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“THE RIDE OF THE VALKYRIES”

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WHO WAS JOSEPH BENENHALEY?

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“THE RIDE OF THE VALKYRIES”

The Evolution of Athletics and Sport at Converse College

by Joe P. Dunn and Margaret S. Moore



In 2007 Converse College registered the trademark for its new mascot moniker: the Valkyries, the mythical Norse maidens who transported fallen warriors to Valhalla. The name evoked a touch of irony: performances of Richard Wagner’s “Ride of the Valkyries” by the college’s renowned school of music showcased more talent than the institution’s athletic teams often displayed. With its new nickname and the blond-haired, armored, spear-and-shield-bearing mascot “Val,” the small college projected high aspirations. Within a decade, Converse expanded its athletic program to include over a dozen sports teams, and nearly 30 percent of its undergraduate student body identified as athletes.

Although the promulgation of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 was an important milestone for women at the high school and college levels, women’s physical activity and sports competition evolved nationally and locally long before that legislation. The saga of women’s athletics at Converse and in the nation is infused with strong notions about women’s physical nature, gender roles, and prejudices against “wrong” or “unnatural” feminine behavior. Women in northeastern and midwestern institutions were saddled with these biases in the nineteenth century, and the prejudices were even more prominent in the South, where notions about race and class shaped cultural norms heavily.

Intercollegiate sports competition arose from club teams that began in the 1850s and 1860s in northeastern men’s

colleges. When Vassar College opened in 1865 as the first degree-granting college for women, founder Matthew Vassar established classes in riding, gardening, swimming, boating, skating, and other “physical accomplishments suitable for ladies to acquire” that would enhance “bodily strength and grace.” Light gymnastics that involved movement and posture, endurance, speed, agility, and strength, he believed, assisted the development of “a sound mind in a sound body.” Vassar fielded the first two women’s amateur baseball teams in 1866, and other women’s colleges soon added extracurricular athletics. Mills College of Oakland, California, formed a baseball team in 1872, and Wellesley opened in 1875 with a gymnasium for exercising, a lake for ice skating, and the first rowing program for women. Mt. Holyoke introduced volleyball to their campus in 1895, and Vassar and Smith built swimming “tanks” in 1889 and 1892, respectively. Several southern women’s colleges, including Goucher, Sophie Newcomb, Agnes Scott, Randolph Macon, and Sweet Briar, all founded in the 1880s and 1890s, followed their northern sister institutions.

When Converse College was founded in 1889, English Victorian and Edwardian views about physical activity still lingered. While moderate physical activity was generally acceptable and sometimes encouraged, competitiveness was frowned upon. Doctors argued that women possessed a limited amount of energy; overextending one’s supply through excessive physical or intellectual activity would have dilatory

Above, As the twentieth century dawned, basketball became one of the most popular sports at Converse College. Club teams vied annually for a loving cup. This photograph captures the winning basketball team from 1916. Courtesy of Archives and Special Collections, Mickel Library, Converse College.

impacts on other aspects of life. Harvard graduate and prominent physician Dr. Edward H. Clarke challenged these views, but he maintained the popular perspective that women should not exert themselves too much physically or mentally during menstruation. Furthermore, exercise should not make women look masculine or affect their primary responsibilities as wives and mothers.

Turn-of-the-century athletic uniforms assured that women conformed to a strict standard of femininity. In croquet, southern belles appeared neat and tidy in their hooped skirts and layers of petticoats. Tennis was popular despite some views that it was “unfeminine” to run, but the corset, starched petticoat and skirt, heavily buttoned blouse, silver-buckled belt, and sneakers with large silk bows made running nearly impossible. Similarly restrictive golf outfits consisted of ankle-length tweed skirts, heavy leather belts, long-sleeved blouses with starched collars, brightly colored jackets, and heavy shoes or boots. In these costumes, women maintained strict cultural standards of feminine decorum. Those who styled themselves differently risked being labeled inappropriate, unwomanly, or tomboyish.

The emerging discipline of women’s physical education, led by teachers trained in the Northeast, continued to place a high premium on femininity and ladylike qualities but emphasized the importance of physical health to a woman’s well-being. The 1897-98 *Converse College Catalogue* expressed the Greek conception: “A perfectly sound mind cannot exist in an unsound body, neither can the soul perform its best work when hampered by an unhealthy body.” To enhance students’ well-being, the Department of Expression and Physical Culture offered calisthenics, Swedish gymnastics, hygiene, and a variety of sports activities. In 1894 the college laid out outdoor tennis courts, constructed a two-lane bowling alley, and built a gym on the first two floors of Dexter Hall, a new campus dormitory.

Although some questioned women playing “men’s games,” more competitive sports soon emerged on women’s college campuses. Initially, baseball was the most popular sport, for it could be played in seclusion in remote areas of campus. At Converse, the head of the Music Program managed the



Above, The 1898–99 Converse College Catalogue carried a photograph of students playing tennis on lawn courts. During the Victorian era, ankle-length skirts, long-sleeved blouses, and ties kept sportswomen’s bodies covered and restricted their movements. Below, Converse College completed construction of Dexter Hall, which contained a gymnasium and a dormitory, in 1899. The ground floor of the building housed the gymnasium, pictured here from around the turn of the twentieth century, with dormitory space on the upper levels. Whether they were playing basketball or dancing, students had to avoid the support columns that ran through the middle of the gym floor. Photographs courtesy of Archives and Special Collections, Mickel Library, Converse College.

baseball club, which consisted of two teams: the Red and Black team and the Black and Blue team. But it was basketball that soon became the most popular sport at Converse and at other women’s colleges. The game, invented in 1892 by Ohio YMCA educator James Naismith, was adapted for women by Smith College physical educator Senda Berensen to limit players’ movements, decrease aggression, and emphasize ladylike poise. Clara Gregory Baer of Sophie Newcomb College for Women in New Orleans introduced an even more restricted version; but believing that athletes’ confining corsets were ungraceful, she also introduced “bloomers,” which allowed more freedom and comfort while playing the game.

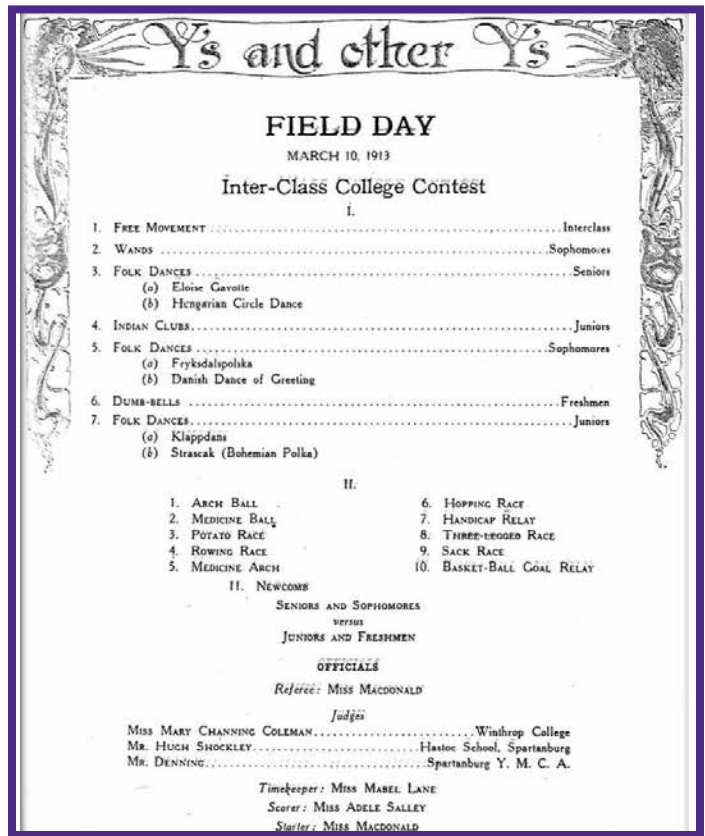
At the turn of the century, Converse adopted Berenson's version of basketball. Pictures of the campus teams appear in college yearbooks starting in 1899. Dexter Gymnasium was divided into three sections, and games revolved around poles that held up the ceiling. The first competitive basketball teams, the Atalanta Club, named for the Greek mythological female warrior and athlete, and the Hyppolita Club, for the Amazonian queen and daughter of Ares, Greek god of war, vied for a \$100 loving cup provided personally by the college president. In 1901 the Atalantas won the game 16-8, and in May 1902 the student literary publication *Concept* boasted that the Converse women were ready to play baseball against the local Wofford College men. "The time is not far distant when we shall be allowed to win the championship of the State in baseball and basket-ball," it proclaimed.

As competition evolved, so did athletic attire, although Converse uniforms did not change as rapidly as they did at northern women's colleges. In the 1899 yearbook, students on the first basketball team appear dressed in dark, heavy outfits with long skirts, and long-sleeved, loose blouses with sailor-style collars and the letters "CC." Although basketball and baseball remained the prime sports, tennis and golf were becoming popular as well. Tennis outfits consisted of long skirts over full petticoats; white, long-sleeved blouses; a bow tie or long, thin tie; and a hat. By 1903, uniform hems rose to mid-calf, though dark stockings still covered the legs.

In just a few decades, athletics became an essential part of college life at Converse. "To the college girl of this great twentieth century," *Concept* proclaimed in 1910, "athletics constitute almost half of her college life." During the first half of the century, the Converse College Athletic Association (CCAA) emerged to promote spirit, sportsmanship, and team play among members of the student body. The CCAA sponsored a fall barbecue and campfire where new students were urged to participate in sports. The event marked the beginning of the year's competition among the different clubs and classes, and the year culminated with a Field Day that included a variety of activities. The 1911 yearbook, for example, listed games like dodgeball, potato runs, arch ball, medicine ball, crow race, dumbbell relay, basketball throw, one-legged relay race, chase ball, and sack races, among others.

Sports had become such an integral part of campus life in the first decade of the twentieth century that the CCAA began to award a "C" letter to basketball players and those who won specific events at Field Day. The criteria for this distinction became increasingly stringent: women earned their letter by accruing points awarded for athletic prowess, but also for other feminine qualities and for personal health. In 1919, for example, students accumulated 1,000 points to earn a letter, and exhibiting correct posture was one of the requirements. By 1926, organized sports, including basketball, baseball, field hockey, archery, track, swimming, and tennis had replaced more casual games. Indeed, no woman could consider her college career complete "unless she has been a member of the rowing club, hockey team, or some of the numerous others that exist," *Concept* claimed, and she would "sacrifice almost anything for her athletics."

Fashion also helped encourage women's participation in sports. The "Gibson Girl," an athletic, voluptuous ideal created by illustrator Charles Dana Gibson, was the upper-class standard of feminine beauty at the turn of the century. In Spartanburg, wrote historian Howard L. Preston, "the 'Gibson Girl' and the



This program from Converse's 1913 Field Day appeared in the 1913 edition of the college yearbook, Y's and Other Y's. In the competitive events, seniors and sophomores teamed against juniors and freshmen. Courtesy of Archives and Special Collections, Mickel Library, Converse College.

'Converse Girl' were interchangeable." Furthermore, images of fashionable young women engaging in sport helped to encourage and motivate students "who had previously been given every reason to believe that athletic competition was too strenuous and physically taxing for them." As the century wore on, the Gibson "updo" hairstyle disappeared, and gym uniforms transformed. Converse adopted a more liberal style of shorter dresses and hairstyles through the 1920s, but only gradually did students begin to wear shorts. Although women at state institutions in North Carolina changed their uniforms in the 1930s, pictures of Converse athletes in shorts do not appear until the 1950s.

The emphasis on women's poise and personal health continued throughout the twentieth century. Carolyn Duer Pennell, class of 1950, explained that in her day, one requirement for earning a letter was to quit smoking for six weeks. Pennell remembered that she "always fulfilled the other requirements" but "just could not give up the smoking." She never achieved the coveted "Block C" award and admitted that "at times" her teams "weren't very good," but Pennell also recalled having lots of fun and laughing a lot. Mary Lib Spillers Hamilton, class of 1957, also remembered the "posture requirement." She remarked that Henrietta Browning, the head of the Physical Education Department, "was constantly reminding the students to hold their shoulders back," even correcting their posture herself when necessary.

Until the 1960s, Converse followed the philosophy of physical educator Helen N. Smith, who in a 1931 article



Top, Taken on the back campus in the 1920s, this photograph shows students playing basketball as part of a physical education class. On the far right, officiating, is Henrietta Browning, professor of physical education at Converse College from 1924 to 1957. Middle, The Converse College Athletic Association and the Department of Physical Education sponsored intramural swimming, tennis, field hockey, volleyball, basketball, and golf by the eve of the Great Depression. This photograph of students playing volleyball on an outdoor court is from the 1936 Y's and Other Y's. Bottom, The 1982 edition of Y's and Other Y's included this photograph of field hockey practice on the back campus. In the picture, Debra Baldi '82 (left) and Cathy Hindman '82 fight over the ball, while Stacy Smith '83 (far left) and Jeannie Blackmon '80 (far right) move into position. The player in the background cannot be identified.

titled “Evils of Sports for Women,” warned against the commercialization of sport. She advocated playing for enjoyment with the “spirit of play and fellowship” rather than intercollegiate competition and star athletes. Physical education and athletic competition were intended for exercise, health, and general well-being, and all students, not just selected athletes, participated. In pursuit of healthy living, gardening was included in the physical education curriculum from 1934 into the 1950s. Activity courses stressed grace, poise, body strength, and habits of lifelong recreation. From the late 1940s until the 1960s, Converse students participated in Play Days held at nearby colleges, particularly sister women’s institution Winthrop College. In the 1960s Converse shifted to intercollegiate athletics.

The change was modest. In 1973, Converse’s only sports teams were tennis and field hockey, both in transition from club activity to intercollegiate competition. That year, twenty-three-year-old Margaret Sakowski, an undergraduate athlete at women’s institution Queens College with a master’s degree in physical education from the University of Georgia, arrived as instructor and coach. In addition to teaching a full academic load of activity courses, Sakowski inherited the tennis and field hockey teams. In the next few years, she added basketball and volleyball as intercollegiate teams. Competition was minimal at first. The Converse “All-Stars”—a play on the Converse shoe company’s famous “Chuck Taylor All-Stars” sneakers—played private high school teams and a few colleges. Recruiting players was a challenge since only two schools in South Carolina played field hockey, and many of the original basketball players came from church leagues.

Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 prohibited discrimination on the basis of sex in educational programs and activities and required equal funding for men and women at schools receiving federal monies. At first, the law did not specifically address athletics, but an early administrative ruling expanded that interpretation. Many institutions stalled in implementing the law, but once change began, it accelerated rapidly.

During the 1970s and early 1980s, a dual system existed in women’s sports. Many co-educational institutions paid dues to both the National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) for men and the Association of Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (AIAW), of which Converse was a member. The system worked well initially and the AIAW grew from 250 to over 1,000 members in the 1970s. Many women physical educators were pleased because they did not want women’s sports to follow the profit-driven model of NCAA men’s sports.

By the end of the 1970s, though, the NCAA recognized the financial benefits of sponsoring women’s athletic championship events. The organization scheduled Division II and III championship tournaments in 1981 and allowed women’s teams to compete in the AIAW, the NCAA, or both. Most co-educational schools did not wish to support two organizations. In 1982, the first Division I NCAA women’s basketball championship proved a fatal blow to AIAW. When seventeen of the top twenty women’s basketball programs, including former AIAW powerhouses Tennessee, Louisiana Tech, and Old Dominion, opted for the NCAA tournament, NBC cancelled its contract for the AIAW tournament, and the organization soon dissolved.

The dissolution of the AIAW forced Converse to drop field hockey, but new conferences emerged in South Carolina under the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) for basketball, volleyball, and tennis. The biggest change in Converse athletics came in 1985 when the Board of Trustees inaugurated athletic scholarships. Converse sports teams for the first time became competitive, and the cross country, tennis, and basketball teams all gained national achievement in the late 1980s and early 1990s. But things were not all positive. Returning from a pre-season game in October 1987, the basketball team bus was run over by a trailer truck that resulted in the deaths of two players and the driver; four others sustained permanent lifetime injuries, and the rest were hospitalized. The team continued the season with walk-on players that included two future Miss America finalists. The basketball coach was relieved of his duties a few years later for attempting to dismiss and then refusing to play a talented lesbian athlete.

Converse joined the NCAA in 1993. But at the end of its inaugural year in its new conference, without any consultation with the athletic director, the Board of Trustees publicly announced the elimination of all Converse athletics programs as part of an emergency deficit reduction measure. The measure stunned coaches, who were actively recruiting: the basketball team's star recruit was on campus to accept a scholarship on the very day the announcement was made. Athletes, too, were incensed at being notified of the board's decision in such an "unprofessional" and callous way. The actual savings were very modest as the program was already operating on a shoestring. Coaches and players sewed the uniforms for the nationally ranked tennis team themselves, and a parent donated uniforms and sweats for the national tournament. Students and alumnae complained of the decision and the "shameless manner" of the announcement. The 1995 yearbook lamented the institution's

"devastating loss," and the athletics section of the 1996 edition consisted of a sole picture: a broken gymnasium sign beside a light switch turned off. All but six of the 39 scholarship athletes stayed at the college with their scholarships honored, but their athletic careers ended.

The administration quickly recognized that their decision had been hasty and shortsighted. The Athletics Program had been a lucrative recruitment tool, the partial athletic scholarships produced revenue not easily replicated, and the negative reaction was stronger than anticipated. Within six months, the board decided to revive the Athletics Program, but the level of competition and institutional affiliation had to be determined. Only a shell of the NAIA existed in the region, and NCAA Division III did not allow athletic scholarships, which the college intended to re-institute. Converse opted for Division II, with which most co-educational schools in the Carolinas affiliated, even though the institution would be the only women's college in the nation at that level. Reapplication to the NCAA, acceptance by a new conference, upgrading facilities, building new teams with coaches and players, and launching the new Valkyries mascot were accomplished by 2007, and a new fieldhouse opened in 2014.

Women's colleges played a key role in the early development of women's physical activity and athletics, but the small number of these institutions that exist today have low athletic profiles. Large NCAA Division I co-educational universities now dominate intercollegiate women's sports. Although the Physical Education Department was eliminated in 2005, Converse continues to teach activity courses, and it considers athletics an institutional priority for student recruitment and for the empowerment of women. As one of the smallest colleges in the country to maintain a robust women's sports program, Converse demonstrates that athletics are as central to its future as they have been to its past. ♦



Converse College added its newest varsity sport, acrobatics and tumbling, in 2016. Acrobatics and tumbling is an evolved form of gymnastics that incorporates athletic elements of cheerleading. The Converse team will begin competing in intercollegiate meets in the spring of 2018. Courtesy of the Converse College Department of Intercollegiate Athletics.

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Margaret S. Moore (BA, Queens College; MEd, University of Georgia) has served as coach, professor, department chair, athletic director, and president of the faculty senate in addition to many other roles during forty-four years at Converse College. She teaches a course on the history of women's athletics and is the recipient of numerous teaching and athletics awards, including the Kathryn Amelia Brown Teaching Award.



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*Postcards of Converse College, circa 1920s.
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