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The Women's Athletic Association: The Foundation of Women's Sports at Hope College

By Grace Pettinger

In 2020, the Joint Archives of Holland received an anonymous donation of a Hope College Women's Athletic Association (WAA) sweater. Because I am a Hope female student athlete, I was eager to research its history and learn more about the women who once wore them.

The sweater features four sewn patches, including a felt "53." This is most likely the year that the woman who owned the sweater graduated from Hope. A large Hope "H" patch adorns the pocket, representing the owner's participation in the Women's Athletic Association during her time at Hope. Additionally, the sweater features a maroon and white patch with the letters "CM," as well as a patch with a white cross and a blue background. The cross has the letters "SPRM" stitched onto it. These two patches remain a mystery.

After diligent research in the Hope College *Anchor* student newspapers and *Milestone* yearbooks from 1949-1953, I discovered that women's athletics truly resembled another world compared to the experience of a female athlete of today. In the early 1950s, a woman interested in sports at Hope College needed to be a member of the Women's Athletic Association (WAA) in order to gain access to competitions. The WAA organized intramural and intercollegiate competitive events for women at Hope. Intramural competitions often commenced between teams from each dorm or through sororities. WAA's intercollegiate events included "play-days" with schools such as Calvin, as well as with the women of Holland High School and Hudsonville High

School. The 1953 *Milestone* listed volleyball, basketball, baseball, archery, golf, riding, hiking, bowling, badminton, ping-pong, and tennis as the sporting options for WAA members. Other events sponsored by the WAA, specifically in 1953, included an All College Christmas, Penny Carnival, May Day, freshman girls Beach Party, Big Sister-Little Sister Tea, All Girls Masquerade, and a Spring Tea for prospective girls.

The owner of the sweater would have most likely participated in some of these activities, as well as a senior banquet for women, which signified the finale of their season. Awards given at this banquet included a graduation number for first-year participants, the letter "H" for second years, a charm for third years, and a trophy for fourth years. The sweater is adorned with the graduation number and the "H," but does not have a charm attached and did not come with a trophy. She may have only participated in two years, or the charm and trophy for the third and fourth year of participation was lost.

The WAA first appeared in the *Milestone* in 1938. The association was sponsored by the Athletic Debt Diggers, the Women's Activity League, and the Physical Education Department. At this time, a woman

involved in the WAA would have been required to pay activity fees. The activities offered included bowling, swimming, basketball, badminton, and ping pong in the winter, and hiking, tennis, roller-skating, and horseback riding in the spring. A year after the WAA's appearance, the founders envisioned the goal of the association as an



(continued on page 2)

From the Director



I hope this issue of the *Joint Archives Quarterly* finds you well and eager to learn about the early history of women's athletics at Hope College. Last year, after receiving a sweater from an unidentified Hope alumna, I asked senior history major Grace Pettinger to find out more of what the sweater represents. Grace did some fine research and opened up a whole new understanding of women and sport at Hope College.

Also, in this issue you will find our 2021 Honor Roll of Donors. Thanks to each and every one of you. Your support helps to make our digitization projects and student research stipends possible each year.

Geoffrey D. Reynolds

The Women's Athletic Association (continued from page 1)

opportunity to transform each woman of Hope into a well-rounded college woman. I expected that the founding of such an organization would promote women's equal access to competition; however, that was not the case.

In the 1940s, the WAA solidified itself as an established organization in Hope's community, according to the *Milestone*. The organization entered a float in the homecoming parade in 1942 and expanded their organization to include co-ed intramural sporting activities in 1943, and continued to provide women with activities throughout the Second World War. Awards of the WAA expanded in 1948 to include the best female athlete in each graduating class. Potentially due to its popularity, noted by the 1948 *Milestone*, the women's tennis team began competing in the Michigan Intercollegiate Athletic Association (MIAA) in 1949, becoming the first female intercollegiate sport at Hope.

The 1950s proved to be a high point in the WAA's history. By 1950, 46% of Hope women were involved in the organization, according to the October 26, 1950, *Anchor*. At that time, the *Anchor* described volleyball, bowling, hiking, riding, and badminton as the most popular sports in the WAA. The *Anchor* also gives an idea of a typical play-day for WAA members in a January 18, 1951, article describing their Hope-Calvin Play-Day and Tea at Hope on a Saturday in January. The day began with getting-acquainted games and relays and a game of volleyball, followed by a luncheon in Voorhees Hall. Next, the association held a program in the Voorhees lounge, which featured group singing. The Hope women gave their Calvin guests a tour of Hope's campus and eventually led them back to the gym where they tumbled, played ping pong, badminton, and basketball. The day concluded with tea

at Durfee Hall. Play-days such as this typically included women who showed "unusual interest and talent," according to the 1952-1953 Hope College catalog, rather than all women who participated in the WAA. In May 1953, which would have been the end of our sweater wearer's college career, the *Anchor* documented the banquet, described as the "finale of the season." At the banquet, the WAA selected board members for the freshman and sophomore class and gave awards for participation. The owner of our sweater would have most likely been in attendance as a graduating senior, assuming that she continued to participate after earning her graduation year numbers and the letter "H" for her participation in previous years.



First WAA Board, 1938

Many colleges and universities in the 1950s held play-days rather than intercollegiate matches or tournaments. William G. Bowen and James L. Shulman state in their book, *The Game of Life: College Sports and Educational Values* that most colleges used the term "play-day" as a general term for intercollegiate meetings. Bowen and Shulman define play-days as a gathering of two schools to play sports with one another; however, their games had no competitive nature. Instead, women from both colleges mixed between teams and engaged in social hours with food and entertainment. Hope engaged in the same activities as colleges and universities across the country during the 1950s. This also explains the early 1940s goal of creating a well-rounded education for women, focusing on the educational benefits of sports.

The mid to late 1950s proved to be almost as monumental for women's athletics as the 1940s, according to the *Anchor*. In the January 21, 1955, issue, the *Anchor* lists the creation of a varsity women's basketball team that would compete in the MIAA, joining the tennis team as two of the available women's varsity sports. Soon after, Hope added women's field hockey to the list of varsity sports available to females in 1959. While the WAA provided women with the opportunity to participate in athletic activities, having three varsity sports available to women solidified women's sports as an important part of Hope College. However, the 1961 *Milestone* argues that women's tennis, the most established of the women's varsity sports at the time, outweighed women's

We're the girls from Hope College
 Who make sports and fun our aim,
 We strive to exercise our knowledge
 And be athletic just the same,
 Our letters are W. A. A.,
 And they stand for what we do,
 To furnish all girls with play
 In a spirit good and true.
 Bowling basketball and hiking
 Softball, tennis, golf, ping-pong,
 The girls may choose of their liking,
 And play these sports the whole year long.
 We may have aches in our joints
 And our muscles may be lame
 But if we get our points
 Our hearts are in the game.

Song written about the Women's Athletic Association, 1952

basketball and women's field hockey as the only true women's intercollegiate sport. At the time, the newer women's varsity sports only participated in a small number of intercollegiate events. While the addition of the basketball and field hockey teams pushed women's sports forward, it did not completely solidify women's sports as a significant part of Hope's athletic department.

Women's sports gained some more recognition in the late 1950s by health educators, who previously had only acknowledged sports as part of a well-rounded education on a national level. Historian Paula D. Welch explains that in 1958, the same year that the women's basketball team and a year before the women's field hockey joined the ranks of Hope College varsity sports, the National Association for Physical Education of College Women recognized that sports programs for women did not meet the standards that women deserved, or had interest for. For the first time, educators observed a need to expand the competition in women's sports. In response, the Division for Girls and Women's Sports, the National Association for Physical Education for College Women, and the Athletic Federation of College Women joined together to create the Tripartite Committee to reevaluate how intercollegiate could function for women's sports. Eventually adopting the name of the National Joint Committee of Extramural Sports for College Women, the group developed rules for national and state events to follow in intercollegiate activities. While the group did not serve to promote intercollegiate sports, it represented a huge leap forward for women's sports on a national level, making them more competitive and removing them from the mere curriculum of a woman's education. The impacts of these developments could have influenced Hope's decision to expand their female varsity sports in the late 1950s and early 1960s, as the *Milestone* demonstrated.

The 1965 *Milestone* details that Hope added women's archery and, in 1970, the varsity volleyball team joined the ranks of women's sports. After the 1970 entry in the organizations section, the Women's Athletic Association did not appear in the *Milestone*. After this, it seems that

women had a wider variety of varsity sport opportunities. Prior to the 1970s, the WAA seemed to provide the only opportunities for athletic participation for women; now women did not need an organization to represent them. At long last, the women of Hope had the representation they deserved in athletics. The WAA had fulfilled its purpose, but now women did not need to participate in intramural sports instead of excelling in varsity, intercollegiate sports. While Hope still offers intramural sports for men and women, women are not limited to less competitive options. This coincides with the national implementation of Title IX.

In 1972, the U.S. government passed Title IX, which took complete government control of all female sports. According to Ronald Smith in his book *Pay for Play: A History of Big-Time College Athletic Reform*, Title IX redefined the seat of control of college athletics, while education programs previously controlled women's sports and placed a ceiling on the reach of female athletics. Regarding Title IX's impact, Smith writes, "But the legality of Title IX forced action on the issue of equity between men's and women's programs rather quickly." Smith also explains further issues that made inequity persist between male and female sports, such as unequal scholarships and equipment. However, the WAA originated from the female education program and because of the implementation of Title IX, varsity sports replaced the WAA.

In my search for information on the mysterious Women's Athletic Association sweater, the *Anchor*, as well as the *Milestone*, revealed exactly how far we have come in women's sports at Hope College. In the articles about the WAA, the rhetoric featured extremely sexist language. The writers of both the *Milestone* and the *Anchor* also heavily underrepresented female sports compared to male sports.

First, the existence of the WAA represented a leap forward for women's athletics. However, its intramural nature, rather than being within the athletics department, sends an important message to the Hope women of the 1950s and historians researching its impact on women and on Hope in general. Hope's inclusion of a separate organization for women at a limited competitive level gave women the opportunity to engage in sports but communicated that this kind of opportunity was for recreational enjoyment only. It may have been taken seriously by the WAA and its members; however, Hope, as an institution, clearly believed its purpose to be that of giving women recreation alone rather than allowing female athletes to represent Hope College the same way as male athletes.

Throughout the entries in the *Anchor* and the *Milestone* during the early 1950s, one can observe a greater representation for men's sports over entries for the WAA. While each male sport received its own page in the *Milestone* or an *Anchor* column detailing the latest game, the WAA, as a whole, received a page in the

organization's section of the *Milestone* and a single or half of one *Anchor* column that encompasses all of their sports and activities without much detail. This is to be expected, as the 1950s did not highlight female sports and had only one varsity female sport at the time, as mentioned previously. This lack of representation displays the cultural tie between competitive sports and manhood in the 1950s. Sports fell into a man's sphere, but did not touch the women's sphere at the time.

In addition, there are key differences between the types of rhetoric used to describe the WAA compared to reports of men's sports, in the *Anchor* in particular. This displays the difference in mindset when approaching male and female sports. Male athletes in the October 26th, 1950, issue of the *Anchor* are described as competitors, rivals (when referring to Calvin), winners, and team members. Men's sporting events include games, victories, tilts, duels, and deadlocks. Male athletes are serious competitors that seemingly go to war against other colleges, proving Hope's superiority in sport. In contrast, the *Anchor* refers to female sports using completely different rhetoric like "girls" rather than competitors or even women in the same *Anchor* issue that described male athletes differently. Adjectives used to describe the WAA and their members are "busy" and "happy." In the November 16, 1950, edition, the WAA's heading for their column is "W.A.A. Activities Keeps Gals Busy." The events are referred to as "activities" and "play-day and tea." The January 18, 1951, *Anchor* described the Hope-Calvin Play-Day women as "yelling, singing, shrieks" of girls. According to Smith, female sports throughout the United States considered certain words to be expletives, such as intercollegiate, coach, and varsity. Specific rhetoric in the *Anchor* gave women a certain childish nature compared to the way they described male athletes and the environment of male athletic events. Smith's research reinforces the idea that colleges and female physical educators held women's sports at a recreational activity.

While the WAA created incredible opportunities for women for the first time, cultural standards for sports limited these opportunities. The 1950s culture viewed women's sports as a recreational activity in which women could participate. Contrastingly, men's sports represented the school as being Hope's "Flying Dutchmen." This demonstrates a link between sports and war at the time. The idea of battling other schools physically to prove superiority echoes the idea of countries battling in war. Mid-twentieth century men fought battles, not women. In that society, women's sports would not hold the same high stakes that men's sports would have, as the men would be going off to fight to prove Hope to be the physically best college. For women at the time, this kind of activity would be something to do for fun, not for serious competition.

Based on secondary research, Hope's athletic program for women did not stand out as different from many

colleges in the 1950s. Prior to Title IX, little to no colleges offered intercollegiate sports for women. Instead, female physical educators controlled the organization of women's intercollegiate sports. Ronald argues that sports fell within a part of a female's education during this time. One must acknowledge the distinct disadvantages in women's athletics during the 1950s that occurred due to a societal acceptance of patriarchal traditions. Smith's point of female educators enforcing the standards of limiting the number of varsity sports for women during the 1950s demonstrates this acceptance of the separate female sphere that did not include competitive sports at a cultural level. Men did not always overtly hold women at a distinct disadvantage. Instead, the majority of the American culture accepted the inequality of women's sports.

The WAA at Hope College gave women the opportunity to participate in organized sporting events. Over the course of over 30 years, the WAA played an important role in the college experience of most women attending Hope. However, the WAA existed within the context of its time, controlled by female educators and regarded by all of 20th century culture as an outlet for women as part of their education. Based on primary sources from the local *Anchor*, as well as secondary sources that add context to the development of women's sports through the 20th century, most of society viewed women's sports as a recreational activity rather than a competitive one. While the woman who owned our WAA sweater attended Hope, the WAA operated within this 20th century culture. Being part of the WAA, she most likely participated in play-days, intramural competitions between dorms on campus, and attended WAA events. As the 20th century progressed and American culture with it, the role of the WAA and women's sports evolved. Women's sports expanded at Hope, as well as around the country, in response to Title IX. Organizations such as the WAA laid the foundations for women's sports at Hope.

Through the woman with the WAA sweater and many other women like her, I am now able to participate in varsity volleyball. While I most naturally thank my teammates, coaches, parents, and the Holland community for supporting me in my sport, I also need to appreciate the women of the past who paved the way for me to play competitively and represent Hope College as a proud female athlete.



About the author:

Grace Pettinger is from Mount Vernon, Iowa, and is a junior at Hope College. She is graduating in December 2021 with a bachelor's degree in History with a minor in Writing. Grace has worked at the Joint Archives of Holland for three years as a student researcher and is the Dryhout Curatorial Intern at the Kruizenga Art Museum. After graduating, she plans to enroll in a graduate program to pursue a master's degree in Archival Management.

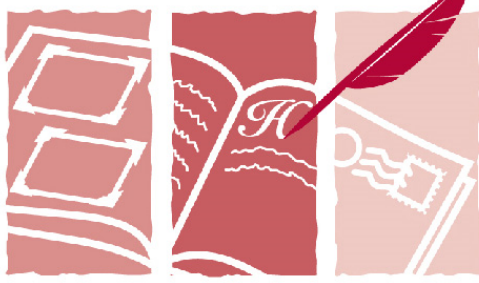
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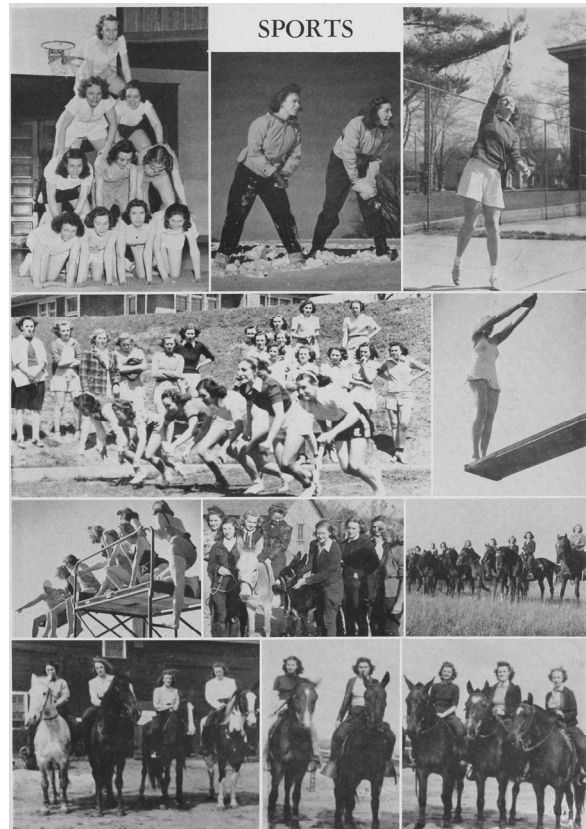
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The Milestone yearbook illustrates the many physical activities available to women at Hope College in 1941.