant gaps in the historical record from its initial start in 1892 until the prominent event in women's athletics—the passage of Title IX in 1972. Less attention has been paid to the subtle advances made before 1972, which contributed to the eventual passage of Title IX. A brief six-month period between 1953 and 1954 in the life of Dolores Dyer exemplifies such an advance. During a time when scholarships through athletics for women were almost nonexistent, Dyer used professional sport as a gateway to a college education. Although hers was an unconventional approach for its time, it eventually allowed her the opportunity to pursue her version of the American dream.

To many contemporary scholars, the passage of Title IX was the beginning of “true” women’s sport and the emergence of sport’s modern era. As a result, most historical study of women’s basketball has focused on the effects of Title IX. However, Title IX did not arise suddenly and without obstacles, but was instead the result of a prolonged struggle by many women who worked to change the perception of women’s athletics during the first half of the twentieth century. This study addresses the method that Dolores Dyer used to achieve success through sport before the passage of Title IX, namely women’s barnstorming basketball from 1953-1954.

Born to working class parents in San Angelo, Texas, Dyer spent her early childhood during the Dust-Bowl era of the Great Depression. Her humble beginnings provided a set of influences and circumstances that differed from those of many women who pursued sports. Many biographical narratives that focus on women's sports scholarship explore the achievements of the elite, the superstar, and the Olympian. These accomplishments are important; however,
they do not represent the challenges faced by women such as Dyer who attempted to play competitively or dreamt of success through sports, but resigned themselves to entering the workforce and played club sports only as a hobby.

There are several factors that contributed to Dyer's rise to the professional ranks. First, she was born a gifted athlete. From her early days of winning at marbles to riding her brother’s new bike before he did; she exhibited an uncanny ability for sports at a young age. Second, she was given the opportunity to develop athletically with her neighbors and friends. The warm climate of South Texas provided temperate weather that encouraged outdoor play and athletic activities. Finally, when her family moved from a farm to the larger city of San Antonio, she was in a position to take advantage of women's AAU sports and city leagues. Each of these factors helped to lay the foundation for Dyer's path toward professional athletics—a path that subtly helped move women’s sport into the modern era.

Dyer’s decision to pursue sport did not fit usual gender expectations during the 1950s. As historian Mary Jo Festle explained, “American society did not really have a place for female champions… [it was the popular belief that sports for women] ‘should be conducted toward the complete development of the individual for the place she probably will occupy in American society as a wife [or] mother.”347 There were many talented young women who grew up during the Depression and played sports with their siblings and wished for a chance to compete in school sports or beyond but the opportunities to do so were scarce. Dyer was representative of the many women who struggled to break those expectations and find a means to play competitive sport in an athletic world dominated by men with the ultimate goal of achieving their American dream.

347 Mary Jo Festle, Playing Nice, 12.
James Truslow Adams’ work, *The Epic of America*, defined an early concept of the American dream, which is if one worked hard enough, they could achieve their individual potential for success. The essence of the American dream is that it can be anything for anyone, and for Dyer it was an education that she believed would lead her to financial independence and success. Dyer had the good fortune of living in a society that allowed women to achieve social mobility through education when, even a single generation prior to hers, the benefit of an education was not a real possibility for most families of farmers such as her own. She is an early example of a woman who used sports to pursue the American dream understood by Dyer in terms of achieving a college education.

Dyer’s most promising opportunity that she found through her athletic talents was the chance to play with the Texas Cowgirls basketball team. By paying her to play professional basketball, the Texas Cowgirls provided the means through which Dyer could pursue her dream of a formal education. Although the Texas Cowgirls offered her the promise of payment for her skills, full contractual payment never materialized. Disappointed, Dyer quit the team, but did not give up on her dream of finishing her education.

The path of women’s professional athletics, such as barnstorming basketball, was a complicated one. Some of the women athletes wanted to play true competitive basketball, rather than skit basketball. However, the audience welcomed the novelty of its showmanship, and it was the entertainment aspect that sold tickets. Had booking agents not put on such a show, it is likely that the gymnasiums would have had fewer spectators. One way to fill seats was to cater to the audience’s perceptions of women and sport, and Hovland’s marketing of the Texas Cowgirls hit the mark. Women were allowed on the basketball court, but often times they were noticed more for their femininity than their athletic skill. Considering that the culture surrounding female
athletes during this period was unwelcoming, it is no surprise that Dyer’s journey with the Cowgirls was ultimately a disappointment.

Dyer was not a showgirl. In fact, she was quite the opposite. Dyer’s attraction to basketball was about true, fair, and physical competition. Skit basketball contradicted these core values and did not fit with what Dyer thought competitive sport should be. Dyer was an example of a woman athlete who pursued competition, but lived in a time when female athletes were treated with either curiosity or derision.

It should be noted, however, that some teams did appear to have modest success against this characterization. Hazel Walker’s Arkansas Travelers, for example, eschewed much of the sexuality present in shows performed by teams like the Cowgirls and the All-American Red Heads. Walker’s shows, in contrast, replaced skits with displays of skill, such as free-throw shooting competitions. While Walker’s show is something contemporary audiences can point to as a “good example” of women’s sport at that time, its success was unusual in the given social climate and not typical of the challenges most women faced in their pursuit of professional athletics.

Because of these obstacles facing women’s attempts to play basketball professionally, Dyer saw education, rather than athletic success, as the way to achieve her American dream. Legitimate opportunities for a professional sporting career for women were scarce. A study conducted in 1950 showed that women professional athletes comprised only about 5 percent of total professional athletes. Education, by contrast, was a relatively more attainable goal.  

348 Williamson, “Hazel Walker,” April 4, 1996. Although the Texas Cowgirls also offered a free-throw competition, it involved a blindfold and challenging an audience member to compete against a player for money. In contrast, Hazel Walker’s Arkansas Travelers, featuring Walker herself, “would shoot 15 free throws standing, 10 free throws kneeling and five free throws sitting”.

349 Mary Jo Festle, Playing Nice, 32-33.
it must be remembered that using sport to achieve education was unusual for the time. A collegiate athletic scholarship—not a paycheck from gate receipts—would have funded her college tuition. In many ways, however uncommon her approach, sport did pave a path of success for Dyer. While the success she enjoyed throughout her playing and coaching career did not bring wealth, it gave her a personal fulfillment of knowing that she was exercising her athletic potential and helping others achieve theirs. Furthermore, her persistence coupled with her athletic skills led her to enjoy an extremely successful coaching career, which would ultimately give her financial independence.

When interviewed fifty-eight years later, Dyer was unaware of how small a percentage of women there were who actually played professional sports during the 1950s. To this day, Dyer remains humble toward her experience and unassuming in regards to her role as a pioneer athlete and role model during her early professional career at a time when women had limited occupational opportunities outside of the home. When recently asked if she thought she had an influence on the young boys and girls who watched her play as a Texas Cowgirl and often asked for her autograph, Dyer said, “I tried to be, you know, as positive to them as I could because I knew what I went through [to join the Texas Cowgirls] and that it was a dream of mine [to play] regardless of whether the dream was reality – it turned out to really be fairyland instead of basketball.”

In the course of conducting research for this work, many of Dyers’ students, colleagues, and fellow coaches were interviewed. Without exception, each interviewee had more than just a

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350 Glen H. Elder, Jr., “Children of the Great Depression,” 45; U.S. Bureau of the Census, U.S. Census Population: 1960, 45-716. Dyer’s graduation from college was much more than just a personal accomplishment. At the time she graduated, women constituted a mere 35.2 percent of undergraduate enrollment in the United States. Only 5 percent of college age women completed four years of college in Texas in 1960.

few positive words to say about Dyer. Despite her experience with the Texas Cowgirls, Dyer’s love of the game led to incomparable personal achievements over the course of her career.

According to the Thomas Jefferson High School booster club, during her thirty-five-year career with the school, Dyer had a record of 410-80 with over 215 district wins in volleyball. She also managed to achieve a 91-game winning streak, 13 district titles, three 2nd place titles, and San Antonio Coach of the Year awards in 1980, 1982 and 1986. Twenty-one of her students earned scholarships in volleyball. Dyer also coached golf. In those eight seasons she won district four times and came in second three times before she retired from coaching in 1994.

Considering all of Dyer’s numerous accomplishments, one could say that Dyer achieved her American dream. She was the first in her family to earn a college degree. Furthermore, while records regarding the numbers of women coaches before Title IX in Texas do not exist, as one of three physical education majors in her college, she represented the beginning of women who were serious about athletics and coaching. She was a successful coach and player during a time when women were largely absent from the high school coaching world. Dyer became the athletic coach she wished for as a youth. Largely self-taught and pragmatic, she pursued education and the opportunity to coach during an era when such opportunities were uncommon. Her sense of values and fair play came from a no-nonsense background that valued hard work and discipline. While the dream of playing professionally turned out to be a “fairyland,” Dyer’s nineteen years of coaching more directly served to further the athletic opportunities of hundreds of young women. Dyer’s career was spent helping young women achieve their potential, and in doing so Dyer achieved her potential as well.

Without the drive and accomplishments of women like Dyer, the boundaries of women’s athletics would not have been pushed to include the vast array of sports and athletic opportunities
that exist for women today. Dyer, working in relative anonymity at the time, was actually at the leading edge of legitimizing women’s sports. Her dedication and coaching ability demonstrated to young women that playing sports was a reasonable path that they could pursue. The fact that Dyer’s students were able to pursue college athletic scholarships is direct proof of the progress made since Dyer’s experience playing professional basketball.

Dyer’s story should serve as a foundation for further research. No study can be comprehensive of every woman’s experience in barnstorming basketball. The Texas Cowgirls were one of several barnstorming teams; there are thousands of potential subjects whose stories will be lost if not recorded. But it is only by identifying and interviewing these women that the issues of the time can be revealed. The process of cross-referencing primary documents with oral history interviews is difficult, but ultimately rewarding. This methodology can be a tool to corroborate experiences and reconstruct social history while filling the gaps in the existing record. Many of these women saved their mementoes and other published evidence from their time playing barnstorming basketball, and these can serve as an invaluable tool in similar research.

There are many unsung heroines of women’s sport that can help fill the void of women’s pre-Title IX sports history and connect more obscure experiences with those that have previously been documented. It is only through a detailed examination of the unsung heroines in sports history that a complete historical chronicle can be constructed. Oftentimes it is their stories that shed the most light on the narrative of women in sports, and the influence of these unknown pioneers of sport is immeasurable. Dyer’s widespread influence and legacy through playing and coaching is just one of these stories. Stories like Dyer’s tell us the history of a generation of women athletes and without further study in the near future, they will be lost forever.
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