

**ENVISIONING BASKETBALL:
A SOCIO-BIOGRAPHICAL INVESTIGATION OF
RUTH WILSON - ONE OF WESTERN CANADA'S
SPORTING PIONEERS**

by

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ABSTRACT

The history of women's basketball in Canada has been influenced by key individuals who have challenged systemic barriers and social mores demanding appropriate female behaviors and activities. In this study I examine the sporting contributions of Vancouverite Ruth Wilson, whose involvements in the sport of women's basketball from the mid 1930s through the 1960s was significant. Though several studies have highlighted the importance of women's basketball in a North American context (Hall, 2002; Cahn, 1994; Kidd, 1996; Hult and Trekell, 1991), to date there has not been a significant examination of the development of basketball for women and its early advocates in western Canada.

Celebrating heroines of sport is not a straightforward matter. The concept of the heroic, as Hargreaves points out, must be examined through an analysis of the struggles and achievements of many women whose stories have been excluded or forgotten from previous accounts of women's sports and female heroism (Hargreaves, 2000). Thus my account of Ruth Wilson's contributions provides a unique case study of one woman's persistent and wide ranging efforts to change the ways in which girls and women participated in a sport which brought them freedom to compete, professional opportunities and in some cases, national status.

This study employs several methodological techniques. Data was collected through primary and secondary document analysis in conjunction with semi-structured open ended interviews. Ruth Wilson's contributions have been highlighted through the narratives of female sportswomen whom she mentored, assisted, befriended and coached and who are still living today to provide their memories about her role in changing the landscape of women's basketball in Canada.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

This thesis examines the sporting experiences of Vancouverite Ruth Wilson, highlighting her expertise and contributions to the sport of basketball in Canada. The history of women's basketball in the twentieth century encompasses complex issues that articulate women's struggles for acceptance in the sporting domain as well as serving as a vehicle for understanding women's desires for political and social emancipation. Sport history, as Roberta Park notes, requires "immersion in the general literature of the period being studied..." so that it does not remain "...isolated from other important cultural or intellectual issues."¹ Thus sports and the means by which they are practiced should be understood as "cultural artifacts" that provide insight into the dominant social structures and values of the society in which they are practiced.²

Ruth Wilson, an avid athlete, influential coach and women's sports advocate from 1936 until the late 1960s played a significant role in the development of women's basketball in Canada, particularly in the city of Vancouver. This thesis considers Ruth Wilson's activities and contributions to women's sporting opportunities in a variety of settings, from her involvement as a student athlete at the University of British Columbia, through her experiences

¹ Roberta J. Park, "Special Essay Research and Scholarship in the History of Physical Education and Sport: The Current State of Affairs," *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport* 54 (1983), 100.

² Roberta J. Park, "Sport, Gender and Society in a Transatlantic Victorian Perspective" In *From "Fair Sex" to Feminism: Sport and the Socialization of Women in the Industrial and Post Industrial Eras*, eds. Roberta J. Park and J. A. Managan (Towata, N.J.: Frank Cass and Co., 1987), 70.

as an athlete and coach with the commercial basketball league in Vancouver, and lastly in her contributions as an administrator and coach in the Canadian national program for women's basketball. My purpose is to highlight the extent to which her influence shaped future generation's sporting experiences and to credit her contributions to the national basketball program that exists in Canada today. By placing a variety of lenses upon her multi faceted career I hope to shed new light upon Wilson's unique contributions to this sport's heritage in Vancouver. She chose to make sport and the advancement of women in sport an important avenue in her career.

A secondary theme of my study highlights the shared experiences of a select group of living female athletes whose sporting careers were positively influenced through contact with Ruth Wilson and her activities. Through the process of interviews the voices of these female athletes provide intimate and profound descriptions of Wilson's influence and highlight how her legacy lives on through the stories and contributions of women who, like herself, have had a significant impact upon the sporting environment of the Vancouver region.

Women's Basketball in Canada

According to Ann Hall, "the story of women's sport, although clearly intertwined with developments in men's sport, makes more sense when we take into account the changing patterns of gender relations and their impact on cultural institutions."³ Battles for women's sports have often gone hand in hand with those for women's rights. Both athletes and activists have worked in

³ Ann Hall, *The Girl and the Game: A History of Women's Sport in Canada* (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 2002), 3.

sometimes different ways to highlight women's physical and mental abilities, to win greater roles in public life and to push views of womanhood beyond fixed definitions of distinctly "feminine" appearance and behaviour.⁴

Basketball played a fundamental role in both shaping and providing sporting experiences for women in North America as early as 1892.⁵ Invented for men in 1891 and taken up by women soon after, basketball took on increasing importance to girls and women in Canada as the twentieth century developed. It was a sport that crossed the boundaries and limitations of socioeconomic status, required little equipment and accommodated the participation of at least ten players at one time.

Despite the growing accessibility of the game, aspiring sports women were initially constrained by social mores demanding appropriate female behaviours. Many accounts suggest that lengthy debates surrounding who should play, coach, control, and officiate hindered women's participation in this sport.⁶ Basketball rules across North America in the early twentieth century were initially adjusted to reflect 'feminine' notions, leading to constraints which affected both physical and spatial dimensions of the women's game. For Canadians, early debates concerning appropriate basketball rules for women

⁴ Pamela Grundy and Susan Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass: The Remarkable History of Women's Basketball* (New York: The New Press, 2005).

⁵ Basketball was the first official intercollegiate competition for women in the United States. Women had been playing at Berkley since 1892. For a more detailed account of women's basketball in the united states see Lynne Emery, "The First Intercollegiate Contest for Women: Basketball, April 4, 1896" In *Her Story in Sport: A Historical Anthology of Women in Sports*, ed. Reet Howell (West Point, NY: Leisure Press, 1982) 417- 418.

⁶ Nancy C. Dosch, "'The Sacrifice of Maidens' Or Healthy Sportswomen? the Medical Debate Over Women's Basketball" In *A Century of Women's Basketball: From Frailty to Final Four*, eds. Joan S. Hult and Marianna Trekell (Reston, Virginia: American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance, 1991), 125-137; Marjorie Bateman, "Health Aspects of Girls' Basketball," *Mind and Body* 42 (1935), 21.

divided the country, where the form of the game was often determined by the region. Women in eastern Canada, for example, emulated their conservative American neighbours and adopted 'girls rules', while those in the west (far from such pressures), learned to play like the men, even if their teams were not regarded and supported in their institutions at the same level as the men's teams. Western Canadian teams benefited from this less conservative attitude producing some of the most competitive women's basketball teams in Canada.⁷

Ann Hall argues in The Girl and the Game: A History of Women's Sport in Canada, that there were three major turning points in the history of women during the twentieth century. The first occurred during WWI culminating in the right to vote and new sporting freedoms for women. Working class women turned to sport in their free time and many sports organizations and leagues developed as the "new woman" began to be viewed as strong, courageous and healthy as well as attractive.⁸ Female physical educators established new initiatives to increase opportunities for girls and women to achieve greater standards of fitness. Basketball and softball were selected most often as the team sports used to accomplish these new goals. In Vancouver, basketball, in particular became a sport for girls and women that was popular and easily accessible.

⁷The Edmonton Commercial Graduate Club, most often referred to as the Edmonton Grads, was founded and coached by J. Percy page for 25 years. They established a record and an image between 1915 and 1940 that is unparalleled in basketball history. For a detailed account see: John Dewar, "The Edmonton Grads. the Team and its Social Significance from 1915-1940" In *Her Story in Sport*, 541.

⁸ Hult and Trell, *A Century of Women's Basketball*, 208.

For female athletes there were many factors that enabled them to begin their sporting careers as young women, most often in their early teenage years. For those fortunate enough to pursue their sporting desires, opportunities to compete in highly competitive leagues ensued. Beginning in the 1920s the city of Vancouver became home to competitive sports leagues that promoted women's abilities and competitive nature, allowing for a broader range of displays of acceptable femininity. For a brief period in time, some women actively exercised their personal agendas, putting professional business and personal lives on hold to compete in semi professional leagues.

The second turning point occurred during WW2 when married women entered the labour force in massive numbers, some remaining there. Women's sport again flourished during war time, not only at the national and international competitive level but increasingly at the grass roots level. Following the war, and during the 1950s conservatism again reigned and women's sport increasingly emphasized feminine characteristics such as beauty and grace.⁹ Yet, women's basketball continued to be played in schools and universities and the Commercial leagues remained strong. As their popularity continued, pressures increased, for national and international competition during the cold war years. The 1960s saw a demand for the development of increasingly strong national teams for international competition, which ultimately had the effect of depopulating the Commercial leagues. By the late 1960s, Ann Hall's third turning point in the history of Canadian women's press for equality, there was a national basketball program

⁹ Hall, *The Girl and the Game*, 3.

in Canada and the adoption of the same set of basketball rules for women across the country.¹⁰

Justification and Relevance

An exploration of women's sporting history takes us to sites where the political, the personal, and the historical are all intertwined. Throughout the history of modern sport there have always been a small number of sporting women who have taken up sporting challenges, shown incredible skill and broken records equivalent to, or better than, those of male sporting heroes. To date there has been no significant examination of the development of basketball for women and its early advocates in western Canada, especially individual "sport heroines" such as Wilson whose impact on the sport was substantial. Although Hall,¹¹ has recently published a broad history of women's sporting experiences in Canada and Barbara Schrodt has highlighted the city of Vancouver's basketball domination after the *Edmonton Commercial Graduates* disbanded.¹² We know very little about female sporting experiences in western Canada, especially in basketball which was the main sport of entry for girls and women as the social climate changed during the interwar years and became increasingly supportive of sporting women.¹³

Basketball remains a highly popular female sport in Canada with community teams and varsity teams growing rapidly. A century of effort has

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Barbara Schrodt, "Vancouver's Dynastic Domination of Canadian Senior Women's Basketball: 1942 to 1967," *Canadian Journal of History of Sport* 26, no. 2 (1995), 67.

¹³ Bruce Kidd, *The Struggle for Canadian Sport* (Toronto, London: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 72.

produced what is today an awe-inspiring game, a fast, tough, artistic sport that encourages individual talents and promotes a sense of womanhood grounded in strength, confidence and achievement. Yet power relations concerning who decides appropriate rules of the game, monetary allocation and coaching leadership continue to be an issue requiring address by physical educators, athletes and national governing bodies. By examining past issues surrounding basketball and its development it is hoped that we may better understand the current state and the future promise of this sport in Canada.

In many respects this study is a genealogical analysis of women's basketball history in Vancouver, rather than a traditional historical analysis. A genealogical analysis examines how "taken for granted truths" are historical constructs that have their roots in specific social and practical agendas. Hence the examination of an individual's contributions to sporting development provides insight into specific struggles for women's opportunities in the sporting domain. As a feminist researcher interested in sporting opportunities for women it is clear that the questions guiding my research are simultaneously personally, politically and academically significant as well as shaped by my experiences. This research is informed by my own sporting past as a female varsity athlete at the University of British Columbia and my connections to the basketball community in Vancouver. Drawing on the work of Richardson and Naples I have sought to articulate "a collective story", one that draws on the reflections and narratives of many individuals that are both shaped and

constructed through the social discourses of individuals' lives.¹⁴ This study provides narrative accounts of female sporting experiences and highlights the ways individuals make sense of their collective experiences in relation to one another and Ruth Wilson.

This thesis provides a rich opportunity to highlight the influence of one of Canada's premiere female sporting pioneers, and herald her contributions to the development of women's sport participation from the mid 1930s into the 1960s. Through the use of historical documents and oral history techniques I examine the role of Ruth Wilson and several outstanding females who competed with her and for her in educational institutions and on various Commercial league teams. As Susan Cahn has pointed out, the use of oral history provides access to information about the past that is unavailable from the written record, providing rich and important data through which to explore power relations and social dynamics in women's sports.¹⁵ In combining oral histories with the vast amounts of newspaper coverage and a collection of interviews with former players who participated in the commercial basketball league in Vancouver from 1946-1967, I have sought to articulate the experiences of influential female athletes who have been until now absent from women's history in Canada. Ultimately this thesis seeks to identify and connect key institutional developments and critical moments of individual and

¹⁴ Nancy Naples, *Feminism and Method: Ethnography, Discourse Analysis, and Activist Research* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

¹⁵ Susan Cahn, "Sports Talk: Oral History and its Uses, Problems, and Possibilities for Sports History," *The Journal of American History* 81, no. 2 (1994), 594.

collective action that have fostered the continued participation for many girls and women in the sport today.¹⁶

Ruth Wilson: Sporting Pioneer

No story of women's basketball in Western Canada is complete without attention to Ruth Wilson. A sporting pioneer, born in the first half of the twentieth century, Wilson ventured into both traditional and non traditional female sporting areas. She became a women's sports advocate, leader, mentor and coach. With a stunning list of accomplishments, including four Canadian Championships as a basketball player; three trips to the softball world championships; many appearances on the women's provincial golf team at National Championships; and a bronze medal as a coach of Canada's 1967 Pan American Games basketball team, she also became the first woman recognized nationally to referee a league basketball game, earning a reputation as Canada's answer to Babe Didrikson Zaharias.¹⁷ Incredibly focused, she worked for the professional advancement of women in sport and career. Wilson has been declared Canada's best all round athlete of the 1940s and 1950s with her commitment to sport and female achievement an evident priority throughout her lifetime.¹⁸

¹⁶ John Tomlinson and Alan Sugden, "Digging the Dirt and Staying Clean," *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 34, no. 4 (1999), 385.

¹⁷ Wendy Long, "Wilson remembered by those lives she touched: Fund set up to establish a Ruth Wilson memorial scholarship at UBC" *The Vancouver Sun*, November 13, 2001.

¹⁸ Women's History Month 2002 - Celebrating B.C. Women in Sport. "Celebrating BC Women in Sport Ruth Wilson - All Round Athlete," British Columbia Ministry of Community Services, http://www.cserv.gov.bc.ca/women/whm/2002/women_sport/r_wilson.htm (accessed January 10, 2005).

Born in Calgary in 1919, Wilson moved to Vancouver with her family when she was an infant. She was the third child born to Lily Plant Wilson, a teacher of physical culture and Major A.E. Wilson a business man whose success in oil ensured the family's economic survival during the depression. At an early age Wilson excelled in tennis, golf, swimming, volleyball and basketball. Her experiences in sport were supported by her family's financial stability as well as the burgeoning opportunities for girls and young women for sport in Vancouver when she was a child. In Vancouver as in many other western Canadian communities at the time, females were seeking opportunities to compete in highly competitive activities such as softball, and basketball. If their labour was not crucial to family survival (as was the case for Wilson) their free hours could be easily taken up with clubs and sports.¹⁹ Encouraged by her family she recalled how, at a young age, she began playing in her backyard and, like so many women influenced by the *Edmonton Grads* basketball team, she "spent hours out there playing the *Grads*" dreaming that one day she would get the chance.²⁰ The liberal environment, in addition to the several fitness movements including the Pro-Rec movement in British Columbia, and particularly Vancouver enabled Wilson to pursue her athletic endeavors.²¹

¹⁹ Veronica J. Strong-Boag, *The New Day Recalled: Lives of Girls and Women in English Canada, 1919-1939* (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman, 1988), 233.

²⁰ Interview with Barbara Schrodt, Vancouver, B.C, 2006.

²¹ In 1934 a training program called "Pro Recreation" shortened to "Pro Rec" was established under the dominion provincial plan and continued until 1953. This program trained physical educators and practitioners with a focus on physical education. For a more complex overview see Barbara Schrodt, "Federal Programmes of Physical Education and Fitness: The Contributions of Ian Eisenhardt and B.C's PRO-REC," *Canadian Journal of History of Sport* 25, no. 2 (1984), 45.

In 1934, already an accomplished athlete, she experienced the loss of her father, and learned to use her involvement in sport as a means to cope, as well as please her mother (an individual well versed in the importance of physical education).²² With her mother's support and financial backing for her education Wilson enrolled at the University of British Columbia (UBC) with her sight set on becoming a teacher. She was thus a successful athlete well before she entered UBC, and continued to be a popular and respected athlete and co-ed while she attended the institution. Wilson reflected nostalgically on her many successes and joys experienced through sport at UBC during various interviews while she was alive.²³ Upon graduation from UBC and having completed her teacher training program she entered the work force and remained in the educational system as teacher and then later as a school guidance counselor. Her involvement in basketball continued throughout her professional career. She participated in what was called the Vancouver commercial basketball league in both the Senior 'A' and Senior 'B' league divisions. This was a semi professional basketball league where teams were sponsored by local merchants, companies and schools. Two of the most famous Vancouver teams were sponsored by a local meat packing company and a local jewelry store. These teams were called the *Hedlunds* and the *Eilers*. Wilson played on four *Hedlunds* Canadian Championship teams (1943-1946); coached the first *Eilers* teams to two Canadian championships (1950,

²² Interview with Tracy, Vancouver, BC, June 2006.

²³ These interviews were not conducted by myself. Wilson had passed away before I could personally interview her. Resources and copies of previous interviews were obtained through Dr. Barbara Schrod, Fred Hume UBC athletics sport historian and the BC Sports Hall of Fame. I would like to offer my deepest gratitude towards all of those who provided information.

1951); was manager of the 1959 Canadian team participating in the Pan American Games; was named Canadian national team coach in 1966; was the bronze medal coach for the 1967 Pan American Games team; and coached collegiate teams at the University of British Columbia, Simon Fraser University and Western Washington University (USA). She also served for ten years as a Vice-President of the Canadian Amateur basketball Association (CABA).²⁴

Reflecting on her life she once stated “I have had an interesting life, it has not always been easy, I have had times, well, when it was quite [pause] sad.”²⁵ Only a few years after the loss of her father she also experienced the loss of her husband, a fighter pilot, in the Second World War. She never re married and spent the duration of her life taking care of her mother and sister. Both passed away before her. When Wilson felt sad she said she often turned to sport and those individuals she knew through sport in order to raise her spirits and distract her from the losses she had experienced. She had a handful of close friends, many of whom were connected to the sporting community in Vancouver. Together these friends supported one another and helped to advance opportunities for women in sport as physical educators, coaches and administrators with various sports organizations in Canada. Wilson’s sports’ network and the circle of friends she maintained through sport remained like

²⁴ The *Hedlunds* were a senior ‘A’ team in the Vancouver commercial basketball league. They were sponsored by a local meat packing company. They won the Canadian Senior ‘A’ national women’s five consecutive times (1942-1946). The *Eilers* were also a team that competed in the Vancouver senior ‘A’ commercial women’s basketball league. The team was originally organized and coached by Ruth Wilson. They were the first Canadian team to play internationally since the 1930’s and they represented Canada at the 1955 Pan American Games. They dominated the Canadian basketball scene in the 1940s and 1950s.

²⁵ Interview with Ruth Wilson conducted by Fred Hume, Vancouver, B.C. 1993.

family, visiting her often until she died in 2001. Several of those individuals who were her close friends provided information for this research project.

Organization

This thesis is divided into six chapters. The first chapter introduces the reader to the topic of this thesis and provides context and the cultural relevance of this study. The second chapter frames the study itself; how it was planned and the methodology used as well as providing the theoretical context for the study. This is followed by a literature review in chapter three where key bodies of literature related to the history of women's sports and the role of physical education and women's basketball history are discussed.

Chapter four presents an account of Ruth Wilson's sporting accomplishments and contributions. It is based on an analysis of primary and secondary documents as well as interviews conducted with Ruth Wilson by UBC sport historians Barbara Schrodtt and Fred Hume.²⁶ It follows Wilson's involvement in women's sport and her growing commitments to basketball in tandem with her career path, examining her experiences in basketball while attending university, and during her employment as a teacher and school counselor with the Vancouver school board where in her spare time she coached and maintained various volunteer roles. I begin by discussing her formative sporting experiences as a student at the University of British Columbia followed by an exploration of her contributions to the Vancouver

²⁶ This interview conducted by UBC Athletics Sport Historian Fred Hume is the only known audio visual interview of Ruth Wilson. It was recorded for her induction into the UBC Sports Hall of Fame in 1993. In the video Wilson describes her sporting accomplishments at the University of British Columbia and in Vancouver in general.

Commercial basketball league. Lastly I examine her role as Vice-President of the Canadian Amateur Basketball Association. I show how several enabling factors fostered her sporting talent and encouraged her to press for greater sporting opportunities for women. Capitalizing on the popularity and celebrity status she gained from her athletic endeavors she was able to represent women in a variety of contexts both on and off the basketball court and was responsible for organizing the first women's national tournament in 1958. Thus I highlight the role of sport in shaping identities and confronting barriers that have traditionally limited the sporting experiences and activities available to women from the mid 1930s to 1967.

Chapter five examines Wilson's contributions through the recollections of her peers, a group of women who knew her well and were directly influenced by her activities both on and off the basketball court. Through the process of interviewing it became evident that Wilson not only influenced their sporting opportunities, she shared many of the same experiences. In many respects the collective experiences of her peers highlight the changing definitions of femininity experienced by sporting women at a time when Wilson's advocacy was both effective and influential in their lives (especially during the 1950s and 1960s). As her successors, these female athletes sustained her tradition of "giving back" to the community through taking on various roles in the Canadian Basketball Association (CABA), as national team members and coaches. Their collective experiences highlight the changes that took place at the

organizational level for sports such as basketball, reflecting changing women's roles in society at large.

In the final chapter of this thesis I reflect on the importance of life history research and the utility of highlighting the accomplishments and contributions of women like Ruth Wilson. In addition, I discuss possibilities for future research examining the life experiences of sporting women who have contributed in many ways to the sporting opportunities shared by women today.

CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY

Spoken Lives

This study is a qualitative inquiry in which I employ several methods in order to gain a greater understanding of Ruth Wilson's contributions to the sport of women's basketball in Vancouver, and more generally in Canada. As O'Brien Cousins and Vertinsky suggests, "it is sometimes less important to know quantitatively what a large group of people do with their lives than to know what exceptional individuals do and why."²⁷ This chapter begins with a discussion of biographical and historical methods followed by an overview of the methodological tools I have used in this study. What began as an initial exploration into one person's life and sporting experiences quickly became the vehicle for examining not only Ruth Wilson's experiences, but the shared experiences of women like herself who played basketball in Vancouver from the mid 1930s through to the development of a women's national basketball program in 1967. Prior to conducting this research I spent five months working on various research projects at the British Columbia Sports Hall of Fame and Museum. It was here, while immersed in the Honoured Member inductee's files that consist of newspaper articles, scrapbooks and personal artifacts that I began to see the importance of documenting the role particular women had in enhancing sporting opportunities in Vancouver. While many are honoured in the Hall of Fame, very little is known about their activities, especially Ruth

²⁷ Sandra O'Brien Cousins and Patricia Vertinsky, "Recapturing the Physical Activity Experiences of the Old: A Study of Three Women," *Journal of Aging and Physical Activity* 3 (1995), 146.

Wilson's formative contribution to women's basketball in Canada. In memory of these contributions and in light of her accomplishments on the women's varsity basketball team at the University of British Columbia, an endowment fund scholarship is awarded each year in her name after the first home game of the season.

As a former member of the women's varsity basketball team this research is simultaneously personal and political. It was in this role that I first heard about Ruth Wilson's basketball experiences and became aware of her important contributions to Canadian women's basketball. Following the work of O'Brien Cousins, I realized that those who study women must begin from women's experiences as described by women themselves – to try to understand the concrete conditions of women's experiences with sport in the past.²⁸ It is through the process of remembering that Wilson's story and her contributions continue to be acknowledged by future generations. As with much of women's history and sport history, stories are often retold in an oral tradition, thus making it even more important to document Wilson's contributions while those who knew her personally are still actively involved in the basketball community.

This thesis employed several methodological techniques. In the first section I used primary and secondary document analysis as well as recorded interviews conducted with Ruth Wilson prior to her death in 2001. I was fortunate to have access to several interviews with her prior to her induction into the British Columbia Sports Hall of Fame and the University of British

²⁸ Ibid., 148.

Columbia Sports Hall of Fame. One such interview was a video tape where I could see her expressions and body language, providing a special depth to my understandings of her while capturing what de Beauvoir has called the “magic in recollection, a magic that one feels at every age.”²⁹

For the second part of my thesis I conducted interviews with four women who were directly involved with Ruth Wilson in various sporting capacities. These interviews and their responses provided an added insight into my initial interpretation of Wilson’s sporting contributions. Again, following the work of O’Brien Cousins, conversational life interviews were used because they “are appealing to this age group, are historically important, and can be effectively recorded on tape with emotional nuances intact.”³⁰

This thesis turns away from merely telling the “story” about how the sport of basketball made the transition toward a nationally unified sport in Canada. It speaks more to the life histories and choices certain women made in order to contribute to the development of a sport in an era that was not particularly supportive of such developments for women. Specifically I look at how the women I interviewed created meanings and interpreted their reality, since it is the subject’s construction of her world that ultimately matters in explaining behavior.³¹ As Janet Ransom explains, the “social and historical constitution of the subject is not a limit on women’s agency, but the precondition of women taking action. It is because, not in spite of, our

²⁹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age* (New York: Putnam, 1972), 361.

³⁰ O’Brien Cousins and Vertinsky, “Recapturing the Physical Activity Experiences of the Old,” 148.

³¹ Ibid.

embeddedness in discursive practices that political action is possible.”³² Each of the women I interviewed contributed to sport in Canada at both the local and national levels hence it was important to listen to their stories and the ways they recalled Ruth Wilson’s impact in their lives and on women’s sport more generally in Vancouver.

Primary and Secondary Resources

Following a poststructuralist framework, I conducted a discourse analysis of approximately thirty newspaper articles from the historical archives of British Columbia’s local newspapers the *Province* and the *Vancouver Sun*, the University of British Columbia’s campus paper, the *Ubyyssey* as well as UBC’s annual year book the *Totem*. I also examined eleven interviews conducted by Dr. Schrodt with former athletes who participated in the Vancouver Senior ‘A’ commercial basketball from 1936-1967. Three of these interviews were with Ruth Wilson. A discourse analysis entailed examining how, “languages and knowledge about social subjects were produced and circulated through words, sounds, and visual images.”³³ There were also several scrap books donated by former athletes from Vancouver’s commercial basketball league, kept at the British Columbia Sports Hall of Fame that I examined. The texts and various media were analyzed in a way that underscores the fact that words and their meanings are socially produced and constructed. Words mediate between the world we know and that which we are trying to convey. These resources

³² Janet Ransom, "Feminism, Difference and Discourse: The Limits of Discursive Analysis for Feminism." In *Up Against Foucault: Explorations of some Tensions between Foucault and Feminism*, ed. Ramazanoglu (New York: Routledge, 1993), 133.

³³ Michael Atkinson, "Sport Gender and Research Method." In *Sport and Gender in Canada*, eds. Paul White and Kevin Young (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 9.

provided the context and background information about the women I interviewed as well as showcased several examples of Ruth Wilson's contributions and involvements in the Vancouver basketball community in a local and national context. Specifically I was looking for examples of the ways in which traditional gender roles were constructed and represented through the media. This information provided insight into the social climate and the public support of women's competitive basketball in Vancouver from the mid 1930's through the 1960's.

Woman to Woman: A Feminist Perspective

Using a feminist perspective, I am concerned with the lives and experiences of women and how they understood their social locations and experiences through the collective identity of being a woman. Feminist theory drives feminist research, which is meant to improve women's position in the world and to empower individual women in their research process.³⁴ Feminist research seeks to challenge the values assigned by the dominant culture and offset the impact of gender stereotyping. It strives to provide a vision of the future by analyzing the past and present to implement change. Thus feminism is both theory and practice, a methodological toolkit that provides insight into the social forces that shape our experiences and helps us to understand women's lives. Importantly in this research is the understanding that there does not exist one category of woman nor is there one type of feminist. Following the work of Hall it is clear that "there is no single feminist way to do

³⁴ Paula J. Caplan and Jeremy B. Caplan, *Thinking Critically about Research on Sex and Gender*, 2nd ed. (New York: Addison-Wesley Longman, 1998), 123.

research; in fact there is a great deal of creativity and variety,”³⁵ The purpose of my study was to understand what constituted the sporting experiences of Canadian women several decades ago, whose views on gender roles and sport for women tended to or were largely confined to liberal ideology and basic notions of equal access.

I employ a variety of methodologies in order to account for the complexity of individual's lives. McCall notes “Personal narratives and single group studies derive their strength from the partial crystallization of social relations in the identities of particular social groups.”³⁶ In this study I examine the sporting experiences of a group of women who were closely connected to Ruth Wilson. In trying to locate Wilson's contributions I sought to establish differences in her experiences as compared to the other women's sporting experiences and their contributions to the sport as players, coaches and administrators. The women who participated in this study grew up in different regions of Canada and have their own life experiences and understandings of sport and opportunities. What was interesting is how they came together in both the sport and professional world and remained in close contact with Wilson and one another for many years.

Biographical Research and Oral Histories: Uncovering Personal Narratives

The use of biography as a research method offers insight into the complex relationships between individual's experiences and actions while

³⁵ Ann Hall, *Feminism and Sporting Bodies: Essays on Theory and Practice* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 1996), 74.

³⁶ Leslie McCall, “The Complexity of Intersectionality,” *Signs* 30, no. 3 (2005), 1771.

placing the subject within a social/societal context.³⁷ According to Vertinsky and O'Brien Cousins, it is important for those who wish to study women's lives to carefully examine the experiences of women and the ways they describe their experiences.³⁸ Edel contends that, "Biography, like history, is the organization of human memory, assembled and hoarded papers are bits and pieces of that memory."³⁹ Therefore I used oral histories to speak to the broader construction of meanings through social events. Goodson and Sikes suggest, that "It is an illusion to think that we capture only the person's voice when we capture a personal story. What we capture is mediation between the personal voice and wider cultural imperatives."⁴⁰ This research is, in essence, an assemblage of memories that together add to my construction of Ruth Wilson's contributions to the sport of basketball. Memory is not only fallible; it is also shaped by the circumstances that prompt it. Personal accounts are built up from experiences and actively cast in terms of preferred vocabularies.⁴¹

This thesis is informed by the work of Catherine Hall who suggests that, "feminist historians begin with the post-structuralist notion that reality is constructed and given meaning through discourse, and their work represents a shift in historiography from empirical notions of reconstructing a "real" past and

³⁷ Veerle Stroobants, "Stories about Learning in Narrative Biographical Research," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 18, no. 1 (2005), 49.

³⁸ O'Brien Cousins and Vertinsky, "Recapturing the Physical Activity Experiences of the Old," 146.

³⁹ Leon Edel, *Writing Lives: Principa Biographica* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1984).

⁴⁰ Ivor Goodson and Pat Sikes, eds., *Life History Research in Educational Settings: Learning from Lives* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2001), 234.

⁴¹ Jaber Gubrium and James Holstein, *Narrative Practice and the Coherence of Personal Stories*, Vol. 39, 1998), 5.

tackling questions of determination and causation, to a post-structuralist and deconstructuralist approach.”⁴² Gubrium and Holstein build on Hall’s work and encourage the researcher to analyze the way a story is told in order to fully understand the message that is trying to be conveyed, for the act of recollection and the conditions of the storytelling “shape what is conveyed.”⁴³ One of the challenges I encountered when asking individuals to reconstruct their basketball experiences is the fact that social memory “draws on pre-existing storylines and ways of telling stories.”⁴⁴ It was important to listen closely to the stories the women chose to share, encouraging open dialogue as well as subtly reminding them that the focus was on Ruth Wilson’s contributions. This was particularly important for me in understanding my own degree of reflexivity, and the difficulties associated with attempting to tell an individual’s story that is not my own, for as Smith suggests, the biographer brings all of his or her own personality, understandings, and experience to the task of creating a view of the individual under study.⁴⁵

Positionality and Reflection

The past we know is the one we shape by the questions we ask, yet our questions are shaped by the context we came from, and our context includes the past. One of the challenges in this research was to develop some distance

⁴² Catherine Hall, "Politics, Post-Structuralism and Feminist History," *Gender and History* 3, no. 2 (1991), 208.

⁴³ Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein, eds., *Postmodern Interviewing* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2003), 163; Alexandra Georgakopoulou, "The Other Side of the Story: Towards a Narrative Analysis of Narratives-in-Interaction." *Discourse Studies* 8, no. 2 (2006), 854.

⁴⁴ Alexandra Georgakopoulou, "The Other Side of the Story: Towards a Narrative Analysis of Narratives-in-Interaction." *Discourse Studies* 8, no. 2 (2006), 854.

⁴⁵ Edel, *Writing Lives: Principa Biographica*, 36.

from my own views on sporting opportunities for women. I have benefited from the guidance of top coaches and athletic trainers and achieved a notable level of success as a varsity athlete at Mount Royal College in Calgary and at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. Though I reflect positively on my experiences, they were directly influenced by the fact that I was a woman. An example would be the inequalities I experienced in regard to financial support, equipment/team clothing and meal monies (women received a fraction of what the men received) while playing on these varsity teams. Also important to this research is the fact that I consider myself a feminist and am dedicated to educating people about the ways gender impacts our sporting experiences. One of the ways I seek to educate and facilitate increased opportunity for girls and young women to participate is through coaching and volunteering.

My personal location in this study is deeply embedded in the sporting culture that I sought to examine. My social location as a varsity team member at the University of British Columbia facilitated insider status within the group of women I was interviewing for this research. I was able to develop a mutual understanding through shared experiences before I even approached my subjects to participate. I also gained insider status through my participation in the Vancouver women's basketball league where I maintained contact with the participants on a regular basis. Though I clearly did not experience the same environment or barriers to participation as these women did, I did enter into this research project knowing that my ability to participate in this league was aided by the efforts of Wilson and her successors. Through this research, I

developed friendships with those interviewed and enjoyed the dialogue I shared with the participants as they began to relive/recall past events of their life, often experiencing a new perspective.

The biggest threat to case study reminiscences may be the recollection of the past with new biases from the present, but it could be argued that it may be better to at least represent the biases of society's older citizens than to accept uncritically the biases of outsiders who, up until now, have largely interpreted women's lives.⁴⁶ Not only is this thesis an important contribution to the understanding of women's sporting experiences in Canada, it also speaks to the experiences of local woman from Vancouver who have had a direct influence upon many young girls and women's sporting careers, including my own.

Gaining Access, Recruitment and Interview Procedures

For the second part of my study I assembled a list of potential interviewees based on a list of contacts provided by both the B.C. Sports Hall of Fame and Museum as well as the University of British Columbia's women's basketball program. I chose participants based on the following criteria: 1) Had a personal connection/ knowledge of Ruth Wilson's contributions to basketball 2) Could speak to her involvements in the sporting community in Vancouver. Once potential participants were selected they were mailed a letter outlining the project and asking for their participation (see appendix no. 2). The mailing addresses and contact information of the potential participants were publicly

⁴⁶ O'Brien Cousins and Vertinsky, "Recapturing the Physical Activity Experiences of the Old," 148.

available through UBC Basketball Alumni list, the University of British Columbia Athletics Hall of Fame Honoured Member files, and the British Columbia Sports Hall of Fame Honoured Member files. Individuals who agreed to participate in the project were given a consent form (see appendix no. 3) to read and sign at the time of the interview. A meeting time and place was then arranged that was suitable for both the participant and myself.

Interview Format

I conducted five interviews with individuals who had been active participants in Ruth Wilson's life, and one with a UBC sports historian who had interviewed Wilson for her 1993 induction into the UBC Sports Hall of Fame, and was familiar with her contributions to women's sports.⁴⁷ There were several challenges I experienced in trying to locate individuals to participate in this study. Several of those who I wished to interview no longer lived in Vancouver and I could not find their new address, while others simply declined to be interviewed or were sick and unable to participate. Ultimately I was satisfied with the group who chose to participate because based on my earlier research these individuals knew Ruth Wilson well and had shared many experiences with her. Sample interview questions were provided to the participants prior to the interview (See appendix no. 4). The interview questions were organized around their relationships and understandings of

⁴⁷There were two individuals in particular who I would have liked to have interviewed that declined to participate in my study. This posed a particular problem for me in that they would have been individuals who may have provided a deeply political context around Wilson's accomplishments and potentially demonstrated that it was not in effect always as easy to advance opportunities for women athletes as Wilson made it seem.

Wilson's involvement in the sport of basketball during three specific periods of Wilson's life. Interviews focused on her contributions as a player, coach and administrator, all experiences that these women had in common. These areas of her involvement were selected based on my early stages of research, particularly while going through interview transcripts conducted by Dr. Schrodtt with eleven individuals who were involved with the commercial league during the 1940s through 1960s, secondary documents, newspaper clippings and scrap books at the BC Sports Hall of Fame. I then compiled a list of questions that were provided to the participants before the interviews. The questions were then used as a guideline for the interviews.

The interviews were structured as follows: 1) their own early experience with basketball and sport in general 2) the participants' knowledge of Wilson's involvement in various forms of sports administration throughout her career as well as administrative roles they carried after she retired 3) their involvement as well as Ruth's in the commercial basketball leagues in Vancouver. Participants were encouraged to be spontaneous and interactive.

The interviews lasted between one to two hours with each participant offering insights into both her own sporting career as well as Ruth Wilson's. They were conducted on a one to one basis with the exception of one where two participants participated together (a second interview for one participant and a first for the other). They were conducted in a semi-structured format, and were audio tape-recorded. Field notes documenting body language, speech, mannerisms, hesitation to particular questions as well as an overall

feel for the climate of the interview were taken. The materials that I collected prior to the interviews - scrap books and newspaper clippings were used in the interviews to act as memory 'triggers' to stimulate conversation and clarify the questions I was asking. The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed at a later date. Once the interviews were transcribed they were reviewed and analyzed according to consistent themes that emerged through the process of transcribing and contextualizing.

The Participants

Lana⁴⁸

Lana is the eldest of the women interviewed. Though I am not sure of her exact age I would place her in her late seventies. Lana grew up in the city of Vancouver and has remained in the lower mainland and vicinity her entire life. She is fully independent and lives with her sister, also an athletic star of the 1940s and 50s in their home in North Vancouver. Both Lana and her sister remain very active and incorporate physical activity into most days. At the time of our interview she indicated to me that she was taking a break from skiing (which she does often) due to a broken collarbone she had sustained in a fall a few weeks prior. Of all the participants Lana knew Ruth Wilson for the longest amount of time. She was first introduced to her as a student attending high school in the city of Vancouver. Ruth Wilson was one of her teachers who later

⁴⁸ The participants have all been given pseudonyms.

coached her for many years both at the University of British Columbia and on the *Eilers* commercial basketball team in the city of Vancouver.

Lana has been inducted into several halls of fame and has received many awards for her athletic accomplishments throughout her lifetime. She played for fourteen years with the Vancouver *Eilers* basketball team, winning the Canadian championship nine times. She then played for Canada's representative team at The Pan American Games and World Championships in 1955, 1959 and 1963. In 1996 she was inducted into the Canadian Basketball Hall of Fame.

She is a retired school teacher who taught at John Oliver High School in Vancouver, for twenty-five years before heading up the Physical Education Department at Eric Hamber High School. Lana was also involved with various administrative and organizational roles with basketball in Canada and Vancouver, most notably as a vice-president on the Canadian Amateur Basketball Association. Her sense of humor and dedication to sport were two characteristics that stood out during the interview process. She expressed a passion and enthusiasm for sports. My meeting with Lana took place in one of her favorite coffee shops where we chatted along with her close friend Sharon who also took part in the interview. Together the three of us went through old photographs, newspaper clippings and team memorabilia while reminiscing about Ruth Wilson and her impact on the sporting environment in Vancouver.

Sharon

Sharon is an active energetic individual in her mid to late sixties. Sharon grew up in Ontario and did not re locate to Vancouver until 1962. She recalled a very conservative environment growing up in Toronto where her early experiences of sports were mandated by female physical education instructors. She first encountered Ruth Wilson when she was selected to represent Canada on the women's basketball team for the 1959 Pan American Games. Her first encounters with Wilson were through correspondence in the months leading up to the 1959 Pan American Games; Wilson was vice president of the CABA at the time.

Sharon was an outstanding Canadian athlete. She competed in ten national basketball finals, played on six national champion club championship teams and was a member of the Canadian Basketball team at three Pan American Games. She also played on seven national Volleyball club championship teams. Professionally Sharon was a high school teacher and coach at John Oliver high school in Vancouver. She interacted with Wilson on many occasions both during and after Wilson's retirement from the school board.

I first met Sharon while attending a women's basketball function at UBC. She is a tall woman who prides herself in her athleticism and fitness and still participates regularly in community basketball. Her positive disposition and energetic detailed narrative accounts were both informative and entertaining. Our first interview took place after I attended her regular Monday night pick up

basketball game. It was a practice session for the *Retreads* 65+ women's basketball team in which she, Lana and Clair are involved.

Clair

Clair is also a very active and fit individual in her mid to late sixties. She grew up in the city of Calgary where she admits to being well versed in the importance of physical activity and sport for women. Clair had a unique experience in sport and could be considered one of the top Canadian players of all time. She was inducted into the Canadian Basketball Hall of Fame in 1994. Before she relocated to Vancouver in 1962 she played basketball for an Edmonton basketball team that flew her once a week to participate in league games.

Clair first encountered Ruth Wilson when she was selected to be part of the Pan American Games team in 1959. Like Sharon her early communications and knowledge of Ruth Wilson consisted of correspondence letters and telephone conversations. As a player she represented Canada at international competitions and the Pan American Games in 1959, 1963 and 1967. After enjoying her career as a player Clair moved into the coaching realm where she coached the Canadian women's basketball team for several years beginning in 1970. She also served a term as vice-president of the Canadian Amateur Basketball Association. Clair was also a high school teacher for the Vancouver School board and taught at John Oliver high school and Prince of Wales high school. She also plays for the *Retreads* basketball team with Sharon on Monday nights.

Our meeting took place very informally in Clair's home. She shared with me several of her old photographs of Canadian women's national teams that she was involved with, as well as various programs and newspaper clippings that she had saved over the years. She was very open and easy to talk with, sharing with me her own personal challenges in the sport as well as the many victories she experienced as both a player and administrator.

Tracy

Tracy is in her late fifties and is the youngest of the women interviewed. She shared a similar life long connection to women's sports as the other women interviewed, yet her sport of excellence was volleyball. Tracy grew up in the city of Vancouver and first encountered Ruth Wilson while she was attending high school at John Oliver. Ruth Wilson quickly became a mentor and friend. In Ruth Wilson's later stages of life Tracy was her primary care giver and close friend. It is from this unique and special relationship that Tracy was able to recall Ruth Wilson's experiences and contributions to the sport of basketball. She was able to reflect on Wilson's desire to help and mentor aspiring athletes and young professionals. Her close friendship with Wilson also provided insight into the amount of time Wilson spent organizing and being involved with basketball in various capacities. It was from this interview that I was able to really understand the personal side of Ruth Wilson's experiences.

Tracy's volleyball career spanned 20 years, starting in high school in 1962, to national and international competition from 1967 to her retirement in

1982. At age sixteen, Tracy was the youngest Canadian ever to participate in volleyball at the international level. She was a member of nine National Senior Women's Championship teams from 1967 to 1973, and 1979 to 1980 and was a National All-Star four times. Tracy spent several years as a high school teacher and coach. She went back to school after teaching for a few years to complete her PhD in clinical psychology. She is still a healthy and active individual who like Lana, Sharon and Clair maintains a positive relationship with sport. The interview was conducted in Tracy's home.

Data Analysis

According to Strauss, qualitative data analysis is an on-going concurrent process that includes: organizing, managing, reading, reviewing, reflecting, describing, coding, categorizing, and making comparisons which lead to a final account.⁴⁹ The process of coding requires the researcher to organize data into small manageable sections that can further be organized through the process of assigning words or phrases to those manageable collections of data.⁵⁰ The transcripts were coded in two stages, the first stage of which occurred during the transcription process. This stage consisted of applying broad themes to specific sections of data, where I noted areas of recurring themes and patterns. These themes were established around similar ideas presented by the participants, consistencies that emerged after reading the transcripts

⁴⁹ Anselm L. Strauss, *Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists* (Cambridge Cambridgeshire ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 319.; Larena Nicole Hoeber, "Putting Organizational Values into Practice" (PhD diss., Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 2004), 67.

⁵⁰ Anselm L. Strauss and Juliet M. Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1998), 312.

numerous times. The first level of analysis sought to establish broad categories and meanings associated with experiences. Patton uses the term “sensitizing concepts” to provide reference and direction when analyzing data.⁵¹ This term highlights the role of the researcher in determining the meanings associated with a statement from a participant both in the context of the interview as well as in a broader societal context.

There were two broad themes that became evident through the process of transcription and coding: 1) The participants’ experiences in the sport of basketball while participating in the sport on competitive teams and 2) their experiences and connection with the sport of basketball upon retirement from playing in various coaching and administrative roles.

The second stage consisted of further analysis where I read more deeply into the transcripts and developed more specific codes, often based around particular words and phrases used by the participants. This step was to establish sub categories and specific examples of experiences within each of the categories established during the first level of analysis.

The participants’ experiences while playing competitive basketball were sub divided into the following themes: the importance of family support in facilitating and encouraging them to pursue the sport of basketball; the participants’ reflections of the opportunities they experienced to play competitive basketball and some of the unique travel opportunities that ensued as a result of their talent in the sport; and their experiences while playing

⁵¹ Michael Q. Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2002), 598.

competitive basketball. The latter theme helped to elicit their understandings of the impact of gender on their experiences. I was interested in the women's understandings of the ways they felt they had to present themselves both on and off the basketball court. Particular attention was directed towards media representations and displays of femininity.

The participants' experiences upon retirement from playing competitive basketball was divided into two sub themes. One highlighting their career goals as physical education teachers, examining how they chose this particular profession, and the impact of this choice in facilitating opportunities within the sport community. My final sub theme examined the impact of my participants as volunteers and mentors in the Vancouver sport Community.

It was from a collective view of the participants' experiences that I was able to reflect on the unique contributions that Ruth Wilson made to the sport of women's basketball in Canada as a player, coach and administrator.

CHAPTER THREE: LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature that explores the history of women's sport participation in North America encompasses various understandings of the sporting body. In the last two decades sport history scholars have contributed substantially to the breadth of knowledge about women in sporting domains, providing a basis for a better understanding of sport's participation today. Studies show that women's experiences in sport and physical activity in Canada defy neat historical generalizations. In part this is because women did not constitute a single group, and their behaviors and attitudes never conformed to a single general pattern.⁵² Women's roles also varied across time, connected as they were to the broader ideological and economic contexts. Sometimes women were active participants in a sport, while at other times they were behind-the-scenes producers or promoters. Thus an examination into the gendered nature of female sports participation is fundamental in understanding the social climate experienced by important sport builders such as Ruth Wilson. For women participating in sports there is a substantive literature underscoring their entrance into the traditional male sporting domain as a highly contested terrain.⁵³ Women's personal experiences in a variety of sporting contexts have

⁵² Grundy, "From Amazons to Glamazons: The Rise and Fall of North Carolina Women's Basketball, 1920-1960," *The Journal of American History* 87, no. 1 (2000), 115.

⁵³ Hall, *Feminism and Sporting Bodies*; Jennifer Hargreaves, *Heroines of Sport: The Politics of Difference and Identity* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2000), 284; Susan K. Cahn, *Coming on Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Women's Sport* (New York: Free Press; Toronto: Maxwell Macmillan Canada, 1994), 358; Helen Lenskyj, *Out of Bounds: Women, Sport, and Sexuality* (Toronto, Ont.: Women's Press, 1986), 179; Patricia Vertinsky, *The Eternally Wounded Woman: Women, Doctors, and Exercise in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Manchester, UK ; New York; New York, NY, USA: Manchester University Press; 1990), 279; Susan Birrell and Mary G. McDonald, *Reading Sport: Critical Essays on Power and*

proven particularly useful in this research project because they speak to a whole range of complex cultural issues around gender, citizenship, bodies and bodies of knowledge.

In this review, I will first explore a broad base of knowledge examining women's sport history research that pertains directly to the roles and representations of the female athlete in the first half of the 20th century through the cold war period. Importantly here are studies examining the impact of the female physical educator and her role in shaping opportunities for women and their athletic pursuits. Next, I will draw upon materials highlighting the history and importance of basketball in shaping women's sporting experiences across North America, followed by a focus upon the local context of Vancouver and the opportunities for playing basketball women experienced in both educational venues and commercial leagues from the interwar years to the mid 1960s. Lastly, I will discuss the personal meanings of the female athlete experience and the notion of feminism in relation to female sport's advocates.

Female Sporting Experience in North America WWI -1960s

Historians have labeled the period from the 1890s to World War I the Progressive era, largely because "progress" was the goal of contemporaries, especially members of the urban middle class. Mark Dyreson points out that where sport was concerned, before WWI North American women were mainly relegated to the sidelines by a variety of groups who "crafted the popular notion that their nation was best understood as a sporting republic - a robust

Representation (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000), 326; Susan Birrell and Cheryl L. Cole, *Women, Sport, and Culture* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 1994), 408.

and essentially masculine policy.”⁵⁴ His work is essential in understanding how substantially the social climate changed for women as their entrance into the labour force resulted in transforming gender roles and opened up opportunities for them to participate in sporting endeavors. The period after WWI is often labeled the “The golden age of sport.” This label highlights a time in the 1920s when society in general placed an increased focus on leisure activities and sports. Women as a result of their wartime experiences were able to express newfound freedoms in numerous ways including a new openness to self expressions often demonstrated through dress, dance and athletic pursuits. The actress and athletic women were society’s new role models. Some popular female athletes maintained status second only to film stars and celebrities. Thus women seeking social reforms and new opportunities found they had gained more of a presence in many areas of society including the sports world without having to be strong advocates for feminism. Hult suggests that during the interwar years “since women’s gender boundaries had widened, their role expectations expanded in the next two decades even without a strong feminist advocacy group.”⁵⁵

In the extensive literature that focuses on both the roles and representations of the female athlete during these years one of the most insightful explorations of female athletic participation is Susan Cahn’s Coming on Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Women’s Sports.⁵⁶ In

⁵⁴ Mark M. Dyreson, "Icons of Liberty Or Objects of Desire? American Women Olympians and the Politics of Consumption," *Journal of Contemporary History* 38, no. 3 (2003), 435.

⁵⁵ Hult and Treckell, *A Century of Women's Basketball*, 6.

⁵⁶ Cahn, *Coming on Strong*, 358.

her study she explores the changing roles that females experienced during this time of transformation for women's sport programs, and suggests that the increased participation of females in sporting domains resulted in "a new standard of womanhood."⁵⁷ Cahn's analysis provides a useful insight into how female sporting pioneers shaped and contested traditional definitions of femininity and womanhood that resulted in new definitions for contemporary female athleticism. Her historical research concerning the construction of gender and sexuality at this time is perhaps the most comprehensive account to date. Importantly for this research, her work focuses on the female athlete as well as female physical educators and how both worked to negotiate various roles and identities in a changing world.

Dyreson, Bouchier, Struna, Ross, Bentley, Adams, and Schrodtt have all built upon Cahn's analysis indicating that achievement did not always match rhetoric, though many women did see their positions and the quality of their lives enhanced.⁵⁸ Their collective works indicate that some urban working women, for instance, earned more pay and improved conditions. They also indicate, perhaps not surprisingly, how some of the industries that employed women organized calisthenics or physical culture classes and then team sports to promote personal health and worker efficiency. Society in general became

⁵⁷ Ibid., 32.

⁵⁸ Nancy L. Struna, "Beyond Mapping Experience: The Need for Understanding in the History of American Sporting Women," *Journal of Sport History* 11, no. 1 (1984), 122; Mary Louise Adams, *The Trouble with Normal: Postwar Youth and the Making of Heterosexuality* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 224; Dyreson, "Icons of Liberty Or Objects of Desire?" 435; Becki Ross and Erin Bentley, "Gold-Plated Footballs and Orchids for Girls, A 'Palace of Sweat' for Men" In *Disciplining Bodies in The Gymnasium: Memory, Monument, Modernism*, eds. Patricia Vertinsky and Sherry McKay (London, New York: Routledge, 2004), 99; Barbara Schrodtt, "Problems of Periodization in Canadian Sport History," *Canadian Journal of History of Sport* 21, no. 1 (1990), 65; Struna, "Beyond Mapping Experience," 124.

more open to the idea that women could excel in sporting endeavors and as a result club teams for women proliferated. Most often in these years individual teams were supported by companies and regional industries and sports such as basketball, bowling, tennis, baseball, volleyball, and eventually softball were among the most popular. Teams that were not sponsored by commercial enterprises were often supported or provided facilities by various institutions, ranging from urban governments to churches. Incentives for supporting these teams varied. Some companies supported them as a form of good advertising, while for the athletes' competitive opportunities, and even on occasion, additional income and prizes were to be had.⁵⁹ Improvements and declining prices of sporting goods, as well as the increasing popularity of sports for spectating also spurred the organization of leagues, both amateur and semi-professional in nature.⁶⁰

Chepko and Couturier, in 'From Intersection to Collision: Women's Sports from 1920 to 1980' point out that "between 1920 and 1960 the "separate spheres" of men and women did not so much collide, as intersect."⁶¹ Building on Bouchier and Dyreson's work they show how women began to re-evaluate themselves during the interwar years, not only based on their gender but through the activities in which they participated and roles they maintained in society. They also provide further insight into how homosocial relationships

⁵⁹ Amateur athletes were careful to not receive monetary compensation for their participation so as to maintain amateur status. They did report receiving gifts from sponsors and often employment in the businesses that were sponsoring the team. Most often their roles in organizations/ companies were that of support staff, secretaries or retail associates.

⁶⁰ Grundy, "From Amazons to Glamazons," 112.

⁶¹ Steveda Chepko and Lynn Couturier, "From Intersection to Collision: Women's Sport's from 1920 to 1980" In *Issues and Controversies in Women's Sport*, ed. G. Cohn (Reston, VA: AAHPERD Press, 2000), 79.

between women began to be viewed as threatening as society became increasingly preoccupied with the masculine virtues associated with competitive sport. Lenskyj's Out On The Field: Gender, Sport and Sexualities addresses the issue in Canada providing an in-depth examination of sexual prejudice, sport and gender identity. She examines the extent to which homophobia, coping strategies and identity construction have been pervasive themes in the life experiences of female athletes during the twentieth century. Homosocial relationships in sports are an important topic of discussion in Lenskyj's work and she draws attention to women's participation in post secondary institutions where individuals interested in sport were pressed to maintain carefully guarded displays of feminine appearance and "normal" behaviour.

Although it is tempting to view a societal preoccupation with traditional feminine appearance and "normal" behaviours as existing predominantly in the sporting realm, Mary Louise Adams in Constructing Normal Citizens: Sex Advice for Postwar Teens shows how society established and perpetuated "normal" behaviours in many dimensions of Canadian society after WW2.⁶² This notion of normality is particularly important in examining displays of masculinity and femininity and Adams shows how the general idea surrounding femininity was that "femininity... is not something one feels but something one learns."⁶³ 'Normality' she continues, was a primary marker of difference

⁶² Mary Louise Adams, "Constructing Normal Citizens: Sex Advice for Postwar Teens" In *Contesting Canadian Citizenship: Historical Readings*, eds. Dorothy E. Chunn, Robert J. Menzies and Robert L. Adamoski (Peterborough: Broadview, 2002), 280.

⁶³ Ibid., 282.

between individuals and between groups of people and she addresses notions of control and nation while highlighting acceptable activities and social roles for females in Canada. In particular she shows how distinct boundaries were drawn between what were considered to be appropriate displays of masculinity and femininity. Her analysis of normal behaviour and societal preoccupation with maintaining and perpetuating strict guidelines provides a useful basis for examining the societal preoccupation with traditional gender roles that Ruth Wilson and her successors experienced and confronted.

Barbara Schrodt in 'The Problems of Periodization in Canadian Sport History' contends that Canadian society was still suffering from the impact of the war and the depression in the years immediately following WW2 through the 1950s. Schrodt provides a substantial body of evidence to suggest that a real shift in Canadian sport policy and culture did not occur until the 1960s when an increased importance was placed on success at international competitions. National and provincial sport organizations received increased government funding while men's professional sport organizations and female amateur sporting opportunities began to take on greater importance in the lives of many Canadian citizens. Schrodt's work is also important in understanding the types of activities available for women after WW2. She, like Adams, discusses what "getting back to normal" meant for servicemen and women who had experienced increased opportunities as a result of the men being away at war. In many respects getting life back to the way it was before the war forced society to revert back to conservative times experienced before the

war. Schrodtt provides a context for sport and the sporting environment of Ruth Wilson and describes the 1950s and 1960s as sustained periods of growth as society recovered from two decades of depression and war.⁶⁴ She also maintains that this period provided an increase in the status of women in sport; a status that women had not experienced since the late 1920s and early 1930s, the “golden age of women’s sports.”⁶⁵

The Canadian Female Sporting Body

M. Ann Hall’s The Girl and the Game: A History of Women’s Sport in Canada and Bruce Kidd’s The Struggle for Canadian Sport are two of the most comprehensive examinations of Canadian female sport’s participation during the 20th century.⁶⁶ Hall’s work is a piece of feminist history where thinking about gender relations, the history of these relations and their future from a women’s perspective takes a central role. She integrates a wide variety of sources and materials in order to produce a coherent account of the sporting experiences of Canadian women. Both Kidd and Hall systematically outline the challenges facing female athletes and discuss class divisions in physical activity and sporting activities. Their analyses provide the foundation for further examination of female sport participation on many levels, especially at the local level where less is known. Like much of the sport and gender literature, both Hall and Kidd focus on mainstream sporting activities and

⁶⁴ Schrodtt, “Problems of Periodization in Canadian Sport History,” 68.

⁶⁵ Dyreson, “Icons of Liberty Or Objects of Desire?” 435; Hall, *The Girl and the Game*, 284; Cahn, *Coming on Strong*, 358; Allen Guttmann, *Women’s Sport: A History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 339.

⁶⁶ Hall, *The Girl and the Game*; Kidd, *The Struggle for Canadian Sport*.

dominant groups. Their work offers an introduction to the various physical activities and health promotion activities deemed acceptable for females without oversimplifying or failing to acknowledge critical issues surrounding women's sports participation in Canada. My study answers Hall's call to fill in the gaps of Canadian sport history through a close examination of the sporting contributions of individuals like Ruth Wilson and several of her successors at the local level in western Canada.

Two significant contributions to our understanding of the development of women's health and physical education programs in Canada are provided by Helen Gurney in her collective works Girls Sports: a Century of Progress: in Ontario Schools and The CAHPER Story: Fifty years of Progress.⁶⁷ Together these works provide a view of the history and development of provincial physical education programs for women in Canada as well as the various organizations developed to promote physical activity and sport programs for women such as the Canadian Association of Health, Physical Education and Recreation. Gurney's accounts are particularly important for understanding the difficult times experienced and the disconnect felt by women across Canada wishing to promote physical activities for women in the two decades following WW2. She recalled that "after the war, there was a rapidly diminishing interest in physical fitness" as well as a shortage of individuals trained to be physical education instructors.

⁶⁷ Helen Gurney, *Girls' Sports: A Century of Progress in Ontario High Schools* (Don Mills, Ontario: Ontario Federation of School Athletic Associations (OFSAA), 1979); Helen Gurney, *The CAHPER Story, 1933-1983: A Review of the Growth and Development of the Canadian Association for Health, Physical Education and Recreation* (Vanier, Ont.: The Association, 1983), 207.

There were many reasons for the disconnect that women felt regarding physical activity standards across Canada. Women in eastern Canada sought solidarity and sovereignty in their physical education programs by maintaining programs exclusively run by women for women. Women in western Canada, lacking female leadership and resources, often found they had to work with the men's programs in order to sustain funding and accessibility. This resulted in two distinctly different programs for athletics. In western Canada women participated in many of the same sports and utilized many of the same rules as the men. It was their ability to work with the men who often elected female representatives to oversee programs that allowed for a more liberal and competitive environment. This, however, resulted in a conflict between eastern and western Canada, where female physical educators from eastern Canada sought to legitimate and standardize the western programs according to their own ideals and the nature of their institutions.

The sport of basketball provides an excellent example of how two different schools of thought regarding women's physical capabilities could be represented in a sport setting. As early as the 1920s depending upon which region of Canada you lived, (east or west of the Manitoba border) girls played either girls' or boys' rules. Gurney in her work, detailed the process that led to the implementation of standardized rules for the sport of basketball in Canada, from the first publication of a girls' rule book in 1962 published by CAHPER to the eventual publication and standardization of women's basketball rules in

1966.⁶⁸ Her studies provide a chronology of women's sport participation from the early 1900s through the 1980s. She also provides insight into the conservative nature of female physical educators in eastern Canada and their influence on the rest of Canada. Importantly for this study, Gurney discusses the more liberal environment experienced by female athletes in western Canada as well as highlights several key leaders of physical education who were appointed to the Canadian Basketball Association in its early development. She attempts to explain how women in both parts of the country sought to establish physical education programs and sport initiatives that served the 'best' interests of the women participating.

Accounts of the sporting and educational environment in Vancouver and specifically at the University of British Columbia are sparse though Lee Stewart's It's Up to You: Women at UBC in The Early Years has provided a useful and comprehensive resource.⁶⁹ In her exploration into women's early experiences from the 1930s through the period immediately following WW2 at the University of British Columbia, Stewart suggests that women who played sports were a rather unique breed of non-conformists who were seeking an ideal of physical excellence that, like higher education, had historically been viewed as a male pursuit. According to Stewart the feminine ideal and the masculine connotations of athleticism posed specific contradictions for sporting women that made female solidarity, playing girl's rules essential.⁷⁰ In the

⁶⁸ Gurney, *Girls' Sports*, 39.

⁶⁹ Stewart, *It's Up to You: Women at UBC in the Early Years* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press for the UBC Academic Women's Association, 1990), 176.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 122.

tough social climate of the time, women found it necessary and helpful to seek solidarity with each other. Becki Ross and Erin Bentley's explorations of the experiences of female athletes at the University of British Columbia provide colourful examples of how conservative views at UBC immediately following WW2 limited opportunities for women athletes. Sporting women, they suggest, were "constantly reminded of their role as men's helpmates on the sideline and behind the scenes, as well as their moral familial obligation as the nation's future wives and mothers."⁷¹ It was thus a conservative time for females and particularly female athletes in Canada where according to Ross and Bentley "a complex nexus of cultural retrenchment and resistance" was embodied.⁷²

Female Physical Educators

Martha Verbrugge has observed that "through sex coded activities, physical education marks and patrols the border between "masculinity" and "femininity."⁷³ Physical educators in North America played a significant role in shaping how individuals both defined and pursued fitness and sporting activities. Female physical education, according to Grundy took shape in the late nineteenth century "amid Progressive Era visions of efficient, orderly, and harmonious development," and its adherents frequently defined themselves in explicit opposition to the competitive sporting style of men.⁷⁴ By the early twentieth century, female physical educators had carefully designed regimens

⁷¹ Ross and Bentley, "Gold-Plated Footballs," 99.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Martha Verbrugge, "Recreating the Body: Women's Physical Education and the Science of Sex Differences in America, 1900-1940," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 71, no. 2 (1997), 273.

⁷⁴ Grundy "From Amazons to Glamazons," 117.

of exercise and athletic development that reflected the virtues associated with femininity and guarded women against over taxation of their delicate systems.

In Canada, the teaching profession was traditionally perceived as an acceptable profession for females and many early female physical educators championed a special version of exercise and sports where females were expected to pursue less strenuous and less competitive activities in comparison to men's. Bouchier describes how physical educators as early as the 1890s controlled their own athletic programs and sought female solidarity through the types of activities and competition styles they practiced. She contends that early female physical educators were informed by notions of female biological limitation that were perpetuated through popular medical literature. Female professionals working in schools and other institutions believed they had a unique calling to prepare women for their roles as future wives and mothers.⁷⁵ Bouchier also provides an account of women's changing roles and the importance of physical education for women leading up to and after WW2. She suggests that women physical educators, primarily trained in institutions where women controlled women's physical education programs, were able as a result of the war effort to "extend their work beyond the walls of the educational institution."⁷⁶ While competitive athletics developed growing links to commercial enterprises outside of institutions of higher learning, physical educators sought to use sports to promote alternative ideals,

⁷⁵ Nancy Bouchier, "Let Us Take Care of our Field; the National Association for Physical Education of College Women and World War II," *Journal of Sport History* 25, no. 1 (1998), 68.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 66.

emphasizing harmony and order rather than competitive fervor.⁷⁷ Grundy builds on Bouchier's argument and suggests that physical educators were not content with building programs at their own institutions. Rather they sought to expand their influence, with women's varsity basketball as one of their main targets. True to their credo most female physical educators were energetic, independent, highly organized women, and they went about their work with missionary zeal.⁷⁸

Gurney's The CAHPER Story: Fifty Years of Progress is the most detailed account of the development of the female physical education profession in Canada. By the 1920s, the majority of female physical educators in Canada were trained in eastern Canada and influenced by leading physical educators in the United States. Though highly influenced by developments and the organizational stronghold experienced in Ontario and eastern Canada, Gurney attempts to provide an overview of the conditions and programs available throughout the entire country. Her account introduces key individuals who contributed to the organization of a standardized set of basketball rules to be taught by all physical educators in Canada. Western Canadian women, due to the smaller numbers involved, relied on the guidance of male physical educators to help organize women's programs. In eastern Canada female physical educators were influenced by the maternal attitudes of their colleagues in the United States and sought solidarity and control of their programs. Kidd, Hall and Somers have all outlined the early mandates of

⁷⁷ Bouchier, "The Politics of the Physical: American Female Physical Educators and the US Army Air Forces at War," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 11, no. 1 (1994), 66.

⁷⁸ Grundy, "From Amazons to Glamazons," 127.

female educators in Canada and the effects these mandates had on establishing less competitive activities for female athletes.⁷⁹ However we have less information on their effects at the local level and in institutions of higher education. In particular, the role of female physical educators is inextricably linked with the development of basketball for women in North America. Their involvement and ideas surrounding appropriate activities and representations for women participating in this sport resulted in many issues and controversies that have surrounded the sport since its inception in 1892.

Women's Basketball History in North America

While the history of women's basketball has been extensively documented, much greater attention has been paid to the early developments of the sport in an American context. According to Grundy, in North America from the 1920s into the 1950s, women's basketball was one of the most popular sports for playing and watching.⁸⁰ The game held a particular appeal because it enabled girls and women to move past restrictions that limited them in many other domains of life.⁸¹ Basketball's origins in a culture of Christian Athleticism in the late 19th century stimulated rapid growth across North America and contributed to its acceptability for women. The game acted as a stepping stone for women interested in sport by allowing them to be more competitive and to take sport to the next level. Hult and Trekell's, A Century of Women's Basketball: From Frailty to Final Four is perhaps the most

⁷⁹ Kidd, *The Struggle for Canadian Sport*; Hall, *The Girl and the Game*, 284; Florence Somers, *Principles of Women's Athletics* (New York: A.S. Barnes, 1930).

⁸⁰ Grundy, "From Amazons to Glamazons," 113.

⁸¹ Ibid.

comprehensive account.⁸² Their detailed account of the game offers insight into many of the barriers faced by female athletes during the development of the sport and is fundamental in drawing comparisons between the development of basketball in western Canada with that of the eastern Canada and the United States.

The original game of basketball was developed by James Naismith in 1891, a young Canadian instructor at the YMCA Training School at Springfield, Massachusetts, who was assigned the task of finding a new team sport for men. In 1892 Naismith shared his new game with a wider audience by providing a description of the game, a list of rules and illustrations for a local publication. The development of a separate game for women can be traced back to influential physical educator Senda Berenson at Smith College in the United States. Berenson read Naismith's publication and swiftly developed a new game for women that was both "womanly and vigorous," but that avoided the roughness that was involved in the men's game.⁸³ She solved the problem of perceived overexertion by dividing the court into three equal sections, requiring players to stay in their own designated section. Women were not permitted to swing at each other or bat the ball from the hands of another player. They were not allowed to hold the ball for longer than three seconds and they could not bounce or dribble the ball more than three times. It was not long after the game was developed that its popularity spread across the country and into the eastern regions of Canada where women at many

⁸² Hult and Trekell, *A Century of Women's Basketball*, 430.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 24.

educational institutions began playing. The first recorded intercollegiate game in North America took place in the United States in 1892 between the University of California-Berkeley and Miss Head's School.⁸⁴

Berenson believed that the success of basketball and its rapid development was a result of it being introduced at an opportune time in women's history where women needed a team sport.⁸⁵ Basketball taught women to make rapid decisions and facilitated cooperation in a way that did not align them too closely with the masculine virtues of the men's game. Under the watchful eye of female physical educators more amendments were made to curtail the competitive nature of the game. Intramural activities became the most often utilized form of competition or 'play' for women. Though the game for women was quickly adopted by schools, private clubs, community leagues and churches, it remained particularly strong in institutions of higher education in the United States and eastern Canada. This was partly because the large programs offered at institutions were able to employ separate physical educators for both the men's and the women's programs.

Female physical educators utilized an extensive network of colleagues to control girl's athletics in schools and colleges for several decades. Cahn, Hult and Trekell all provide accounts of the impact female physical educators had on women's athletic programs and specifically basketball. They highlight the movement which sought to limit competitive athletics and strenuous activities for girls and women, particularly in the eastern regions of North

⁸⁴ Ibid., 25.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

America where 'play days' and intramural programs for women reigned supreme.⁸⁶ Many authors such as Shackelford, Wushanley and Guttman also provide various detailed accounts of women's basketball history in the United States.⁸⁷

Women in Canada began participating in basketball as early as the 1890s. Although first introduced into institutions in eastern Canada, Basketball grew to be a very popular sport in Canada, particularly in the West where local teams like the *Edmonton Grads* came to dominate local and international competition.⁸⁸ To date the most comprehensive account of Canadian women's experiences in the sport of basketball nationally is found in Hall's The Girl and The Game, where she provides an overview of the significance of the sport in Canada as well as highlighting some of the controversies surrounding the rules that the women played in different regions of the country. By the late 1920s the conservative approach of women physical educators who maintained a particularly strong influence in eastern Canada was quite distinct from, and in many ways, out of sync with the attitudes and expectations of women participating in western Canada. In western Canada, like the rural and small town settings in the United States, women's basketball was a popular spectator sport highly influenced by the men's game. As early as 1922 when the *Edmonton Grads* began playing men's/boy's rules basketball other teams

⁸⁶ Cahn, *Coming on Strong*, 358; Hult and Trekell, *A Century of Women's Basketball*, 430.

⁸⁷ Grundy and Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass*; Guttman, *Women's Sports*, 339; Hall, *The Girl and the Game*, 284; Ying Wushanley, *Playing Nice and Losing: The Struggle for Control of Women's Intercollegiate Athletics, 1960-2000* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2004).

⁸⁸ Dewar, *The Edmonton Grads*, 541.

from western Canada followed suit. Women participating in the commercial leagues, most often employing the competitive men's game, often drew large crowds of hundreds of people. In the city of Vancouver, teams like the UBC 1929/30 women's basketball team who won the world championship in Prague, regularly sold out their gymnasium.⁸⁹

In western Canada, specifically in the city of Vancouver, the majority of women first began playing basketball in Sunday School church leagues or in the commercial basketball leagues. Deemed an acceptable sporting practice for women, church basement leagues and various YWCA organizations promoted female participation.⁹⁰ The organization of these leagues was such that the top level of play was called the Senior 'A' league while the less competitive league was called the Senior 'B' league. The most high profile teams in Canada, including the *Edmonton Commercial Graduates*, participated in the Senior 'A' category of the commercial leagues, as did several notable teams from Vancouver who dominated the national championships for twenty six years from 1942-1967.⁹¹

The early game that often took place in church basement leagues used slightly different rules than the game that is known today. Dewar's Basketball, Saskatchewan's Story 1891-1981 provides a detailed account of the rules as well as highlighting the types of opportunities available for women in Saskatchewan as well as in western Canada. He describes a girls' game

⁸⁹ Louise Zerbe, "The 1930 UBC Women's Basketball Team: Those Other World Champions," in Howell, *Her Story in Sport*, 549.

⁹⁰ Hall, *The Girl and the Game*, 35.

⁹¹ Schrodt, "Vancouver's Dynastic Domination of Canadian Senior Women's Basketball," 19.

where “initially, the game involved two teams of six players: two centers or “rovers” who could go anywhere on the court, two forwards restricted to the front court, and two guards who could neither leave the back court nor shoot. Players could only dribble once. Then they had to pass or shoot; there was a jump ball after each score.”⁹² These rules were not practiced for long as women’s teams were increasingly influenced by men’s programs and the success of teams like the *Edmonton Grads*.

Women who were able to attend post secondary institutions in western Canada most often played boys’ rules basketball. Women’s programs at institutions of higher education in western Canada were not able to accommodate separate instructors for both the men’s and the women’s programs. As a result the male leaders of physical education encouraged girls to participate in the sport using the same rules as the men’s teams. Once exposed to the competitive style of play women found they could play the game like the men and that they enjoyed it. This resulted in the controversy that divided eastern and western Canada regarding the appropriate rules that should be played by women in basketball.

An examination into the rule controversy in the city of Vancouver, specifically at the University of British Columbia is discussed by Vertinsky in her study of the War Memorial Gymnasium. She provides insight into the controversies that existed between eastern and western trained female physical educators in Canada and shows how battles over girls’ rules and boys’ rules basketball at the University of British Columbia (UBC) persisted

⁹² Dewar, “The Edmonton Grads,” 540.

well into the 1950's.⁹³ Gurney, Hall and Kidd also discuss the rules' controversy that divided female athletes wishing to participate in this sport in Canada well into the 1960s.⁹⁴

In many instances teams sponsored by university institutions as well as those sponsored by private enterprise all played in the same competitive basketball leagues. Towards the end of the season which usually ran from October through March, teams would travel via train across the country in a series of play downs in order to establish a national champion.⁹⁵ It was during these play down series that teams from the east and west would meet and find ways to compromise on the rules to be played in a particular game. Most often the teams would play one game or one half utilizing each style of play (girls'/boys').

Women's basketball in Vancouver is an area that particularly warrants further investigation because of the extent to which local teams dominated the senior national program for many years. Though much has been written about the *Edmonton Grads* domination little is known about why women in the city of Vancouver maintained their reign and produced such fine athletes. Schrod's discussion of the commercial basketball leagues in Vancouver after the Second World War is the only comprehensive historical account of women's basketball in Vancouver.⁹⁶ She focuses on the domination of Vancouver basketball teams from the time the Edmonton Grads disbanded in 1940 until

⁹³ Patricia Vertinsky, "'Power Geometries' " 61.

⁹⁴ Gurney, *Girls' Sports*; Kidd, *The Struggle for Canadian Sport*; Vertinsky and McKay, *Disciplining Bodies in the Gymnasium*, 223.

⁹⁵ Schrod, "Vancouver's Dynastic Domination of Canadian Senior Women's Basketball," 24.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

the end of the 1960s. In particular she documents the rise of the commercial basketball leagues during the 1940s through the 1960s. Often called industrial sport leagues, these sports programs for women were “seen as good public relations tools for business and industry.”⁹⁷ Emery, Cahn, Hall, Schrodts and Guttmann all discuss the rise of the industrial leagues, pointing out that sociologists have failed to provide accurate numbers of women who joined company teams and leagues. They acknowledge however, that the industrial leagues reached a much larger number of women than the colleges and universities did and that the level of competition was quite high.⁹⁸ Forbes, for example explores the role of commercial organizations in supporting recreation programs for women in her examination of the Eaton’s department store.⁹⁹ She contends that activities that were cheap, clean and accessible were most popular among women and basketball certainly fell into this category.

Dramatic changes in the governance and organization of Canadian sport at the national level from the mid 1930s to the 1970s influenced women’s basketball experiences. Gurney suggests that the first major development in the governance of sporting opportunities in the mid 1930s was the offering of degree programs in Physical and Health Education and Recreation.¹⁰⁰ The early leaders of organizations such as the Canadian Association of Health, Physical Education and Recreation and its predecessor the Canadian Physical

⁹⁷ Lynne Emery, “From Lowell Mills,” 107.

⁹⁸ Cahn, *Coming on Strong*; Hall, *The Girl and the Game*; Schrodts, “Vancouver’s Dynastic Domination of Canadian Senior Women’s Basketball”; Guttmann, *Women’s Sport*.

⁹⁹ Susan Forbes, “Gendering Corporate Welfare Practices: Female Sports and Recreation at Eaton’s during the Depression,” *Rethinking History* 5, no. 1 (2001), 59.

¹⁰⁰ Gurney, *The CAHPER Story*, 107.

Education Association recognized that if physical education and recreation were going to develop in Canada and provide worthwhile experiences for participants there needed to be properly trained leaders and teachers. Leaders in these associations set up communication networks amongst universities across Canada. At the University of British Columbia the appointment of M.L. Van Vliet and Miss Gertrude Moore to instruct physical education in 1936 was an example of the types of initiatives implemented across the country at this time. According to Osborne, these developments laid the foundations for the "institutions' Board of Governors to be receptive of the need for an official formal program in physical education."¹⁰¹ A further influence upon sporting opportunities was the Dominion-Provincial Youth Training Program popularly called 'Pro Rec' that was implemented in 1934 and ran until 1953. This innovative program was envisioned by the provincial Minister of Education in British Columbia, Dr. G. M. Weir, in order to provide healthy recreational activities and to combat the "demoralizing influence of enforced idleness" among unemployed youths.¹⁰² Typically, Pro-Rec initiatives involved calisthenics, team sports, track and field events, dancing, and physical fitness activities. Importantly this program encouraged individuals to be involved in regular forms of physical activity.

The work of McFarland provides a detailed account of the development of public recreation in Canada. In her work she describes the impact of the

¹⁰¹ Robert Osborne, "Origins of Physical Education in British Columbia" (University of Alberta, 1970).

¹⁰² Phyllis Barbara Schrodts "History of Pro-Rec: The British Columbia Provincial Recreation Program, 1934 - 1953" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Alberta, 1979).

national Fitness Bill that was presented to parliament in 1943 which resulted in the First National Fitness Act (1944-1945). With the passing of this Act all provinces appointed Directors of Fitness and Recreation and established The National Council on Physical Fitness. The Council's mandate included recreation under the broad umbrella of responsibility to "encourage, develop and correlate all activities relating to the physical development of the people through sports, activities and other similar pursuits."¹⁰³ Although the first Fitness Act was repealed in 1954, the Department of Health and Welfare continued to maintain a small fitness branch while organizations such as CAHPER continued to lobby the government to issue a new Fitness Act. In 1961, Prime Minister John Diefenbaker, a strong believer that national pride could be gained through Canadian success in international competitions, implemented bill C-131, the Fitness and Amateur Sport Act. This new Act increased funding to provincial organizations and provided a national focus for the development of athletes.¹⁰⁴ Hall contends that national involvement in amateur sport from the 1960's onwards resulted in the "rationalization, restructuring and professionalization of the Canadian sport system."¹⁰⁵ The passing of bill C-131 marked a dramatic change in the value systems and ideals that were to surround sport in Canada. Society was quick to adopt a high performance model where athletes and coaches benefited from increased

¹⁰³ Elsie McFarland, *The Development of Public Recreation in Canada* (Ottawa: Canadian Parks/Recreation Association, 1970), 51.

¹⁰⁴ Bill c-131 was intended to encourage mass participation as well as improve international sport performances. For a comprehensive analysis of the origins of Bill C-131 and its early impact, see: Macintosh, Donald et al. *Sport and Politics in Canada: Federal Government Involvement Since 1961*. (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987), 10.

¹⁰⁵ Hall, *The Girl and the Game*, 136.

financial support from the government from both the provincial and national level. This resulted in a new scientific approach to training methods that in turn facilitated the first training camps and developmental clinics for coaches and referees.

According to Hall, shifting patterns of employment as well as increased government funding all had an impact on the experiences women had participating in Canadian sport.¹⁰⁶ She provides a detailed account of the shifting nature of Canadian sport in the 1960s and her thoughtful analysis highlights the difficulties women as administrators faced in both eastern and western Canada. She notes that it was not until the mid 1960s when leaders from both regions of Canada were brought together and individuals were able to voice their concerns about the changes that were happening, could decisions be made about a new strategy for facilitating competitions and sport practices. Vancouverite Ruth Wilson, an avid athlete, influential coach and women's sports advocate played a significant role in these events during these years, creating and advancing opportunities for women to compete in highly competitive levels of basketball.

Unpaid Labour, Administration, Volunteer Roles, Coaches and Professionals

The role of women in the organization and the development of national sport organizations in Canada has been extensively studied by Schrodtt who shows how the development and organization of many sport programs in Canada was largely a result of the initiatives of volunteers. In 'Changes in the

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

governance of amateur sport in Canada,' she traces the development of various sport organizations from Canada's confederation in 1867 until the 1980s and provides an account of the many roles and duties volunteers undertook in developing sport in Canada.¹⁰⁷ Individuals using their free time to develop and coordinate sport programs often spent countless hours organizing schedules, competitions, locating funding and venues for sports. In particular women have been traditionally relegated to 'soft' areas of sports organizations, typically in the secretarial, educational and public relations domains.¹⁰⁸ Whitson and Macintosh's 'Gender and Power: Explanations of Gender Inequalities in Canadian national Sport Organizations,' builds on Schrod's examination of volunteer duties in national sport organizations and provides insight into the gendered nature of roles and duties allotted to individuals.¹⁰⁹ Several other studies have examined the roles of volunteers and the power relations that exist in sport organizations. Hargreaves, McKay, Cahn and Theberge have all shown how "unequal power relations between men and women remain prevalent in the staffing patterns of commercial, public and voluntary sport's agencies," and how women have been unpaid and experienced limited opportunities for advancement.¹¹⁰ In Managing Gender,

¹⁰⁷ Barbara Schrod, "Changes in the Governance of Amateur Sport in Canada," *Canadian Journal of History of Sport* 24, no. 1 (1983), 1.

¹⁰⁸ Josee Martel, "'it's A Long Hard Road to the Top': The Career Paths and Leadership Experiences of Women in Canadian Sport Administration" (Masters, The University of British Columbia), 51.

¹⁰⁹ David Whitson and Donald Macintosh, "Gender Power: Explanations of Gender Inequalities in Canadian National Sport Organizations," *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 24, no. 2 (1989), 137.

¹¹⁰ Jennifer Hargreaves, *Sporting Females: Critical Issues in the History and Sociology of Women's Sports* (London, New York: Routledge, 1993), Jim McKay, *Managing Gender: Affirmative Action and Organizational Power in Australian, Canadian, and New Zealand Sport*

McKay illustrates the continuance of highly gendered practices in the organization of national sport organizations offering valuable insight into the gender stratification often found within them.¹¹¹ Cahn has also examined women's roles in sport organizations identifying how the simultaneous increase in participation and decrease in leadership lead to women striking an unintended bargain, trading control over sport for greater access to sporting opportunities and resources."¹¹²

Women in the area of coaching both from a volunteer and a paid perspective have also experienced challenges in this domain of sport. Theberge contends that one of the factors frequently thought to hold women back in coaching is prejudice on the part of sport administrators.¹¹³ Her analysis of women's coaching experiences draws attention to women's struggles to break into networks traditionally reserved for males. Her analysis also highlights the double duty often experienced by female coaches who are engaged in partner relationships, wherein professional duties as coaches fall secondary to the responsibilities of the household.

Together these resources provided a useful background into the types of roles and the expectations Wilson and her successors would have experienced in coaching at a high level of basketball and as representatives on the Canadian Basketball Association. Wilson was both a product of the

(Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997).; Cahn, *Coming on Strong*, 358; Theberge, "Gender, Work, and Power: The Case of Women in Coaching," *The Canadian Journal of Sociology* 15, no. 1 (1990), 59; Theberge, "The Construction of Gender in Sport: Women, Coaching, and the Naturalization of Difference," *Social Problems* 40, no. 3 (1993), 387.

¹¹¹ McKay, *Managing Gender*, 217.

¹¹² Cahn, *Coming on Strong*, 260.

¹¹³ Theberge, "Sport and women's Empowerment," *Women's Studies International Forum* 10, no. 4 (1987), 302.

movement to establish acceptable guidelines for female physical activity as well as an influential leader in the community as both a coach and educator. The beliefs she maintained about the proper activities and coaching styles for men and women are important factors in understanding how she influenced and confronted barriers inhibiting the unification of the rules for women's basketball in Canada.

Personal Meanings of the Female Athlete Experience

Examining the importance of the sporting experience to women themselves is an area of interest for many scholars, including Burton, Cahn, Dworkin, Hargreaves, Heywood, Nelson, Mangan and Hong.¹¹⁴ They all articulate how women's increasing participation in sport introduced a new sense of authenticity, recognition of agency and of self. These studies examine how sportswomen over time increasingly found it less necessary to judge themselves in comparison with men, but participate in their sport as women on their own terms. As Chaudhuri and Strobel argue, however, the problems with such celebrations of agency is that they tend to link momentous feats with political movements and thus overlook the historical, personal and material differences between women. They contend that celebrations of sporting success and agency often simplify or essentialize the specific

¹¹⁴ Hargreaves, *Heroines of Sport*; Leslie Heywood and Shari L. Dworkin, *Built to Win: The Female Athlete as Cultural Icon* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).; Fan Hong and J. A. Mangan, eds., *Freeing the Female Body: Inspirational Icons* (London: Frank Cass, 2001); Mariah Burton Nelson, *Are we Winning Yet?: How Women are Changing Sports and Sports are Changing Women*, 1st ed. (New York: Random House, 1991).; Cahn, "Sports Talk," 595.

historical, cultural, geographical and discursive details of women's lives.¹¹⁵ Thus Cahn for example, reminds us that athletic success has often symbolized the struggle that developed between women expressing newfound athletic freedoms and men over resources and power.¹¹⁶ In many respects, today's champion sportswomen are still publicly and privately grappling with some of the same problems of gender, race, sexuality and class as their sister sport heroines decades earlier.¹¹⁷ To celebrate the feats of sportswomen and to highlight their particular styles of advocacy thus presents a challenge to the researcher. Acknowledging this, authors such as Golombisky, Holtzhausen and Hargreaves encourage researchers to question their own motivations for celebrating the accomplishments of female athletes and the consequences of labeling feminist motivations as directing the reasons for their dedication to sport.¹¹⁸

Central to my study are various constructions of femininity and women's roles both as athletes and sports advocates. In 'Constructions of Various Femininities Among the Oldest Old Women' Alex et. al. describe femininities as various ways of shaping oneself as a woman in relation to the impact of historical, social, and cultural circumstances.¹¹⁹ In a similar fashion the works

¹¹⁵ Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel, *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 276.

¹¹⁶ Cahn, *Coming on Strong*, 358.

¹¹⁷ Patricia Vertinsky and Christiane Job, "Celebrating Gertrudes: Women of Influence, Unique Accomplishments and Intrepid Sporting Adventures," In *International Perspectives on Sporting Women, Past and Present*, ed. Annette Hofmann (Copenhagen, Denmark: University of Copenhagen Press, 2005), 251.

¹¹⁸ Kim Golombisky, "Pioneering Women" and "Founding Mothers": Women's History and Projecting Feminism Onto the Past." *Women and language* 28, (2005), 12.

¹¹⁹ Alex et al., "Constructions of Various Femininities Among the Oldest Old Women," *Health Care For Women International* 27, no. 10 (2006), 854.

of the Birmingham Feminist history groups as well as Goldenberg explore the various meanings of femininity and the impact of defining women as belonging/having a collective experience. They argue that the only way to understand the political activity described by those involved as 'feminist' is by placing it in the context of the particular and dominant version of femininity practiced during this time. The Feminist History group specifically examined women's experiences and understandings of what feminism meant in the 1950s. They describe a time that is quite different from today where feminism was bound to femininity in a way that feminists today would not "easily recognize as feminist."¹²⁰ The women who participated in this study were all actively negotiating various understandings of femininity and what constituted appropriate behaviors and representations for sportswomen during the 1950s. Women's experiences, as Goldenberg suggests, are often misinterpreted due to a desire to attribute sameness amongst women that the conflict of unity and difference arise.¹²¹ Collectively Goldenberg and the Birmingham Feminist History Group's studies provide insight into the types of advocacy women expressed as well as serve as a reminder to be careful about projecting feminist views onto the past. Sabo and Ward's paper 'Wherefore Art Thou Feminisms? Feminist Activism, Academic Feminisms, and Women's Sports Advocacy,' provides a useful account of the changing environment experienced by women's sports advocates since the 1960s as well as

¹²⁰ Birmingham Feminist History Group, "Feminism as Femininity in the Nineteen-Fifties?" *Feminist Review* 806 (2005), 6.

¹²¹ Maya Goldenberg, The Problem of Exclusion in Feminist Theory and Politics: A Metaphysical Investigation into Constructing a Category of 'Woman', Vol. 16 (Hull: Hull Centre for Gender Studies, 2007), 43.

highlighting various styles of advocacy.¹²² They suggest that the current cultural “visibility and celebration of women athletes is rather remarkable when you jump backwards three decades.” Before 1980 they suggest there was not a substantive discussion of women’s sport in mainstream feminist writings. For the purpose of this study it was important to listen to the stories that the women shared, identify the similarities of their experiences while recognizing the uniqueness of their personal lives in the context in which they lived and played.

Together these areas of literature provide the background for exploring Ruth Wilson’s contributions to the sport of basketball in Canada. In essence this study contributes to our overall understanding of Wilson’s accomplishments. It is through an examination of her life and experiences in the context of the literature that has been reviewed that we begin to see how she and those women she influenced acted both within the confines of society and defined social roles while striving for the advancement of opportunities and status of sporting women in Canada.

¹²² Sabo, Don and Janie V. Ward. "Wherefore Art Thou Feminisms? Feminist Activism, Academic Feminisms, and Women's Sports Advocacy." *The Scholar and Feminist Online* 4, no. 3 (2006): March 8, 2006, <http://www.barnard.edu/sfonline/sport/index.htm>.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF RUTH WILSON TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF WOMEN'S BASKETBALL IN CANADA

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss more fully the development of women's basketball in Canada as well as highlight the contributions of Ruth Wilson, in providing opportunities for Canadian women to participate competitively in the sport. History is never linear, in that events and the experiences of one's life are shaped and contested by both internal and external forces. Women's increasing desire to participate and experience the same opportunities in sport as their male counterparts has been echoed throughout the history of Canadian sport in the twentieth century. Like male sports, women's basketball games over this time could be viewed as cultural performances, rituals that played out some of society's most deeply held assumptions around gender and physicality.¹²³

The development of the men's basketball game, created by Canadian James Naismith at Springfield College in Massachusetts in 1891 is familiar to most. So too is the role of Senda Berenson who played an integral role in separating the girls' game from the boys' by organizing and implementing a set of specific 'girls rules' in North America, and grounding her arguments in biologically based gender differences and the notion of separate spheres.¹²⁴ These rules limited women's opportunities in and accessibility to the sport of basketball in Canada as well as the U.S. and eventually lead to a debate over

¹²³ Pamela. Dean, "'Dear Sisters' and 'Hated Rivals': Athletics and Gender at Two New South Women's Colleges, 1893-1920," *Journal of Sport History* 24, no. 3 (1997), 352.

¹²⁴ Vertinsky and McKay, *Disciplining Bodies in the Gymnasium*, 223; Hult and Treckell, *A Century of Women's Basketball*, 430.

women's style of participation in the game that continued well into the 1960s. Ruth Wilson's experiences and lack of acquiescence to the philosophical change of direction for women's sports imposed by female physical educators throughout her professional career is of historical interest. She was a staunch supporter of competitive athletics for Canadian women and chose to promote physical activity through her non-radical style of advocacy.

In this chapter I will provide a brief description of the history of women's basketball in Canada, highlighting the significance of the sport and the controversies that surrounded the various types of participation that women experienced across Canada until the late 1960s. My intention is to establish the context of the sporting environments that Wilson encountered at various stages of her sporting career, showcasing the role that she played in the movement towards a national program for the sport of women's basketball in Canada. I will examine her contributions in several contexts in order to provide insight into her maturation as a sportswoman while highlighting how opportunities for women took on a different shape in response to Canada's growing desire for national programs and regulations during the late 1950s.¹²⁵ Wilson's formative experiences in basketball began at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, an institution that she remained connected to throughout her lifetime. It is here that I will begin Wilson's story, examining her participation and involvements in basketball and the sporting community. Then I will evaluate her formative contributions to the Commercial basketball league in Vancouver, and lastly, I will discuss the various administrative roles she took

¹²⁵ Schrod, "Changes in the Governance of Amateur Sport in Canada," 6.

on throughout her career that fostered the national development of the sport of women's basketball in Canada.

The Development of Women's Basketball in Canada until the late 1960's

In many respects basketball, the first team sport practiced in large numbers by women in North America reflected the state of women's opportunities for sporting competition in higher education from the late nineteenth century through the 1970s.¹²⁶ From its inception, the success and popularity of the game amongst men far exceeded the expectations of physical educators who quickly moved to adopt a female version. A female version was sought to align the sport with the ideals of female physical educators of the time who still maintained that women's bodies could not handle the overexertion and competitive nature of men's game. In basketball, rule selection was particularly important since it reflected very particular philosophies about the nature of women's physical abilities and their role in society.¹²⁷ Rule changes were introduced to curb the roughness of play and thereby adapt the game to the more delicate female demeanor expected from women at the time. The belief that basketball, as played by men, was too vigorous for women was strongly held by early female physical educators. The leading advocate for girls' rules, physical educator Senda Berenson, established that the basic premise for women's unique set of rules was to avoid physical roughness and the excessive energy demands on women's

¹²⁶ Paula D. Welch and Harold A. Lerch, *History of American Physical Education and Sport* (Springfield, Ill.: C. C. Thomas, 1981), 387.

¹²⁷ Joanna Davenport, "The Tides of Change in Women's Basketball Rules" In Hult and Trekell, *A Century of Women's Basketball*, 83.

constitutions, as well as to promote team work and avoid competitive strain.¹²⁸

The resulting game, adopted by leading female physical educators in the United States and most of eastern Canada and announced as a “New Game for the New Woman,” strove to achieve a two fold mandate, “A sport for every girl” and “Every girl in a sport”.¹²⁹ It was said to combine the physical development of gymnastics with the abandon and delight of true play, and although it was heartily adopted by the Canadian Women’s Intercollegiate Basketball League (CWIBL) and later the Women’s Amateur Athletic Foundation of Canada as the creed for female physical education, in many respects it denied to women the expansive space and competitive drive enjoyed by the men’s game. From 1921-1935 this organization (CWIBL) was responsible for organizing intercollegiate basketball competitions in eastern Canada as well as publishing a rulebook for women’s intercollegiate basketball.¹³⁰

The belief in the importance of limiting women’s physical exertion was much more prevalent in the United States and eastern Canada than it was in

¹²⁸ She divided the court into three equal sections and required players (anywhere between five and ten on a team) to play only in their particular section. If the game was played with 6 players, as it often was, the two forwards, two centers and two guards each were limited to one third of the court. The guards defended the forwards and passed the ball to one of the centers whose sole purpose was to pass the ball to the forwards, the only ones allowed to shoot. Players could not steal or bat the ball from another’s hands, they could not hold the ball more than three seconds and they could not bounce or dribble the ball more than three times. Nor were they allowed to play for more than 30 minutes at a time, or more than twice a week. Preface in Senda Berenson Abbott, *Spalding’s Official Basketball Guide for Women* (New York: American Sports Pub Co, 1912), 5. For a more detailed account of Senda Berenson’s contributions see: Betty Spears, "Senda Berenson Abbott New Woman: New Sport" In Hult and Trekell, *A Century of Women's Basketball*, 19.

¹²⁹ Hall, *The Girl and the Game*; Hult and Trekell, *A Century of Women's Basketball*, 430; Vertinsky and McKay, *Disciplining Bodies in the Gymnasium*, 223.

¹³⁰ Yvette M. Walton, "The Life and Professional Contributions of Ethel Mary Cartwright 1880-1955" (Masters, University of Western Ontario), 57.

western Canada for a number of reasons.¹³¹ While basketball in Canada was strongly influenced by the form and type of basketball being played south of the border, it was in Ontario, especially in Toronto, that the more conservative female physical educators (most of whom had been trained in the United States) readily adopted the creed of the American Women's Division of the National Amateur Athletic Federation – strong opposition to the competitive sport model, supporters of play for play's sake.¹³² Reflecting on the influence of American female physical educators, Ontario physical educator Helen Gurney proclaimed that "Canadian women owe a debt of thanks to all those American women who held our hands and taught us to become competent physical education leaders."¹³³ By contrast, the more modest higher education institutions in western Canada, with smaller staffs and fewer facilities, often had to depend on male instructors to lead the girl's sports programs. These male leaders, influenced by the Canadian Amateur Basketball Association (CABA), tended to encourage women to play like the men. As a result, in basketball, they typically taught five a side "men's rules/boys' rules" (sometimes called "international rules") to women and girls.¹³⁴ Western Canadian teams benefited from this less conservative attitude, producing some

¹³¹ Guttmann, *Women's Sports*, 140.

¹³² Gurney, *Girls' Sports*, 35.

¹³³ Mary Keyes, "Women's Basketball in Central Canada Revisited: 1899-1970," (paper presented at the North American Society for Sport History Convention, May, 1991), 5.

¹³⁴ Winona. Wood, "Physical Education and Recreation for Girls and Women" In *Physical Education in Canada*, ed. Van Vilet, Maurice L. (Scarborough, Ontario: Prentice Hall, 1965), 164. Interestingly, the concern for the negative effects of basketball (and track and field) upon women and girls that passed from U.S. women physical educators to Canada did not seem to apply to tennis, swimming or other sports that women had begun to play. By 1941 a national survey indicated that the numbers playing women's basketball using men's and women's rules were about even. See: Kidd, *The Struggle for Canadian Sport*.

of the most competitive women's basketball teams in Canada.¹³⁵ Thus, in many respects, the form of basketball familiar to a Canadian girl was determined largely by where she happened to live. The result was that in spite of its great popularity, women's basketball and its methods of play were involved in almost constant disagreement across the country.

Perhaps the most prominent supporter of "boys' rules" and an outspoken advocate of this style of play for women was Percy Page, coach of the famous Edmonton Commercial Graduates basketball team. Comprised of female students who had graduated from a local high school in Edmonton, Page encouraged his team to begin playing boys' rules in 1922 with great success. 'The Grads' as they quickly became known were able to play boys' rules without public censure because of Page's clever coaching and marketing skills. Linked to a demonstration of women's physical capabilities was the constant threat of losing their femininity, and thus the Grads, like other teams from western Canada who chose to play boys' rules (including several teams that Ruth Wilson was involved with) were pressed to spend a great deal of attention in maintaining strict displays of femininity off the court. Bowing to social sensitivities, Page kept a tight reign on the appearance of his female team and ensured that, though the players were aggressive competitors on the

¹³⁵ The Edmonton Commercial Graduate Club, most often referred to as the Edmonton Grads, was founded and coached by J. Percy page for 25 years. They established a record and an image between 1915 and 1940 that is unparalleled in basketball history.

court, they were always presented to the public as “ladies first” and basketball players second.¹³⁶

Female physical educators from eastern Canada were not impressed with the Grad’s adoption of boys’ rules, and sensing a possible national divide sought to maintain the hegemony of Senda Berenson’s established Spalding girls’ rules and their legitimation by American female physical educators. In an attempt to support this view and mediate between the east and west, the CWIBL (Canadian Women’s Intercollegiate Basketball League) introduced a set of women’s rules somewhat less restrictive than the Spalding girls’ rules. But no sooner had discussions begun to allow more scope for female athleticism than a major conference in the United States of the National Amateur Athletic Federation, attended by leading female physical educators, countered with concerns over the robust and unladylike playing of basketball among women.¹³⁷ In 1930 and 1931, the Women’s Amateur Athletic Federation of Canada made an effort to unify the basketball rules but did not have enough strength as a national organization to accomplish this task.¹³⁸ Eventually the women’s physical education section of the Ontario Educational Association decided in 1934 that Ontarians could do no better than to accept the rules of the women’s athletic division of the American Physical Education Association, while in western Canada and specifically at the University of

¹³⁶ Cathy Macdonald, "The Edmonton Grads: Canada's most Successful Team A History and Analysis of their Success" (Masters, The University of Windsor, 1976).

¹³⁷ Alice Frymer, *Basketball for Women* (New York: A.S. Barnes and Co, 1930).

¹³⁸ Keyes, "Women’s Basketball in Central Canada Revisited," 7.

British Columbia where Ruth Wilson began playing for the varsity basketball team in 1936, boys'/men's rules basketball reigned supreme.

In 1940, the Women's Athletic Committee (WAC) of the Canadian Association for Health, Physical Education and Recreation (CAHPER) was organized and chose as their first task to conduct a survey across Canada to establish what type of rules women from different regions of Canada were playing in basketball. As they suspected the results indicated that only in eastern Canada were girls' rules being played. The WAC, which was an important voice for the professional female educators in eastern Canada, thus determined to use their authority to publish a rule book to be distributed to schools and universities. The revenue that came from the sale of this rule book went back into the organization to promote girls' rules basketball with a women centered philosophy. While women in eastern Canada benefited from the distribution and sales of these rule books, women in western Canada who were playing men's rules had to find their own support for their basketball programs, often seeking the support of private sponsors and community organizations

While this non-competitive philosophy of female physical educator's continued to govern women's sports in the eastern and central sections of the country, many communities in the west supported women's competitions where women played men's rules. Influenced by the Grads and several years of avid play, the west produced an exceptionally skilled generation of female

athletes, whose talents were nurtured from an early age.¹³⁹ These women were fortunate in that the period from the late 1940s through the 1950s was marked with an increased emphasis on community leagues, often called commercial or industrial leagues, where they could experience semi-professional sporting opportunities. Local community teams in western Canada were supported by private sponsors and local municipalities who provided funding so that teams could travel outside their communities to compete.

By the late-1950s, another shift had begun to occur in women's basketball. The generation of teams and stars, including Wilson, who had sparked the postwar WW2 renaissance were retiring and taking on new roles in the sporting scene.¹⁴⁰ An increased emphasis on interuniversity sport as well as growing pressures to provide a competitive national representative team depopulated the once popular commercial leagues. Also, as more funding became available (from sales of the rule books), increased opportunities for women from eastern and western Canada to meet together to discuss the future of basketball in Canada occurred. It was during these meetings that lobbyists, influential young women coaching in the university system who themselves had played CABA rules in community competitions and in western provinces without "deleterious consequences", pushed hard for the uniformity of basketball rules.¹⁴¹ As a result of their efforts within the changing social climate of the 1960s where a competitive sports model was

¹³⁹ Grundy and Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass*, 85.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 92.

¹⁴¹ Keyes, "Women's Basketball in Central Canada Revisited," 13.

taking on a higher precedence, women's basketball witnessed both a surge of growth and a change in the value system underpinning the nature of play and participation in the sport. The controversy over the type of basketball women were playing in Canada thus ceased to be a constant source of contention for both female physical educators and athletes across Canada with the eventual rule unification and adoption of CABA rules in 1966.¹⁴²

With all of the changes in rules as well as the implementation of the Federal Fitness and Amateur Sport Act (1961) and its provincial counterparts, a transformation in the Canadian sport model began to emerge.¹⁴³ The federal government in Canada committed funding for the development and promotion of amateur sport with a twofold mandate of encouraging mass participation as well as enhanced performance at international competitions. Canada began to adopt a high performance model where, according to Kidd, women lacked leadership to represent their interests. Across the country a battle for funding and facilities ensued. It was not until women's basketball made its official appearance in the Olympic Games in 1976 that an increased focus on the women's program began to take on importance.¹⁴⁴ Up until this time those in charge of Canadian sport focused on preparing men's teams for international competition, showing little interest in developing the women's sport. All in all it was a challenging time for women's basketball because even though they were unified through the rules that they played, very few women participated in

¹⁴² For a full account of these developments see: Mary Eleanor Keyes, "The History of the Women's Athletics Committee of the Canadian Association for Health, Physical Education and Recreation, 1940-1973" (PhD diss., The Ohio State University, 1980).

¹⁴³ Kidd, *The Struggle for Canadian Sport*, 144.

¹⁴⁴ Interview with Clair, Vancouver, B.C. 2006.

major organizational decisions and those who did were discouraged from aligning themselves with radical feminists of the time or the “women’s point of view.”¹⁴⁵ It was here that Ruth Wilson would make her most significant contribution to the sport of basketball in Canada.

Ruth Wilson’s Early Experiences at the University of British Columbia

“If one’s record at college is indicative, as so many grads insist, of the trend of one’s life after graduation, Ruth will undoubtedly be a success in whatever she attempts.”¹⁴⁶

When Ruth Wilson began to attend the University of British Columbia in 1936, opportunities for women to attend post secondary institutions had been steadily increasing as a result of the changing social roles experienced during the interwar years, though higher education was a privilege only for those who could afford it. Solomon points out that, due to the erosion of the notion of separate spheres during and after World War I, a greater number of women began to enter the industrial workforce as well as post secondary institutions. When the war was over, women were reluctant to abandon their new found freedoms and many women “knew that they would either work or pursue further study in preparation for professional work.”¹⁴⁷ Often women would stay in the labor force until marriage, and on occasion, if not rejected because of their new legal status, women would remain there for most of their adult

¹⁴⁵ Hall, *The Girl and the Game*, 144.

¹⁴⁶ Verna McKenzie, “We Nominate: Our Choice for Graduates of the Year, Meet Ruth Wilson, She’s An All-Round Co-Ed,” *Ubyyssey*, May 15 1941, 5.

¹⁴⁷ Barbara M. Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women: A History of Women and Higher Education in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 139.

lives.¹⁴⁸ As the depression developed towards the end of the 1920s, “unemployment and increasing poverty cut deeply into the middle class,” and although the city of Vancouver was not impacted as badly as many other areas in the country it became increasingly common for females to need to work where work was available.¹⁴⁹ Reflecting on these years Solomon recalls how the general understanding of the time was that “every individual should be prepared for the eventuality of employment of some type in case of financial need.”¹⁵⁰

Wilson, who was raised in an upper middle class family, and whose mother was a teacher well versed in the merits of an education, was encouraged to pursue a university education.¹⁵¹ Once there however, she too was impacted by the economic downturn and had to find employment during the school year and through the summer in order to contribute to the cost of her tuition.¹⁵² It was common for women employed in Vancouver to work in the service industry or as educators. Wilson, who took a job in a local department store, found it to be an excellent fit, for in addition to her employment the store sponsored a team in the Vancouver commercial basketball league. Opportunities for working women to participate in leisure activities supported by commercial enterprises like department stores were quite common, and in many respects the development of sport in Canada was closely related to

¹⁴⁸ Strong-Boag, *The New Day Recalled*, 41.

¹⁴⁹ Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women*, 167.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 170.

¹⁵¹ Tracy, 2006.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

industrial modernization and urbanization.¹⁵³ As wage earners, women's work experiences were similar to male's in terms of hours and labor, and in the commercial basketball league they were also exposed to similar opportunities for leisure. Both men and women experienced a shift in paid labor opportunities and leisure was increasingly thought of as a universal citizen right.

Thus Wilson's early involvement in the commercial basketball league while attending the University of British Columbia provided her with an interesting vantage point from which to examine athletic competition and the conflict between sport organization in the educational area and sports that were influenced by a commercial model. On the one hand, institutions like the University of British Columbia were consistently becoming more and more influenced by conservative female physical educators who were trained in eastern Canada before moving to western Canada for employment. On the other hand, the commercial basketball leagues, like the one in which she participated, and which rejected a distinctly male model of competitive athletics, provided an outlet for expressing drive and female athletic prowess.

In 1936/37 Wilson began her UBC athletic career as a member of the *Thunderettes* basketball team. At the same time she participated in sports not offered by the institution and achieved the status of BC's junior tennis champion. From her first years at University of British Columbia, she displayed a wide range of athletic talents, and solidified her life long relationship with sports and sporting women. It was during these years that women's

¹⁵³ Ibid.

involvement on campus took on a higher profile than in the past, though the female population remained a minority on campus. Wilson played a prominent role in promoting female opportunities and involvement on campus and as a result experienced a level of popularity amongst her peers that was uncommon for women of her time. It was thus, from her early experiences at the university that she developed, not only as an athlete who would eventually attain hall of fame status, but also as an advocate of female sporting opportunities.

After one year of studies she was offered the opportunity to play on a commercially sponsored basketball team that would challenge the famous *Edmonton Commercial Graduates* basketball team in a highly anticipated and publicized event. A dedicated and skilled basketball player, she could not pass up the opportunity to play although the conditions of her participation stated that she would have to take a year off of school in order to train and work in *Spencer's* department store that was sponsoring her team. So, in 1937, Wilson made the decision to take a year off from her studies to work and train. She would come to regret the decision that delayed her eventual graduation from university, though it was an example of the type of supportive gestures Wilson often made so that other women would have similar opportunities to compete in the league.¹⁵⁴ Spencer's would not have sponsored the team had Wilson not played for them.

Upon her return to the varsity basketball team in 1938/39, she once again proved her athletic prowess, being described as "half of co-ed's defense"

¹⁵⁴ Hume with Wilson, 1993.

in the campus newspaper.¹⁵⁵ Not surprisingly, the same campus newspaper, *The Ubyyssey*, described Ruth Wilson as "... the best woman athlete ever developed on the campus," and hailed her as the backbone of the UBC Senior A basketball team.¹⁵⁶ According to another account she was the "Ace high scorer" for the team, demonstrating that neither she nor her teammates were "...dainty young ladies out for a bit of gentle exercise".¹⁵⁷ Descriptions like this highlight the fact that for sporting women on campus there existed a conflict between how they were expected to behave during sporting contests and how they were to present themselves outside of sport. Lee Stewart suggests that athletic females who were enrolled at UBC found they had to direct significant amounts of attention towards overcoming institutional prejudice as well as maintaining strict traditional displays of femininity.¹⁵⁸ This preoccupation with the contradictory expectations of the feminine image and the female reality posed a particular problem for the women involved in athletics at UBC. Those who emulated the popular feminine image were often regarded as less serious students while intellectual aggressiveness, a trait required for academic success in a male dominated institution, was even less acceptable when the women's aggressive natures spilled out onto their sporting domains.¹⁵⁹ Aggressiveness was here and in many cases of female participation in sport

¹⁵⁵ Myrne Nevison, "Co-Ed Sports," *The Ubyyssey*, Nov. 4, 1938, 4; Gerry Armstrong, "Co-Ed Sports," *The Ubyyssey*, Sept. 22, 1939, 4.

¹⁵⁶ "Hooperess," *The Ubyyssey*, Nov. 25, 1938, 4; "Women's Senior 'B' Basketball," *Totem*, 1941.

¹⁵⁷ Gerry Armstrong, "Co-Ed Sports," *The Ubyyssey*, Sept. 22, 1939, 4.

¹⁵⁸ Stewart, *It's Up to You*, 176.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

deemed to be incompatible with the socially ascribed notions of the feminine sporting body.

Wilson's involvements in athletics and the careful way in which she presented herself extended beyond the realm of basketball. The pressures that she experienced to practice sports within the confines of a feminine ideal lead her to seek an appropriate balance between participating and excelling on varsity teams while at the same time playing in intramural programs where the focus was on social, non-competitive interaction. There was also pressure for her to participate in individual games and sports such as golf where a lack of physical roughness and the trappings of femininity were expected to be maintained. Her superiority in golf (Wilson consistently shot in the low 80's) and successes in volleyball, where she was a member of the mixed intramural volleyball championship team of 1939, are examples of this. During the 1939/40 year she again embraced the intramural spirit and became a member of the UBC archery team under the tutelage of Miss Gertrude Moore, the head of the women's physical education program. Wilson's achievements as an athlete and popularity on campus lead to her being declared as UBC's female graduate of the year in 1941. The campus newspaper highlighted the fact that Wilson was able to function and negotiate her identity fluidly by participating in a variety of activities and not allowing herself to be represented entirely by one outstanding attribute. It declared:

"*The Ubyyssey's* graduate of the year, feminine species is neither a confirmed "social butterfly" nor a "bookworm". She is a popular young lady whose activities cut a cross-section of campus life and endeavor in every field – academic, social, athletic..."¹⁶⁰

Thus Wilson's fame as the female graduate of the year was in many respects due to her ability to take advantage of a broader acceptance of sporting women while adhering to pressures to maintain a feminine decorum. Fears of being mannish may have deterred some, but generally university women seemed to have regarded their involvement in physical exercise and competitive sports as a means to achieve greater equality.¹⁶¹ In the changing environment leading up to the Second World War women were increasingly encouraged to take up work formerly reserved for men to seek a greater degree of self development. This development included

"learning more about world and current events, keeping up with new literary and cultural trends, developing fitness and athletic abilities, and contributing as much as possible to the war effort."¹⁶²

At the same time, acutely aware of the continued need to maintain a proper feminine image both on and off the court, Wilson became involved in other activities on campus including a sorority, the University's chapter of Alpha Gamma Delta. Sorority women, according to Stewart, were "women who followed the line of least resistance, pursued the feminine ideal, conformed to the latest fashions, and confirmed their social standing by joining sororities."¹⁶³

Wilson definitely chose the path of least resistance here, sustaining her social

¹⁶⁰ McKenzie, "We Nominate," 5.

¹⁶¹ Vertinsky, "Power Geometries," 55.

¹⁶² Susan Hartmann, "Prescriptions for Penelope: Literature on Women's Obligations to Returning World War II Veterans." *Women's Studies* 5, no. 3 (1978), 227.

¹⁶³ Stewart, *It's Up to You*, 121.

standing through her sorority while maintaining her focus upon her athletic intentions. In fact she used her involvement with the sorority to encourage and further her agenda to extend athletic opportunities to women by helping to implement mandatory physical activity for females as well as war service for both men and women on campus. In 1940/41 she was elected to the position of Women's Athletic Representative on campus. It was an opportunity she used to further raise the profile of women on campus and help legitimate female involvement in sporting and service activities.

That fall Wilson also used her standing in the sorority to implement her idea to raise money for the war effort by hosting a series of Red Cross balls at both Canadian and American universities. It was an idea which came to fruition in January 1942 and generated over \$2000 for the Red Cross.¹⁶⁴ The fundraising success of the UBC ball further raised her celebrity status on campus, as one can see through a glance at her senior year book. She boasts the third highest collection of photographs and is the most prominent female figure throughout the text.¹⁶⁵ Her involvement and leadership in such a variety of female activities thus broadened her acceptance and lessened the threat of diminishing her femininity through participation in 'masculinised' sports. Those who knew her said that on the basketball court she was fierce and aggressive, though never foul or brash, and that her athletic endeavors and commitment to the school were as well rounded as her athletic physique.¹⁶⁶ Wilson was also

¹⁶⁴ McKenzie, "We Nominate," 5.

¹⁶⁵ This was based on a content analysis of the "totems" (yearbooks) from the years Wilson attended UBC, 1936-1941.

¹⁶⁶ Interview conducted with Fred Hume, Vancouver B.C. 2006.

typified in the campus newspaper as representing an “All-Canadian girl...as her activities in varsity prove.”¹⁶⁷ Arguably, it was Wilson’s ability to balance her athletic accomplishments with a traditionally acceptable female focus of studies that lead to a successful profession as a teacher and later a guidance counselor.

In many respects, Wilson’s positive experiences at university were not common. Accounts suggest that females of the time experienced secondary status and restricted opportunities on campus for a number of reasons.¹⁶⁸ They were a minority, at a time when the university was bracing for the Second World War, as a distinctly military focus and training regime was adopted on campus and women’s needs were a low priority. Wilson was also a female with athletic abilities and a competitive drive at a time when, according to Hall, women’s sports were characterized by a “remarkable emphasis on beauty, grace, and femininity.”¹⁶⁹ Despite all this, Wilson had a highly successful career at UBC both academically and socially, helped by her ability to maneuver between roles and adopt a particularly useful style of advocacy that she maintained throughout her lifetime. Stewart articulates it as an ability to adopt a balance where she would play “boy’s rules in the institution” and “girl’s rules in [their] extra curricular activities.”¹⁷⁰ In this sense she was one of a limited few during her day who accomplished this feat and still was hailed primarily for her athletic accomplishments. Negotiating carefully, she was able

¹⁶⁷ McKenzie, “We Nominate,” 5.

¹⁶⁸ Stewart, *It's Up to You*, 121.

¹⁶⁹ Hall, *The Girl and the Game*, 108.

¹⁷⁰ Stewart, *It's Up to You*, 107.

to be athletic and competitive while maintaining just the right amount of femininity. Reflecting on her UBC years Wilson recalled them as “the best years of my life”.¹⁷¹

As an all around great athlete and prominent citizen on campus, Wilson’s athletic pursuits visibly contributed to increased support for women and women athletes on campus. She was one of the last high performance athletes nurtured and supported by the university before it became increasingly influenced by conservative female educators trained in eastern Canada who were determined to implement a non competitive intramural focus and play day structure for female athletes. She achieved her degree from the University of British Columbia in 1942 and almost effortlessly moved into her chosen profession as a teacher at a local Vancouver high school. She thus left UBC before the women’s athletics program reached an all time low as the Second World War wore on. According to one source, almost immediately after Wilson left the institution “women’s athletics and sports fell behind the priorities of both men’s athletics and the war effort”.¹⁷² UBC sport historian Fred Hume, reflecting on the social climate for female athletes at UBC at the time says that “the 1940s were a weak decade, relatively speaking, for women’s sports participation and their profile in UBC varsity team sports. Another account recalled this time at UBC as the “black hole” of the female – sport relationship.”¹⁷³

¹⁷¹ Hume, 2006.

¹⁷² Stewart, *It's Up to You*, 120.

¹⁷³ Hume, 2006.

Wilson's commitment to basketball however took on a new role as she began coaching at the high school which employed her, as well as playing a greater role in the Vancouver commercial basketball league. Her contribution began as a player in the league and then, upon retirement from play, as a coach and later vice president for the Canadian Amateur Basketball Association.

Ruth Wilson and the Vancouver Commercial Basketball League

After graduation from UBC, Wilson became increasingly involved in the Vancouver commercial basketball league, the same league she had played in while representing Spencer's department store. Her contributions to the commercial basketball league in Vancouver took on various forms. She first ventured into the league as a player, where she secured four titles as a Canadian basketball champion. She followed this with a successful career as a coach in Vancouver – a city where boys' rules flourished – and that, according to Barbara Schrodt, dominated the national senior championships, her teams claiming top prize 21 times in a 26-year period from 1942 to 1967.¹⁷⁴ It was also during this period of her life that she had a particular impact on future generations of sporting women, women who, like herself, remain connected to basketball and to the University of British Columbia.

Women's involvement in sport and leisure activities, both during the interwar years and the years immediately following WW2 through the 1960s were coloured by semi professional sporting opportunities. The mass

¹⁷⁴ Schrodt, "Vancouver's Dynastic Domination of Canadian Senior Women's Basketball," 19.

mobilization of male soldiers to fight in World War II transformed both women's work and women's sports. Women from many social positions were at once entering the labour force and simultaneously changing and defining leisure practices. As these women entered the workforce employers, recognizing the benefits of having healthy physically active employees, sought to provide them with recreational opportunities. As a result commercial or industrial sports leagues were often established in urban centres across Canada. These leagues according to Hall were encouraged by the federal government as an important means of promoting health and fitness for Canadian citizens, particularly for females, where they were used to remove the stigma of "playing in time of war."¹⁷⁵ In many ways it was women's entry into the paid work force that "engendered not only an employment issue, but, also, conflict about a new social role" and newfound freedoms that the women expressed through sport.¹⁷⁶ According to Grundy, competitive basketball programs both reflected and promoted the growing self confidence many women experienced, allowing them another venue in which to demonstrate female competence and encouraging an expansive sense of ability and accomplishment.¹⁷⁷

Both in the years leading up to the Second World War and immediately following, sponsoring sports programs for women was seen as good public relation tools for businesses and industry. According to Emery, fielding a women's team was thought to demonstrate a company's progressive attitude

¹⁷⁵ Hall, *The Girl and the Game*, 103.

¹⁷⁶ Forbes, "Gendering Corporate Welfare Practices," 59.

¹⁷⁷ Grundy, "From Amazons to Glamazons," 128.

and to be helpful in enhancing its public image.¹⁷⁸ Thus the popularity of these leagues enabled basketball to survive the hard economic times of the depression as felt during the interwar years, as well as providing a means to advertise businesses involved in the war effort. Although the end of the Second World War eliminated the need for women to work as extensively in manufacturing plants, teams that were supported by commercial enterprises often facilitated women's continued employment in the service industry as well as in the educational realm. Women who were teachers, as was the case with Wilson, often found their vocation to be ideal for securing sponsorship, and their flexible summer schedules and extended holidays during the school year facilitated travel to other cities to compete.¹⁷⁹ Participation in these leagues provided an important venue for women's sporting opportunities and amusement well into the late 1960's and early 1970's.¹⁸⁰

The city of Vancouver produced several particularly strong teams who dominated the Canadian Women's national basketball scene after the Edmonton Commercial Graduates disbanded in the early 1940s.¹⁸¹ Female athletes like Ruth Wilson became household names and achieved a level of notoriety and fame similar to that of Hollywood celebrities. Wilson recalled in one interview how on several occasions she was "whistled at from across the street" and often approached by adoring fans who sometimes would be bold

¹⁷⁸ Emery, "From Lowell Mills," 107.

¹⁷⁹ Interview conducted by Barbara Schrodt with Ruth Wilson, Vancouver, B.C. 1990.

¹⁸⁰ Clair, 2006.; Interview with Sharon, Vancouver B.C. 2006. They both believed that as the media and the government began to place more importance on university sport the commercial leagues eventually collapsed.

¹⁸¹ Schrodt, "Vancouver's Dynastic Domination of Canadian Senior Women's Basketball," 19.

enough to “ask for her to blow them a kiss.”¹⁸² It was not uncommon for these women to play for large crowds, particularly by today’s standards. One particular report recalled how a low turn out was recorded when “only 425 fans attended the three-game series in Vancouver to see the *Eilers* retain the Dominion title, defeating Saskatoon.”¹⁸³ Reflecting on her career as a player during WW2, Wilson recalled “there were no men, and so the people came to watch the women instead. I often thought we were so lucky to be playing in that era because we had such big crowds and everything.”¹⁸⁴ These were competitive series indeed and importantly in western Canada and in a few pockets of eastern Canada the majority of women’s teams were playing men’s/international rules basketball.¹⁸⁵

In some cities, as was the case in Vancouver, it was common for teams to enter into the commercial league who were sponsored by both industry and educational institutions. However as noted above, the style of play was competitive and so the women playing were able to avoid the scrutiny of professional female educators and remain less scathed by criticisms from those who opposed competitive activities in fear of its masculinizing effects. Even though criticisms from female educators had less of an impact in Vancouver the women were aware of the ways they were expected to present themselves. While participation in women’s sports had the potential to

¹⁸² Hume, 2006.

¹⁸³ Hall, *The Girl and the Game*, 127.

¹⁸⁴ Schrodtt with Wilson, 1990.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid. Ruth Wilson indicated that there were a few teams in eastern Canada that played boys’ rules. She recalled a team from the city of Hamilton who played the same rules as the western teams.

encompass physical appeal as well building confidence for the participants, there was a growing polarization between “masculine” and “feminine” activities. Associating particular activities in this way contributed to widespread associations between “mannish” female athletes and suspicions of lesbianism. This made it increasingly difficult for athletes to blend athletic skill into socially acceptable versions of femininity, particularly when they no longer defended a school’s honor in high-level varsity competition.¹⁸⁶ Wilson who was able to negotiate a balance between athleticism and criticism at UBC proved that she could do the same while participating in the commercial league in Vancouver and lead by example through her conduct both on and off the court.

Wilson believed that Vancouver was a particularly supportive environment for the women participating in these leagues.¹⁸⁷ Schrodts investigation into Vancouver’s “dynastic dynasty” highlighted reasons for the league’s success from the 1940s through the 1960s.¹⁸⁸ She points out that Vancouver boasted an environment where both the men and women worked together to provide sporting opportunities for all citizens regardless of whether they were male or female. Though women helped in the organization of the league and often sought out sponsors, the real driving force behind the Vancouver commercial league were wealthy businessmen who sponsored women’s teams as a form of advertising. It was the ability to work with the male sponsors in the basketball community towards the common goal of providing opportunities for women to participate that was the real success of the league.

¹⁸⁶ Grundy, “From Amazons to Glamazons,” 114.

¹⁸⁷ Schrodts, “Vancouver’s Dynastic Domination of Canadian Senior Women’s Basketball,” 26.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

The women could not have done it without the men who according to Wilson “held them together.” They did all the administrative stuff. They supported us and never pooh-poohed us.”¹⁸⁹ Sponsorship usually entailed paying for affiliation fees, uniforms and if financially able sponsors would often cover the cost of traveling to championships or playoffs.¹⁹⁰ This level of funding was particularly important if women players were required to travel across Canada to participate in a Canadian Championship. Wilson, grateful for the opportunity to play, yet unaware of the uniqueness of her experience, recalled:

“I guess there was a shortage of men, never thought of it, they were training...we were so lucky we had the nicest sponsors and coaches that were real gentlemen. The boys never laughed at us or made us feel inferior...they were so nice to us. They would come to our games. Gosh (the stands) were just full.”¹⁹¹

In many respects Wilson’s success and involvement in the commercial basketball league was due to the same presence and style of interaction she developed at UBC, one where she worked with the men while adhering to a strict display of feminine decorum to diminish criticism around this competitive activity and maintain interest and support for the league.

Wilson’s leadership skills during her years playing in the commercial basketball league were as much organizational and team building as athletic. When questioned about her individual skill Wilson recalled with modesty that she was “not the fastest or the most talented on the team.”¹⁹² However her thorough understanding of the game combined with her remarkable work ethic

¹⁸⁹ Hume with Wilson, 1993.

¹⁹⁰ Schrod, “Vancouver’s Dynastic Domination of Canadian Senior Women’s basketball,” 23.

¹⁹¹ Hume with Wilson, 1993.

¹⁹² Ibid.

contributed to many a game where she was the top scorer. Being involved in the commercial basketball league was an incredible commitment for both the players and the sponsors. At a time when these women were committed to their various professional careers they were required to designate a great deal of time to their commercial team and in representing their various sponsors. A typical season ran from October through March with the national play down series scheduled for April.¹⁹³ For the women in Vancouver most of their games took place in the city of Vancouver. For play downs, however, they would travel via train on weekends or on occasion be required to take time from work to travel to other cities and provinces. Undoubtedly the scheduling and organization of these leagues was a cumbersome task, relying as it did on an army of volunteers to orchestrate the coordination of referee's, train schedules as well as gym time for the women.

The most notable team Wilson played for was a team sponsored by a savvy business man and owner of Hedlund Meat Packers, called the *Hedlunds*. This team maintained a five year reign as Canadian senior champions, and included several athletes, including Wilson, who "became household names in Vancouver, and were among the finest women athletes Vancouver has ever known."¹⁹⁴ The *Hedlunds* team that Wilson played for was deemed national Canadian champion five consecutive times from 1942-1946.¹⁹⁵ Wilson retired from playing basketball after only a few years with the

¹⁹³ Interview conducted by Barbara Schrodt with Ruth Wilson, Vancouver, B.C. 1991.

¹⁹⁴ Long, "Wilson Remembered".

¹⁹⁵ As a result of the Second World War travel for play down series was limited. Western Canadian teams played other Western Canadian teams. According to member files at the BC

Hedlunds. Already a household name in the Vancouver community, she retired from playing at the age of 27. Fully accomplished she sensed that a new group of women were entering the basketball community and because most of her friends were married and having children, choosing not to return to the league, she began what has been noted as her greatest contribution to the sport of basketball in Vancouver; her role as a coach.¹⁹⁶ News of Wilson's retirement from playing in 1946, and her new role as coach at both UBC and in the commercial basketball league, spread quickly through the city of Vancouver. One newspaper account announced,

"Ruth a physical education instructress at John Oliver High School, has, bit by bit, dropped her personal sport participation to turn her knowledge to advantage among the younger generations. This year will mark her retirement as a player but definitely not as a coach."¹⁹⁷

It was as a coach that she found herself challenged again over acceptable displays of femininity and sporting behaviors, especially at UBC where the male head of the athletics department supported the competitive varsity tradition of women's basketball, in opposition to the female head of physical education who desperately wanted to implement "girls' rules" basketball. Wilson had graduated before the school of physical education at UBC was established in 1946, a program that came to be directed by a female physical educator from eastern Canada who sought to adopt a more feminine style of physical activity. Her non competitive style promoted 'play days' for

Sports Hall of Fame in 1945 the Hedlunds beat the Edmonton Pats in a 5 game series to win the championship.

¹⁹⁶ Schrodts with Wilson, 1991.

¹⁹⁷ Norma Cathro, "A Dream Comes True: Ruth Establishes Record," *Vancouver Sun* April 18, 1950.

the women that was in stark contrast to the level and form of play Wilson had herself experienced while playing in the commercial basketball league. She was well aware of the rules division across Canada and determined to maintain Western superiority in the sport, believing that Vancouver should dominate the Canadian basketball scene. So when her former team, the *Hedlunds*, which had evolved into a team called the *Nut House* (1946-1949), experienced several losses in an important play down series, she moved beyond her role as a coach and decided to try to configure and organize a new team that might dominate the Canadian scene again.¹⁹⁸

In 1949 Wilson set out to find a new sponsor for a team of women consisting of former *Nut House* players and several players she had been affiliated with through her coaching at UBC.¹⁹⁹ As an experienced coach she had an eye for discovering talent and was confident that this new team could compete well, if not win, the Canadian title for Vancouver.²⁰⁰ Soon after her decision to create a new team, she sought out Walter Eiler of Eiler's Jewelers to sponsor the team. Reluctant at first, but persuaded by her perseverance and the prospect of potential new female clients buying his jewelry, Eiler agreed to sponsor the team.

Combining teams that had formerly competed against each other was not an easy task for Wilson. The teams had quite different styles of play so she

¹⁹⁸ Misfortune in Cardston, Alberta, in 1948, and a closely-fought provincial defeat by Victoria in 1949, put Nut House out of the play-downs, the only time in the period of this study that Vancouver failed to win the Canadian championship two years in a row.

¹⁹⁹ *Nut House* is the name of a successful basketball team that competed in the Vancouver commercial league. Many of the players from the former *Hedlunds* team found a new sponsor and became the Nut house team.

²⁰⁰ Schrodt, "Vancouver's Dynastic Domination of Canadian Senior Women's Basketball," 21.

strategically “employed a two-platoon system” where the older, former Nut House players stressed set plays, while the young UBC graduates played a fast-breaking game.²⁰¹ Her decision to organize the team and ability to have the women work together resulted in another Canadian title in 1950, the first postwar play down series to cross the country. This was an important series for the women from western Canada as it provided an opportunity to showcase their dominance and use of ‘international rules’ or boys’/men’s rules to the women from eastern Canada where the teams played “girls’ rules” basketball.

The Vancouver newspapers regularly heralded Wilson’s coaching ability and the coverage provided a certain notoriety for women’s sports programs. In 1950, after winning the National Championship, the headlines of one local paper declared “A Dream Comes True: Ruth Establishes Record.”²⁰² The article went on to say that

“Ruth, probably the first girl to both manage and coach a team to the Canadian title, gathered twelve basketball players last October and has worked night and day to achieve the perfection they displayed on the present tour.”²⁰³

This win was indeed a dream come true for Wilson who was never shy about her desire not to be limited by the fact that she was a female. In a similar fashion to her earlier displays of advocacy at the University of British Columbia, she said, “I want the Canadian title. And I want to be the only girl coach and manager to get it. Just watch.”²⁰⁴ Clearly she did not appear to feel pressured by the male influenced sporting community of Vancouver to restrict

²⁰¹ Schrod, “Vancouver’s Dynastic Domination of Canadian Senior Women’s Basketball,” 21.

²⁰² Cathro, “A Dream Comes True,” 12.

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

her desire to be successful or repress her competitive nature. Her coaching style was that of a confident leader and she expressed an excellent understanding of the game, a skill she attributed to playing boys' rules basketball.²⁰⁵ A former player, reflecting on Wilson's coaching style indicated that "Ruth was quiet and very methodical" and as a player "you always knew where you stood. She could dissect and analyze a game very well."²⁰⁶

Accounts from various players during this time recalled that the Vancouver environment was particularly appealing to women athletes and that the press of the time showcased women's competitions almost as often as the men's events. In one account, local Vancouver reporter Erwin M. Swangard wrote:

"there probably was more sports drama Tuesday evening than we will have for many a night...Let's start off with the deciding game between the *Eilers-Edmonton Pats* Western Canada women's basketball finals. Before this thriller this seasoned reporter and the rest of the *Eilers* entourage joined in chewing his finger nails to the danger point. And my wife, also a seasoned campaigner, was no better for once: that's the kind of game it was. A super duper from start to finish with two fine teams giving all that they had- all the time- and that was plenty."²⁰⁷

The women were also showcased frequently in photographs where editorials were strict to present the women athletes as attractive women as well as basketball players. "Who Says Women Athletes Aren't Pretty?" was the title of one headlining story from 1952.²⁰⁸ Reflecting on this sporting environment

²⁰⁵ Hume with Wilson, 1993.

²⁰⁶ Interview conducted by Barbara Schrodtt with Darla Hartwell, Vancouver, B.C. 1991. A pseudonym has been used for this source.

²⁰⁷ Erwin M. Swangard, "Let's Face It" *The Vancouver Daily Province*, March 28, 1951.

²⁰⁸ "Who Says Women Athletes Aren't Pretty?" *Vancouver Sun* Jan 19, 1952.

where women presented themselves according to the demands of the reporters a former athlete of the time stated:

“I can remember NP reporters would come out and you would get this silly sappy photograph – eg. Two of us with hats on and putting lipstick on. I can remember posing for that shot and thinking it was ridiculous.”²⁰⁹

The general understanding of the time was that any press was good press. For sponsors it meant more revenue, and for the players it meant their continued opportunity to compete in the league. Representations like the one described above were common for female athletes and were often met with mixed reviews. According to Hall, to be successful required performing one's gender in accordance with the prevailing norms.²¹⁰ For girls and teenagers this meant learning to be feminine, acquiring the skills of domesticity and enjoying the company of men. All of these activities acted as markers of 'normality' for women in the 1950s. Though not often discussed particularly in the media, the hyper production of femininity compensated for the underlying fear of lesbianism.²¹¹ In many instances even though it was not outwardly spoken about or expressed, the women were aware that they had to behave and look a particular way. Reflecting on the social climate of Vancouver and the dynamics between men and women one player recalled that “we were brought up in a chauvinistic time. The man knew and we would listen and do what he told us. And we were drawn to men.”²¹² After two seasons as coach of the

²⁰⁹ Schrodts with Hartwell, 1991.

²¹⁰ Hall, *The Girl and the Game*, 141.

²¹¹ Ibid., 123.

²¹² Interview conducted by Barbara Schrodts with Lori Wood, Vancouver B.C. 1991. A pseudonym has been used for this source.

Eilers team, and ready to move on to her next challenge, Wilson retired as a coach in the Vancouver commercial basketball league, and handed the reins of the team to Gordon McDonald, a former player and prominent referee.²¹³ Gordie, as he was known in the Vancouver basketball community, had a very different coaching style than Wilson's. He was volatile, loud and often aggressive, characteristics that Wilson was able to tolerate and work with. As one of her peers recalled:

“there was a mutual understanding (between Ruth and Gordie) and (Ruth) could be very frank with him, and say “now calm down Gordie. Gordie, you’re full of it. This won’t work. If you’re going to be volatile, you’ll get nowhere.”²¹⁴

Wilson had a gentle demeanor and displayed confidence in her relationships with those she coached and those in positions of power. She was able to lead by example and always had the foresight to change her role in the basketball community so that it was amicable for all those involved.

Wilson as an Administrator

As Wilson moved out of the commercial league coaching realm (relinquishing her duties as *Eilers* coach) she began to play a more pivotal role in Canada's national program by increasing her administrative and support initiatives. When asked about her decision to retire from coaching in the commercial basketball league Wilson stated

“I coached *Eilers* for two years and my own friends were getting very annoyed with me because I never had any time left over after basketball. The only way I could get out of this

²¹³ Under the guidance of McDonald the team continued their winning streak earning 7 consecutive Canadian Titles, a record bettered only by Percy Page of the Edmonton Grads.

²¹⁴ Hall, *The Girl and the Game*, 141.

responsibility, with an excuse acceptable to the kids was to join the CABA. So I became the Vice-president (women), and you can't be a coach at the same time. So I got Gordie to coach."²¹⁵

Her success as a player and coach in the commercial league, and the impact of the *Eilers* team that she had so successfully created, marked a turning point for women's basketball in Canada. Not only did it showcase the high level of female play that had begun to develop in western Canada, but it highlighted Wilson's understanding of the game and her desire to be involved with the building of a National program for women's basketball.

This shift in her role by no means lessened her commitment to the sport. Already a prominent figure in western Canada, Wilson took on the vice presidency of the Canadian Amateur Basketball committee. It was a role that she took very seriously and maintained for several years from 1952-1962. One of the most significant contributions she made while acting as vice-president was reflected in her understanding of both the way the game was organized in Canada as well as the way the game needed to be restructured in order to facilitate the growing demands for Canadian success and representation at international competitions. Reflecting on her understanding of sport development at the local and national level she pointed out that, "If you want a good league you have to split players up – if you want to win nationally you have to take a representative team."²¹⁶ Wilson demonstrated that she was aware of the current state of women's basketball in Canada where local leagues provided opportunities for large numbers of women to participate.

²¹⁵ Schrodts with Wilson, 1991.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

Large numbers of women playing the sport, with the talent pool equally spread throughout the league ensured lots of opportunities for women to compete, the focus being on participation rather than high performance. This style of participation was not optimal for establishing a high level of play because the talent pool becomes watered down. In order to establish a higher skilled cohort of women, those who were less skilled needed to be eliminated leaving only those of a high caliber to remain.

Prior to Wilson's role on the CABA, the organization of the commercial league in Vancouver was such that the talent was spread throughout the city league ensuring competitive games throughout the season. When the *Eilers* team from Vancouver represented Canada at the Pan American Games in 1955, this team was not an all-star team or one that had been selected as a provincial team.²¹⁷ They were the same team that had been competing weekly in the commercial league. Up to this point the teams chosen to represent Canada at international competitions were teams that participated in various commercial leagues who had been crowned as national champions based on a series of consecutive wins as they traveled from province to province in a play down series. According to Schrodt, the series for the national championship was typically played between the winners of the western and eastern Canada playoffs (Manitoba was the national divisional point).²¹⁸ Once a winning team was declared from each region they would meet and have a final series of

²¹⁷ The Canadian representative team in 1955 was a Vancouver team and it would be the last time a single commercial basketball team would represent the country at an international competition.

²¹⁸ Schrodt, "Vancouver's Dynastic Domination of Canadian Senior Women's Basketball," 24.

games, the winner gaining the honour of national champion. The organization of these series was quite arduous, as arrangements had to be made according to train schedules, and travel across the country to play various teams often took weeks. From an organizational perspective Wilson was very aware of the need to re-structure the women's basketball program in Canada. She was also cognizant of the need to implement and structure a way to select individuals (not teams) to represent Canada on a national basketball team at international competitions. Once trans-Canada airline travel became more accessible and the influence of Wilson's strategic organization began to take shape, the method of Canada's national team selection also began to change.²¹⁹

Wilson's leadership skills, organizational abilities and desire to maintain a strong program for women's basketball in Canada ensured that her role on the CABA was a good fit. As the national representative for western Canadian women her role was an extension of the various organizational efforts she had conducted for the local Vancouver basketball league. She spent the majority of her time conducting strategic planning and acting as a liaison with representatives in eastern Canada.

In order to build the national program, Wilson identified and sought to change what she believed to be two key reasons for Canada's lack of success. The first challenge was the travel and time involved in the way the national champion team was selected. In the past, as the winning team traveled from city to town to compete in the play down series, the visiting team was often at

²¹⁹ Ibid., 25.

an advantage for the long trips provided momentum through a succession of wins, and team building opportunities. Home teams were often “cold,” having not had any recent competition, then having to play a visiting team that had been on a winning streak. One former player recalled in an interview “to play anyone of any caliber, we had to travel 200 miles on a weekend, for one game. We never expected that the home team would win, always the visiting team.”²²⁰ This meant that from an organizational perspective the selection of a women’s Canadian basketball national champion was an unfair process because the traveling teams had a distinct advantage. The cost of travel was also a significant challenge for teams from other parts of the country, particularly during Wilson’s early stages on the CABA for it was during this time that the major sponsor of women’s basketball cut back on their support.²²¹ Without the means to travel, teams often opted out of going to other cities to play competitive series, thus limiting their exposure and opportunities to be recruited as a national team member. Wilson realized this, insisting that if Canada wanted to be well represented internationally there would have to be organizational changes in the way the national play downs were conducted.

In 1958, with the financial support of several western Canadian teams Wilson organized the first tournament style play down series. She noted that she “got the idea when I got into the CABA (because we had tournaments here

²²⁰ Interview conducted by Barbara Schrodtt with Clair, Vancouver B.C. 1991.

²²¹ Basketball for many years was sponsored by the Underwood Company who would cover the cost of bringing the winning team from Western Canada to Toronto one year and the Eastern team to Victoria the next.

in high schools) that we should have a tournament, including everyone.”²²² It was from this tournament that the 1959 Pan American games team was selected and Ruth Wilson had a direct role, particularly from an administrative standpoint where she recalled:

“I sat there for hours figuring out train rates and schedules. We got special rates, and it was divided by a certain amount, and then the home team with their gate gave so much. And it was quite a to-do. But it turned out all right.”²²³

Thus a shift in the structure of recruitment and team selection had begun. Now that the play down series for women’s basketball in Canada was located at a central location (tournament) it was an opportunity for Wilson and several other members who formed a selection committee to evaluate the best players from around the country. No longer did they have to rely on a specific team of players from one region. The best players from all the regions were brought together for a ‘selects’ team offering the possibility for a stronger Canadian team. In fact the next time Canada sent a team internationally it was a team that Ruth was asked to coach.²²⁴

This shift towards choosing the best players over the best teams was indicative of several initiatives supported by the government of Canada to move the Canadian sport model towards a high performance focus. The shift also marked the transition away from strong city commercial leagues towards an increased focus on interuniversity sport and varsity programs. As cities began to draw upon larger pools of players (those living in towns outside the

²²² Schrodts with Wilson, 1990.

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ This would be the 1959 Pan American Games team that Wilson managed. She was also vice-president of the CABA.

city), provincial teams began to take shape, offering a new level of competition nationally. Also, as the women's national basketball program began to receive increased funding from both federal and provincial governments, the new focus was on high performance, not the continued participation by many in the commercial leagues. The inevitable demise of the commercial leagues had begun. Soon national team players were being restricted from competing in the Canadian Championships (for commercial teams), and top players were required to relocate to train centrally. This resulted in the depletion of top level players in the local leagues and created a small cohort of women who had a significantly higher skill level than the average league player.

However the early 1960s was in many ways a time of growth for provincial and sport organizations in Canada. As the selection of the national team began to depend on the national tournament, a greater emphasis on training camps and team solidarity ensued. Once again Wilson was confronted by eastern Canada's lack of adoption of boys' rules basketball. Wilson was a strong supporter of boys' rules and having experienced international competition often called these rules 'international' rules. In one interview she recalled "I called them international rules, oh it just bugged me how they called them boy's rules."²²⁵ She used this terminology as a way to remove the stigma associated with gender and physical activity. She also used this terminology as a way to showcase the need for all of Canada to be playing under these rules especially if they were going to select a single team consisting of players from all across the country. She strongly believed that the

²²⁵ Hume with Wilson, 1993.

caliber of play from eastern Canada should be equal if not better because of its population density and access to facilities, but this was only useful if the entire country of Canada adopt boys' rules basketball or CABA rules.

Wilson was well aware that she was not a one woman army. In true Wilson style she continued to play a pivotal role in the organization of the national tournaments and was persistent in her desire to have the rules unified, yet she was also careful not to offend women players from other parts of the country. Her role on the CABA was a position she took very seriously and to which she devoted much of her spare time. As one league player reflected, "...someone had to secure the gym space, organize referees, design schedules, find sponsors, as well as keep players happy and continuing to participate."²²⁶ In the days before email and computers' communication, the organization of tournaments and draws was a tedious and arduous process. Yet, like many individuals in supportive roles/administrative roles her efforts were often performed behind the scenes and with little praise.

Wilson never appeared to complain about the time she dedicated to the CABA. She acknowledged the work as "just something you did. Something you did when you loved the game."²²⁷ Though she was not able to bring about an official rule unification and the adoption of CABA rules while under her leadership, her successor Eleanor Whyte witnessed the change. What was crucial was her attention to detail, the connections she built up in the community, and her ability to secure sponsorship, all of which made her role

²²⁶ Tracy, 2006.

²²⁷ Sharon, 2006.

on the CABA very important. She also set the precedent of involvement for a generation of women who would continue to give back to the sport of basketball in Canada.

CHAPTER FIVE: REMEMBERING RUTH

This chapter considers what we can learn from the memories of a small sample of sporting women who were directly and indirectly involved with Ruth Wilson and the female basketball community during the 1950s through the 1960s. Among the many sportswomen that Wilson encountered throughout her career in basketball, a number survive today to tell their stories about their own experiences in women's basketball and reflect upon Wilson's influence upon the sport locally, nationally and themselves. My interest lies in their points of intersection, how they remember her, and in what ways their relationships supported the continuing development of a national basketball program for women in Canada, as well as increased sporting opportunities for women in Vancouver. As I pointed out in my methodology section, three of the four women I interviewed belonged to the "oldest basketball team in the world" a team called the *Retreads* which competed in the 65+ age group category at the World Masters Games in 2005. The fourth was a national sports figure in the 1960s who grew up in Vancouver and was strongly connected to the local sporting community as a high performance athlete and physical educator. All four of my informants competed, coached and/or worked together since the late 1950s and knew each other very well. They had all achieved significant success in the sporting realm earning medals and induction into various sports halls of fame and museums. Each of them went on to have influential careers as physical educators in the city of Vancouver.

My interviews began by discussing their first encounters with Ruth Wilson. Two of the women, Lana and Tracy, first encountered her while they were attending high school, while Sharon and Clair first knew her during her term as vice-president of the Canadian Amateur Basketball Association (CABA) and then worked with her in various social and professional capacities. As impressionable newly trained teachers in the city of Vancouver they looked to Wilson for guidance knowing how seriously she took her role as leader and the importance she placed upon giving back to the community. Sharon, who grew up in Ontario before moving to Vancouver recalled her first introduction to Wilson in the following way:

“In 1959 we won the Ontario Championships and we went to the Canadian Championships. That is all I thought they were, but it also turned out they were the selection tournament for the Pan American Games team. Ruth was on the selection committee. And so I got to know her from that, I got picked for that and we went to Saskatoon for 2 weeks, I guess for training camp. I corresponded with Ruth about the size of my shorts etc. all that stuff. We went to Chicago. She was very very well organized. The kind of person you liked. I really knew nothing about her as an athlete. I saw her in that situation.”²²⁸

Clair, who was still living in Calgary when she first encountered Wilson, also recalled her introduction:

“I got a letter from...I think from Ruth saying would I like to join the team and here are the plans for the team. We would be training 2 weeks in Saskatoon prior to leaving. That was our training period, 2 weeks. That was my introduction to Ruth. I didn’t really know her other than the person who sent me a letter.”²²⁹

Thus their early encounters with Wilson all took place after she had retired from playing basketball and had moved exclusively into her role as a

²²⁸ Sharon, 2006.

²²⁹ Clair, 2006.

professional educator, administrator and coach. Since Wilson was a generation older than they were and had grown up during a period in Canada where women's opportunities in amateur sport were less overshadowed by men's sport and professional opportunities, they tended to view her experiences somewhat differently from their own. It was evident that because of Wilson's humble nature, and the way the women recalled her contributions in a scripted manner, that they based their knowledge of her early experiences on information they had heard at celebrations of women in sport and various halls of fame inductions that they had attended together over the years. At the same time our discussions about Wilson's influence on their lives highlighted similarities they shared with Wilson, in addition to the generational challenges they faced as sporting pioneers. In fact much of what they were able to recall of Wilson's early experiences became so deeply connected to their own that it was often difficult to decipher if they were talking about her or if they were recalling their own experiences in women's basketball. It was as though the opportunity I provided for them to share and reflect on Ruth Wilson's contributions also provided a forum for them to voice their own experiences, both positively and negatively.

One of the reasons my participants got along so well with Wilson was because of their mutual enthusiasm for the sport of basketball and sports in general. They all had similar levels of support and encouragement from their families, experienced similar introductions to the sport of basketball, were able to enter higher education with the career goals of becoming physical

educators, and all shared similar gendered understandings about the opportunities available for sporting women playing basketball in Canada from the time Wilson was involved in the 1940s through the 1960s (when they were more involved). Though their early practices were different in some respects (Sharon played girls' rules), their sporting experiences were all shaped by the conservative nature of Canadian culture in the decades following the Second World War. Hall, reflecting on this time for Canadian female athletes, called this period transitional and difficult for several reasons: the changing political and administrative structure of the sport system, changes in the values placed on sport, increased government involvement in sport, as well as the increasing professional opportunities for men's sport while women remained relegated to amateur activities.²³⁰ Despite these impediments and the belief that this was a "very conservative time for women's sports,"²³¹ each of the women interviewed recalled positive sporting experiences in their own communities while playing competitive basketball during the 1950s and 1960s.

They were very open and forthright in their interviews and after they had illuminated the context in which they knew Wilson best, they could not help but share with me the stories of their early introduction to basketball as well as several important factors that facilitated their involvement. It is from these stories that the full significance of Wilson's role in developing and contributing to the sport of women's basketball in Canada became clear. Their stories related to Wilson's contributions in two ways that will be discussed in the

²³⁰ Hall, *The Girl and the Game*, 137.

²³¹ Sharon, 2006.

remaining part of this chapter: 1) Their involvements and experiences in the sport of basketball as players; and 2) Their continued involvement with the sport as coaches, physical education teachers and administrators. The stories from the interviews I conducted are provided with verbatim quotations from the participants.

Experiences as Athletes Playing Competitive Sport

Early Family Support

It seems that the opportunity to participate in sports would not have been possible had it not been for support from the women's families who encouraged them to participate in various sporting activities during their childhoods. They all participated with the approval of their parents at a time when it was not always considered acceptable for girls to be athletic. All of my participants were able to point to a family member who had been particularly influential and involved in encouraging participation in sport. Though there was often overlap, influential individuals ranged from brother, mother, aunt or older sister. The support came in various capacities but most often included financial and moral support and encouragement. Reflecting on her family's support, for example, Lana recalled how "I was always allowed to play as long as I had my chores done."²³²

Lana claimed that her older sister and brother participated in a variety of sporting activities, while Sharon recalled how she was encouraged to be physically active by her mother, an active woman who loved to swim.²³³ Clair

²³² Interview with Lana, Vancouver, B.C., 2006.

²³³ Sharon, 2006.

also came from a home where females were encouraged to participate in sport and again it was the influence of her mother who encouraged her to be active.²³⁴ Hall suggests that women in the 1950s and 1960s, particularly if they were from families who were financially stable were able to access sports and spend long hours training because of what has been called “Daddy’s little girl syndrome.”²³⁵ This ‘syndrome’ reflected the lack of professional opportunities for women, and the notion that amateur women athletes were able to devote long hours to training with the idea that they would one day be ready to settle down. For many female athletes in Canada there existed a small window of opportunity where they were allowed to pursue athletic goals without their participation being deemed a threat to their future roles as wives and mothers. These women were able to challenge the traditional gender order that according to Alex et al. influences individuals’ ways of being from “the way we talk, write, dress, sit move” as well as how we participate in sports.²³⁶ However, for my participants, traditional gender roles that entailed marriage and childbearing and limited athletic endeavors were not enforced. Thus each in their own way challenged traditional definitions of female roles and opportunities and were encouraged to do this with family support.

My participants’ reflections on their families’ ability to support their sporting interests financially was particularly important for a number of reasons. During the interviews each of the participants suggested to me that they had grown up in economically hard times. All felt that money or lack of

²³⁴ Clair, 2006.

²³⁵ Hall, *The Girl and the Game*, 136.

²³⁶ Aléx, “Constructions of various Femininities,” 854.

money had a direct effect on their opportunities in sport as well as affecting how they identified with Wilson. They believed that Wilson had experienced a different sport environment with greater opportunities because she came from a wealthier background that provided her with exposure to different sports (like golf) and greater social connections. Tracy who knew a great deal about Wilson's family background through their close friendship suggested that "many of Wilson's contacts were well off individuals whom she grew up knowing."²³⁷ On the other hand, she also noted that many of these people knew Wilson because her mother was their Montessori school teacher, thus even though she grew up in an affluent neighborhood, Wilson and her family may not have been as affluent as Sharon, Clair and Lana implied.

Even though they felt they belonged to a lower socio-economic class than Wilson and had fewer supportive connections in the community they were all financially stable. I attribute my observations to the fact that they were all able to continue their educations at various universities at a time when it was still considered a privilege to do so.²³⁸ By the 1950s, a mere 6 percent of Canadians between 18 and 24 pursued a post secondary education. Those who did were predominantly white, and from the middle and upper classes.²³⁹ According to Strong-Boag, an identifying feature of middle class status for women from the mid 1930s onward was their entry into the paid labour force as teachers, nurses and clerical workers.²⁴⁰ Like Wilson during her youth,

²³⁷ Tracy, 2006.

²³⁸ Ross and Bentley, "Gold-Plated Footballs," 99.

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ Strong-Boag, *The New Day Recalled*, 42.

none of them were responsible for contributing to their family's income and all seemed to have had the free time required to become successful athletes. For my participants, who chose to pursue professional careers, work as teachers enabled them to carry on playing sport, and participate in the commercial leagues because of their ability to schedule time off work and cover absences with substitutes, in addition to holiday breaks gained throughout the year that accommodated play downs and tournaments. Moreover participation in the commercial basketball leagues did not require a huge financial sacrifice since private sponsors were sought to cover the cost of travel, uniforms and equipment. The participants all received a great deal of support and encouragement to continue playing basketball because it provided them with a sense of accomplishment and was not a financial burden.

Opportunities to Play Competitive Sport

For the most part the women had similar experiences and opportunities to play competitive sport. The majority of their early experiences in basketball were shaped by participation in local commercial basketball leagues or through participation in Sunday morning basketball programs held by local church organizations. The focus of play in these leagues was that of a participatory model where organizers sought to provide opportunities for many girls to play and focused minimal attention towards offensive strategies and team defenses. The caliber of play was not particularly high nor was it overly competitive. Furthermore they had the opportunity to play a number of sports growing up, experiencing a very different environment than they believe

children face today where, often at an early age, young people are forced to choose one sport at which to excel. As a group they all acknowledged that they did not participate in competitive basketball until they were young women about to enter university. Reflecting on her early experiences Sharon noted that she:

“Came from Toronto and girl's didn't play interscholastic sports in Toronto. I never played a competitive game until university. We only played intramurals.”²⁴¹

Lana and Clair recalled playing boys' rules basketball in their various city commercial leagues. It was not until much later, as young women, that they recalled really getting into competitive basketball where they would travel great distances to and from games, use playbooks and incorporate strategy into their style of play.

Lana, who grew up in Vancouver, indicated that her involvement in basketball was influenced by Ruth Wilson who was a teacher at her Senior high school. She did not start playing for the school team until grade eleven, and that was after she had been playing for the *Hedlunds* commercial team for one year and was not sure if she was going to continue with the sport. It was Wilson who first encouraged her to play on her school team and she described the experience in the following way:

“Oh, I was sitting in the gym watching the girls practice. Mary Campbell was the coach and she was leading a practice. They (the team) were all running up and down the floor, and I was sitting on the bench. Ruth walked through the gym. When she came back through I was still sitting there. And she said, Mary I think you have forgotten about Lana. So that was my way onto the team. You know how a coach forgets when there is

²⁴¹ Sharon, 2006.

someone sitting on the side. Well, once I was in I never really stopped playing. Good fun and I will never forget it.”²⁴²

For Clair, who attended university in Calgary and had earned a reputation as a great basketball player in her local community, it was not surprising that her peers encouraged her to both play for and coach her university team.²⁴³ All of the participants were gifted athletes whose competitive instincts blossomed in the sporting environment they found while playing basketball. Even though they were participating in different regions of the country before they moved to Vancouver, they shared similar experiences playing and had similar opportunities outside of sport that were facilitated by their connectedness to the sporting community. While attending university, competitions were mostly limited to the local context since travel was expensive and time consuming. Most university teams participated in the same leagues as the commercially sponsored teams. Most often there were different divisions for teams to participate in. The Senior ‘A’ league was the top level and was highly competitive while the Senior ‘B’ league facilitated opportunities for a greater number of women to participate in and was less competitive. In the city of Vancouver, the University of British Columbia women’s basketball team most often competed in the Senior ‘B’ league though there were several strong teams in the school’s history who participated in the Senior ‘A’ league, most notably the 1929/30 women’s basketball team that won the world championship in Prague. It was common for young women to play for both

²⁴² Lana, 2006.

²⁴³ Clair, 2006.

their university team as well as a team sponsored by a commercial industry. Lana played for Wilson at the University of British Columbia, as well as a team that competed in the Senior 'A' commercial league that Wilson coached.

Once they reached the Senior 'A' level unique experiences, professional networking and travel opportunities often presented themselves. For example the participants expressed that they were able to travel outside of their home province as well as travel internationally via airplanes. Air travel was considered to be relatively new and exciting for these women. Clair stated that "the world was much larger then" compared to today where "the world is so small, in that, anyone can just jump on a plane," and compete almost anywhere.²⁴⁴ It was also through their connectedness to the sporting community that they were able to solidify professional opportunities as teachers with the Vancouver school board before they relocated to the city of Vancouver.

For Lana, Clair and Sharon who were competing in their various cities Senior 'A' leagues, the 1958/1959 basketball season was a very important. This was the year they were all selected to represent Canada on the women's basketball team at the Pan American Games in Chicago. It was an event which lead to life long friendships and was a direct result of Ruth Wilson bringing them together for the first Canadian National Championship tournament in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. It was for the 1959 Pan American Games that Wilson as vice-president of the CABA worked to establish a new tournament process to select a national representative team. As this was the

²⁴⁴ Clair, 2006.

first year for the tournament, it was decided that the winning team along with a few additional 'stand out' players from other regions of Canada would represent the country at the Pan American games. The *Saskatchewan Aces* won the championship and a selection committee that included Wilson chose several stand-out players from the tournament to strengthen the team.

The opportunity for these three women to compete was thus very special because the chance for women to compete in basketball at international competitions had long been limited. As basketball for women was not recognized as an Olympic event and because teams from the United States were most often selected to represent North America at competitions in Europe and overseas, the women relied on the Pan American games to gain international exposure and these only happened every four years.²⁴⁵ Since the 1920s most Canadian women had lacked opportunities to participate in international competitions because the *Edmonton Grads* had single handedly dominated the Canadian and international scene of competitive women's sport. During the period of their reign it was rare for another team to represent Canada at international competitions. The *Grads* had always been elected to go because they were simply the best. They were the "undisputed champions of Canada, North America and the 'world'"²⁴⁶ and it was not until 1929 that the University of British Columbia's women's basketball team who played in the Senior 'A' league were recommended by the *Grads* to take their place and represent Canada at the Third Women's World Games in Prague. After the

²⁴⁵ Clair, 2006.

²⁴⁶ Hall, *The Girl and the Game*, 57.

Grads disbanded, several western teams from Vancouver dominated the Canadian and international scene, and for the 1955 Pan American Games Vancouver's *Eilers* basketball team represented Canada.²⁴⁷ Certainly Sharon and Clair were aware of the high caliber of play in Vancouver and through their participation on the 1959 Pan American Games team, where they met Wilson and several other important coaches and sponsors, it became evident that if they wanted to continue to play at a high level they needed to be in the city where the best teams were consistently being formed.

For the 1963 Pan American Games the CABA decided that Vancouverites' Gordie MacDonald (coach of the *Eilers*) and Eleanor Whyte (the new vice president of the CABA), would coach the women's basketball team. Both Sharon and Clair were contacted to join the team and were encouraged to relocate to the city of Vancouver where they could teach for the Vancouver school board. By 1962 both Sharon and Clair had relocated to Vancouver to play for MacDonald in the commercial basketball league and had secured full time jobs as high school physical education teachers. This opportunity to relocate as well as participate in another international competition was facilitated by their involvement and success as athletes.

Impact of Gender on Their Experiences as Players

Gender research has shown that there is not just one type of femininity but several femininities, which are constructed by an individual's relationships to

²⁴⁷ Schrod, "Vancouver's Dynastic Domination of Canadian Senior Women's Basketball," 22.

historical, social, and cultural circumstances.²⁴⁸ Most of the women interviewed agreed that they accepted the demands of the times to conform to traditional gender roles and display appropriate representations of femininity. In the interviews we discussed their understandings of femininity and how they felt they had to present themselves as women both on and off the basketball court. Although Wilson experienced an environment where women were expected to be “ladies” first, the general climate of her time had allowed for a greater fluidity about what constituted appropriate feminine behavior. Thus, while they all faced similar challenges to act in codified ways, the women interviewed seemed to believe that they had been subject to a more limiting environment for women than Wilson faced. As Ross has pointed out theirs was a time of contradictions where they felt pressed to direct a significant amount of attention towards the negotiation of their roles as athletes and their roles as women.²⁴⁹

Lana, Sharon, Tracy and Clair all provided examples of how they negotiated societal expectations of appropriate feminine behaviors for sporting women. Sharon discussed an international trip with the Canadian men’s basketball team to Brazil. As both the men’s and women’s teams were traveling together, the women were asked and indeed expected to sew on the Canadian emblems to everybody’s blazers because the tailors had neglected to do this:

²⁴⁸ Toril Moi, *What is a Woman? and Other Essays* (Oxford: University Press, 1999); Al  x et. Al., “Constructions of Various Femininities,” 853.

²⁴⁹ Ross and Bentley, “Gold-Plated Footballs,” 113.

“We were flying down and the blazers that we had were from Tip Top. Well they didn’t have the crests sewn on them yet. We were flying with the men’s team and they gave them to us to sew the crests on. Both the men’s and the women’s crests had to be sewn.”

Asked about how she felt being expected to perform this ‘traditional’ female task she stated, “Oh we were mad but we did it. We were expected to and we had to.”²⁵⁰

Of course, the men were not the only ones to place expectations upon female behaviour. According to Ross “the specter of ‘evil lesbianism’ continued to dog all women in athletics.”²⁵¹ Though my participants did not outwardly state that this was an issue, they did recall pressures to not look “butchy” or too masculine. Cahn has shown how the suspicion of lesbianism functioned both as a homophobic repellant and as a magnetic sexual force field in women’s athletics and several participants shared they were aware how carefully they had to present themselves both on and off the basketball court.²⁵²

Christiane: What about off the court? Did Ruth ever say you were ladies first?

Sharon: Clair would tell us that when we were with Molson’s cause we had somebody quite “butchy” on our team then. That was definitely not something you would want to be seen as. Um...

Christiane: Do you mean masculine?

Sharon: Yah, too masculine, we had to wear skirts when we were on the ferry and um I remember that it was because of this particular person, we tried to, this particular person who didn’t

²⁵⁰ Sharon, 2006.

²⁵¹ Ross and Bentley, “Gold-Plated Footballs,” 113.

²⁵² Cahn, *Coming on Strong*, 202.

own a skirt. I mean now I have so many and I never put them on.²⁵³

There was an emphasis on presenting a feminine image under all circumstances and as Sharon recalled there were no exceptions, even if it was too cold to wear skirts:

“In 1967 the winter games (Canada) were in Quebec City. We had a uniform from BC consisting of blazers from the liquor store. We had to have our own grey skirts and it was minus 30. We had to wear those skirts and blazers marching through the Parade. We had to wear skirts and high heels. In Winnipeg! It was cold! But we had to march in there like that.”²⁵⁴

There also existed a contradiction between the style of play the women were expected to perform and the way they were supposed to look on the court. When questioned about their competitive style of play they all acknowledged that they never held back. They expressed that the female decorum traditionally maintained outside of the sporting context was relegated to their appearance but not their actions while participating:

Christiane: what about on the court? Was there pressure for you to be not too aggressive?

Lana: heavens no

Christiane: On the court it was one way and off the court it was another

Lana: you gotcha

Christiane: So off the court you were nice and sweet but on the court you were “go get'em” and aggressive

Lana: That was any team I have ever played on it was “go get'em” on the court²⁵⁵

²⁵³ Sharon, 2006.

²⁵⁴ Sharon, 2006.

²⁵⁵ Lana, 2006.

Being a 'lady' was never in question while they were playing the game. In fact they countered overly aggressive behaviors by accentuating their feminine appearance on the court. Clothing became one of the main signifiers used to exemplify femininity. They all directed significant attention to small details from wearing lipstick to having appropriately colored running shoes (even if they were hard to find). Sharon and Lana both recalled the emphasis that was placed on having the right colour of running shoes.

Sharon: In Toronto after the war it was hard to get rubber, but if you wore black running shoes that was too masculine I remember that

Lana: We all had white shoes²⁵⁶

Both Sharon and Lana appeared to understand that in order to achieve the status and recognition that was needed to maintain sponsorship they had to accommodate the journalists and photographers who wanted to present them in stereotypical depictions of female athletes. According to Hall, female athletes photographed during this period were subject to a time that sought to link athleticism and sexuality in new ways.²⁵⁷ Often the focus was on an athlete's physical appearance rather than their sporting accomplishments.

Lana and Sharon both reflected on this:

Lana: That is why we got such good publicity cause we did what they wanted

Sharon: If they would put a picture of us in a tussle they would put one where her hair was flying. It is not like they were good basketball pictures, like you see now. You see basketball, now you see a women with her hair disheveled. They purposely made us look a certain way.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁶ Lana, 2006.

²⁵⁷ Hall, *The Girl and the Game*, 141.

²⁵⁸ Sharon, 2006.

The women also reflected on the role of the media in directing the ways they were presented in newspapers and local media sources. For female athletes desperate to find sponsors and needing to appeal to the media that provided them with publicity, they had to present themselves in ways that they did not always find particularly appealing. Of all my participants, Sharon expressed the greatest distaste towards the way they were represented in the media stating “we were all in the papers lacing up our shoes. All ‘cutsie’ and young. I have a problem with that.”²⁵⁹ She also commented negatively on an image from her scrapbook where the women were asked to form a human pyramid for the photograph.²⁶⁰ It was not, however, a view shared by all of those interviewed. Lana disagreed with Sharon stating firmly that “it was cute,” nor did she see the harm in having to present herself in such a way.²⁶¹

Sharon: These are the kinds of things they had girls do, would you ever have boys doing a basketball picture looking like that?

Lana: That was kind of unique

Sharon: Lana I have one of us doing this in Toronto

Lana: But that was fun

Sharon: Sure it was fun but you wouldn't have boys doing that²⁶²

Cahn suggests that few players who participated in the industrial leagues in North America were even aware of the controversies over uniforms, rules or coaches.²⁶³ The majority of the women who were involved in the leagues simply did what they were told and enjoyed the spotlight that they

²⁵⁹ Sharon, 2006.

²⁶⁰ Photo in appendix no. 1

²⁶¹ Lana, 2006.

²⁶² Sharon and Lana, 2006.

²⁶³ Cahn, *Coming on Strong*, 103.

received while having the opportunity to compete. Lana enjoyed her celebrity status and even recalled being identified by a fan while on vacation. This she later indicated was one of the highlights of her sporting experience. Her non issue with the way they were presented in the media exemplifies the ways hegemonic representations become so entrenched in society that individuals often become oblivious to the fact that they are even subject to dominant forms of behaviors. Thus the women were able to have positive experiences and maintain a celebrity status because they chose to not challenge the male hegemonic system. Like Wilson they conformed to a range of acceptable behaviors, (though that range was more limited than Wilson had experienced), and found a balance by not voicing criticism so as to maintain the support from sponsors, the media, as well as the Vancouver community.

For the women interviewed they presented a clear understanding that there existed expectations for their behaviors both on and off the basketball court. Their understanding of appropriate behaviors was both taught to them by influential role models as well as learned indirectly through the direction given to them by photographers and leaders in the sport community. All of them felt that in order to advance opportunities they had to work within the sports system that was already established in western Canada where men were predominantly in positions of power and authority.

Experiences Outside of Playing: Coaches, Teachers and Administrators

Career Goals: Physical Educators

In many respects, the career trajectories of my participants were quite similar in spite of the generational gap. Playing basketball introduced them to

important community leaders who also influenced them to pursue professional careers as teachers. They were fortunate to encounter individuals like Wilson who demonstrated through her own commitment and career path the impact they could have on women's sporting opportunities. In hindsight they all agreed that they were fortunate to be physical education teachers and that they enjoyed their professions very much. They did however acknowledge that though their profession was ideal because of the flexibility it granted to participate in sport, selecting their career paths had not been premeditated. They recalled that professional opportunities were limited in many ways both in sport and career. Repeatedly in the interviews, the women pointed out the importance of social support in their careers, suggesting "it is not what you know it is who you know."²⁶⁴ Sharon and Clair acknowledged that they were the first in their families to pursue a post secondary education, an opportunity facilitated by their success in sports, particularly basketball. In their sporting social circles, becoming a teacher was considered a 'normal' profession yet both Sharon and Clair felt as though they had entered the teaching profession by a default because their first choice of profession was not available.

Though the teaching profession in general was considered to be quite 'normal' for women wishing to pursue professional careers, in western Canada formal training in physical education was a relatively new discipline. At the University of Alberta the institution with which Clair was affiliated, formal instruction in the discipline originated in the Department of Physical Education in the faculty of Education (1945-1954). Lana, for instance, was a member of

²⁶⁴ Clair, 2006.

the first physical education graduating class from UBC in 1949. Clair who did not move to Edmonton to attend the University of Alberta teacher training was able to take classes at the Calgary Branch of the University of Alberta. She recalled being the only education student in Calgary with a focus on physical education:

“I decided I wanted to be in PE and that was a little bit different because I was the only PE student. So I had to go in the courses with the people who were going to be medical doctors. All my classes were in somebody else’s office because I was the only student at the time.”²⁶⁵

Sharon who was from eastern Canada knew of the occupation for women but it was not the first career choice she considered:

“In grade 9 we had a guidance counselor give a speech about what we wanted to be. I thought a pharmacist because my brother delivered for the drug store. After the war there were no chocolate bars and the pharmacist had them under his counter, so I knew I wanted to be a pharmacist. Anyway, I had never thought about university or anything. A girl in my class wrote that she wanted to be a P.E. teacher. So, she wrote that, and I thought... I could want to be a PE teacher too.”²⁶⁶

Clair shared a similar experience of not knowing what to study in university or being aware of the options available for women:

“No one in my family had gone to university. So I didn’t have any guidance in that way. I was leaving high school and I had to make a decision. And this girl I sat next to said I am going to be a physio therapist. I said, what’s that? Sounds like fun - maybe I will do that. In my day you were either a nurse, you worked in an office, or became a teacher. And in Calgary there were two police women. I thought that would be great...but anyway they already had two so they didn’t need anymore. I thought well that’s that I can’t be a police woman and I can’t stand needles so maybe I’ll go be a physio. To do that you had to go to

²⁶⁵ Clair, 2006.

²⁶⁶ Sharon, 2006.

Edmonton, but to do that you had to be able to afford to leave home. So by default I ended up becoming a teacher.”²⁶⁷

It was also evident that all my participants benefited professionally by being involved in the sporting community. Participation and success in the commercial basketball leagues provided an opportunity for them to network and meet influential individuals who shared similar interests. When asked about the influence of individuals they knew through sport, Clair recalled how a local basketball referee who happened to be on the school board in her city was able to get her a position before she completed her teaching certificate, though she eventually did complete it:

“He phoned me up. I was going to summer school. He says what are you going to do next year? I replied, go to school I guess. Do you want to teach (he says)? I say how can I? He says never mind how. Do you want to? I said well I don’t know? He said you phone me if you want a job, you call me. In fact I had a choice of this, this and this.”²⁶⁸

Both Clair and Sharon benefited from being connected to the sports community by being able to secure roles as teachers with the Vancouver School Board before they relocated to Vancouver. The women acknowledged that their ability to coach various sports teams as well as the celebrity status they had achieved based on sporting success made them appealing to the hiring committee with the school board.

In some respects they were fortunate to have the opportunity to pursue professional careers both during and after their sporting experience. For many women of this time opportunities to excel in sport were granted with the

²⁶⁷ Clair, 2006.

²⁶⁸ Clair, 2006.

understanding that upon retirement women would move into traditional roles that relegated them to wives and mothers.²⁶⁹ According to Hall, the notion persisted that “because they were not under the same pressures as male athletes to train themselves for a career, they could have their ‘fling’ with no thought of the future.”²⁷⁰ The act of pursuing sport as well as a career was unique, despite the limitations they recalled.

By September of 1962, Lana, Sharon and Clair were living in Vancouver and teaching physical education at three different high schools; Prince of Wales, John Oliver and Eric Hamber while participating in the senior ‘A’ commercial basketball league with their hopes set on playing at the 1963 Pan American games. Though they did not claim that Wilson had helped to secure their teaching positions with the school board they did acknowledge that their increased contact with Wilson became increasingly useful. In fact it was during the next few years that Wilson’s impact on these women’s lives became quite evident. From knowing her as a coach and manager on their own team she became a close colleague. She was according to one participant:

“always around, she coached basketball all the way through...when there was any sort of tournament going on she was always involved in some capacity. And on top of this she would be going to CABA meetings.”²⁷¹

In many ways when the participants described Wilson in this manner they were also describing the type of commitment and desire to mentor others they maintained throughout their professional careers.

²⁶⁹ Hall, *The Girl and the Game*, 163.

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 118.

²⁷¹ Sharon, 2006.

Volunteering and Mentoring Women in the Vancouver Sport Community

My participants also followed in Wilson's footsteps when it came to supporting the sport of basketball outside of their teaching hours. Their careers as athletes as well as teachers and educators were very similar. Wilson encouraged them to extend their involvements in the teaching profession beyond that which took place in the gymnasium or the classroom. Together they organized after school programs for the youth at their schools, especially at John Oliver high school. Lana recalled how they:

“...started the Monday night basketball league, Ruth and I did. Eventually eighteen teams would come and play starting around 6:30pm for forty five minute games...we had three gyms going!”²⁷²

It was Wilson's example and dedication to giving back to youths that encouraged them to do the same. Wilson was highly involved in the Vancouver sport community. When she was not working directly with students as a guidance counselor or teacher she maintained several roles coaching and organizing in Vancouver. In order to keep the league up and running someone had to book referees, schedule facilities, organize playing schedules as well as liaise with the rest of the basketball community in Canada who were located in other regions. She did all this plus the hours she would spend in the gym coaching and teaching basketball fundamentals to keen individuals seeking to advance their game. Her dedication to the sport and individuals wishing to challenge themselves was tireless. Those who witnessed her involvement were influenced to do the same. It was as though the countless hours they

²⁷² Lana, 2006.

spent were acknowledged as just part of the job. Thus all my participants recalled being teachers who were actively involved as coaches and organizers in the sporting community in Vancouver. They looked to Wilson as an example of how to make the transition between playing the sport and the various roles she maintained as a player, coach and administrator throughout her lengthy career.

As Sharon, Clair, Lana and Tracy gave up playing their sport at a high level they maintained their involvement in the sporting community and the Senior 'A' leagues as administrators. They remained physically active, but shifted their participation style towards a more recreational style of play. This shift was not because their bodies were physically unable to compete or because the women felt as though they were being forced to retire. Instead all of my participants expressed that the reason they retired from playing was because they wanted to provide opportunities for a new generation of sporting women to get involved. In many respects they acknowledged that their new roles as administrators and coaches were similar to Wilson's career and sport path. Sharon's account of why she retired from playing highlights the general consensus from the women interviewed:

"I guess I remember why I quit, I left so that younger people could be on the team. The Pan Am games, I could have played but it was time for other people to play. I had had enough of being on a team. You feel kind of guilty when you take up a spot like that."²⁷³

Both Sharon and Lana stated that their sustained involvements were "just something that they did," and "something that they expected from each

²⁷³ Sharon, 2006.

other as colleagues.”²⁷⁴ Reflecting on her understanding of what it meant to be a teacher and coach Clair pointed out that:

“More teams were coached by teachers...There was almost a community of people. Now you go to the school and you don’t know who you are going to meet. Well teachers just don’t do it anymore. I still do but I retired in 1997. They look at me and go who is that coaching?”²⁷⁵

One of the most influential contributions that all of these women shared was their sustained contributions to national sport organizations in Canada. After working for many years Wilson stepped down from her role as vice president of the CABA because she realized that new generations of sporting women were entering into the basketball community and wanted to make way for them to contribute as she had done. Reflecting on Wilson’s retirement from this volunteer position and based on her own experience Clair stated, “I don’t know why she stopped with the Canadian organization, but people just took their turn, then Eleanor did, then Lana, then I did it.”²⁷⁶ Clair’s discussion of why Wilson retired is particularly important because she highlights the changing landscape and environment that Lana, Clair and Sharon faced as the Canadian national focus on sport began to move towards a high performance model. Specifically Clair highlights the increasing involvement men had in the decision making processes surrounding women’s sport:

“She was still around, she was active she probably just got tired of going to meetings and dealing with the men! Plus she was busy she was one of the top golfers. She had her summer cabin and she coached. So you know being the person who gets to go on a trip to Brazil is not the be all end all. You don’t necessarily

²⁷⁴ Sharon and Lana, 2006.

²⁷⁵ Clair, 2006.

²⁷⁶ Clair, 2006.

have to go. She probably just gave up the CABA in favor of Eleanor doing it. But Ruth was still very active."²⁷⁷

National involvement in amateur sport from the 1960s onwards recalls Hall, resulted in the "rationalization, restructuring and professionalization of the Canadian sport system," that resulted in a shift in the types of experiences women had as high performance athletes in Canada.²⁷⁸ The supportive environment that Wilson had experienced where both the men and the women worked together and where Wilson had authority regarding decisions was not the same environment her successors faced.

Clair and Sharon both spoke about businessmen who were sponsors and/or presidents of the CABA who kept the sport of basketball up and running while Ruth Wilson was the vice-president. They described them as "wonderful people" indicating that "basketball would have died if they hadn't been around." Clair further discussed the impact of one particular male with whom Wilson had worked closely. He believed in the importance of sporting opportunities for female athletes, despite criticisms and a lack of financial support from the national basketball community. Clair discussed his impact in the following way:

"I will tell yah Henry Jones²⁷⁹ was the president at the time prior to my coaching probably when Ruth was coaching and they were going to scrap the women's team, they weren't going to bother with one. Well why spend money on them what for? What is the return? They are only going to go to Winnipeg to the Pan Am's and they are all going to go home. So why should we

²⁷⁷ Clair, 2006.

²⁷⁸ Hall, *The Girl and the Game*, 136. Bill c-131 was intended to encourage mass participation as well as improve international sport performances. For a comprehensive analysis of the origins of Bill C-131 and its early impact, see Macintosh, *Sport and Politics in Canada*, 10.

²⁷⁹ A pseudonym was used for his name

spend money on the team? Henry Jones said there was no money, they were going to have a men's team but no women's. Henry Jones put up the money by taking a mortgage out on his house."²⁸⁰

Lana and Clair followed in Wilson's footsteps by serving as vice-presidents of CABA. Clair also spent numerous years coaching and being directly involved with the national team in various capacities. The duties of administrators also changed dramatically through the course of involvement for all of these women. Where Wilson spent the majority of her time corresponding with other representatives via mail and telegraphs and later phone calls, opportunities to meet in person with officials was significantly less than those Clair experienced. This lack of communication experienced by Wilson enabled her to exercise authority over the decisions she made regarding women's basketball in Canada. Those who followed in her footsteps had to deal with officials and leaders from many regions of Canada such that they felt as though their decision making process became highly supervised. Clair, reflecting on the changes that she experienced as a vice president, indicated that though there were different presidents who were "really good people," it was a difficult environment where "they did what they could as volunteers who relied on government funding" and approval.²⁸¹ Those who followed in Wilson's footsteps were indeed part the Canadian environment where

"women, both as athletes and leaders, were often left out of the decision making processes, and they were divided among

²⁸⁰ Clair, 2006.

²⁸¹ Clair, 2006.

themselves, more than in the past about how to change their future.”²⁸²

As Lana, Sharon, and Clair became increasingly involved and recognized as top national players and coaches, national pressures for teams to successfully represent Canada at international competitions increased. Wilson had worked very hard to bring the Canadian women together (the tournament), but her success in this endeavor did not mean that the next generation found it easy to take advantage of the strong national team they had formed. During her role as the vice president, Clair faced a difficult environment where she struggled to find support for the Canadian women’s basketball team. She recalled that while she was an active member:

“Canada could have cared less if they even had a women’s basketball team. And because they were only competing every four years at the Pan American Games the consensus from the men who controlled the sport organization was that the women’s team was “of no good use”.²⁸³

According to Clair it was not until 1976, when women’s basketball made its debut in the Olympics, that Canada began to put more of an organizational and financial contribution towards the development of the women’s basketball program.²⁸⁴ Thus the women’s national program had to rely on support from corporate sponsors and fundraising initiatives.

It was a time of contradiction for those who were interviewed, for on the one hand, they were successful athletes allowing their competitive natures to

²⁸² Hall, *The Girl and the Game*, 137.

²⁸³ Clair, 2006.

²⁸⁴ Clair, 2006.

be expressed on the court. They were ecstatic about the opportunity to represent Canada and be high performance athletes. Yet on the other hand, like Wilson, they were professional working women, “idealistic” as Sharon put it, and confused as to how to continue to provide opportunities for future generations. In many respects they faced a very conservative environment where they had to work within the confines of the gender order and within the boundaries of what would be considered appropriate feminine behavior and decorum in order to keep their league and national program up and running.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH AREAS

At the BC Sports Hall of Fame there is now a special recognition program and exhibit entitled "IN HER FOOTSTEPS... CELEBRATING BC WOMEN IN SPORT". Annually the program honors "Heroines who have changed the world" and Ida Chong, the Minister of Community Services and Minister Responsible for Seniors and Women in British Columbia says that "having heroines is crucial to building a future in sport," for they champion the positive effect of role models in empowering more women and girls in multiple aspects of their lives.²⁸⁵

Ruth Wilson was one of the first to be inducted into IN HER FOOTSTEPS, celebrated as a woman who embodied excellence in sport and fitness through both her performance as well as enabling others to participate and excel. But little has been documented about the extent to which she has contributed to the promotion of women's basketball in Canada and especially in Vancouver where she strove throughout her life to facilitate the development of the sport, mentor young players, support community programs and engineer administrative opportunities and structural changes in the way women's sport was organized.

Celebrating heroines of sport is not a straightforward matter. The concept of the heroic, as Hargreaves points, out must be examined through an analysis of the struggles and achievements of many women whose stories

²⁸⁵ Annie Reid, "Heroines for the Next Generation - 2007 Honourees for in Her Footsteps Celebrated," *Promotion Plus Network News*, 2007, 1.

have been excluded or forgotten from previous accounts of women's sports and female heroism.²⁸⁶ Many of them had to struggle against forms of discrimination, and constructed their own sporting identities in changing and difficult conditions. In fact women have been much more a part of the sporting lives of cities and nations than has previously been believed despite the traditional differential treatment of men and women in sport. Thus my account of Ruth Wilson's contributions provides a unique case study of one woman's persistent and wide ranging efforts to change the ways in which girls and women participated in a sport which brought them freedom to compete, professional opportunities and in some cases, national status.

Despite women's dramatic surge in athletic participation and achievement during the last three decades, feminists have generally not seen sport as a major platform for gender politics and cultural transformation. Yet, through an examination of the contributions and steadfast example of Ruth Wilson and her successors it is evident that these women worked to advance opportunities for women in sport and break stereotypes that limited the types of activities available to them.

I have illustrated many of her activities through the eyes of female sportswomen whom she mentored, assisted, befriended and coached and who are still living today to provide their memories about her role in changing the landscape of women's basketball in Canada. In many respects this living community of women continue to celebrate the sporting heroism of Ruth Wilson, and relive her efforts through their participation in "The Oldest

²⁸⁶ Hargreaves, *Heroines of Sport*, 1.

Basketball Team in the World.” This is a team named the *Retreads* composed entirely of women over 65 which competes against teams that are faster, stronger and younger with the competitive zest they inherited from Wilson’s leadership.

Sport Advocacy and Sport Feminism

Ruth Wilson, the first Canadian female to referee and coach a commercial league team to a national championship, certainly influenced my participants’ expectations of what a sporting female can accomplish. In many ways they followed Wilson’s style of advocacy, which acknowledged that women could succeed in sport and leadership but also showed that they would have to negotiate their way through the traditionally male domain of sports in a non confrontational way. Wilson seemed to understand that change is a slow process, one that cannot be forced and that there existed a ‘woman’s way of doing things.’ Like many women of her time she worked within the system and pressed her cause more in deed than in word, frequently stepping beyond boundaries without attempting directly to break them down.²⁸⁷ She demonstrated that an effective strategy for challenging systems of dominance was to work with the systems in place rather than against them. As a result she was well liked by those in positions of power in the basketball community who were often businessmen who served as sponsors for the commercial leagues, coaches, referees or members of the Vancouver School board. She lead by example and was not forceful or overpowering in her determination to set an example for the women with whom she maintained close contact.

²⁸⁷ Grundy, “From Amazons to Glamazons,” 144.

When asked about Wilson's impact as a mentor and sport advocate Sharon recalled how Wilson always seemed to know "who to ask to get things done."²⁸⁸ All of the participants agreed that she was a constant force in the basketball community who was never pushy yet displayed a high degree of resilience. Perhaps one of her greatest attributes was the way she went about achieving her goals for women's sports and continued participation while never seeking overt recognition from her peers.

Yet Wilson was very well known in the sporting community as Sharon pointed out:

"I think everybody in Vancouver in the sporting community must have known Ruth. I never realized how great she was. To me she was just another teacher, another person. She never pushed herself forward."²⁸⁹

One of the dangers with discussing styles of advocacy in the past lies in projecting feminist views onto earlier decades and characterizing and heralding women's feats in terms of their contemporary significance rather than their historical relevance. This study confirmed findings from other scholarly works that have examined the life experiences of sportswomen, particularly the work of Hall and in many respects the American accounts of Cahn and Grundy.²⁹⁰ The participants of this study, as well as Ruth Wilson, dedicated much of their free time to organizing, refereeing, coaching and mentoring future generations of sporting women. In many respects the contributions these women made

²⁸⁸ Sharon, 2006.

²⁸⁹ Sharon, 2006.

²⁹⁰ Hall, *The Girl and the Game*; Cahn, *Coming on Strong*; Grundy and Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass*.

towards the development of the sport for future generations of sporting women were extraordinary. In determining the significance of their contributions it is important to examine not only what they did, but how they did it, and what they expected to gain. Like many of the women described by Hall, Kidd, Grundy and Trekell they offered up their time and knowledge without looking for acknowledgement or praise.²⁹¹

A particular challenge faced while conducting this research was to listen to my participants' stories of how they pressed for women's opportunities without interrupting their narratives or commenting upon their activities. Often they downplayed their contributions stating "it was just what we did back then."²⁹² Sharon underscored out how important context was by indicating that throughout her career she noticed a distinct shift in the level of volunteering and community involvement provided by teachers. Clair who worked at a different school than Sharon also commented on the shifting levels of involvement from teachers she witnessed throughout her professional career. She felt as though the majority of teachers today have little desire to donate their time or get involved with the sport community like she did.²⁹³

Promoting opportunities was clearly not always an easy task and all of the women expressed challenges in dealing with the CABA and the Vancouver School Board, particularly when it came to gender equity and allocations of equipment and funding for girls and boys sports programs. Sharon worked at

²⁹¹ Ibid.; Kidd, *The Struggle for Canadian Sport*; Grundy and Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass*; Hult and Trekell, *A Century of Women's Basketball*.

²⁹² Sharon, 2006; Darleen, 2006.

²⁹³ Darleen, 2006.

the same school as Wilson and Lana, a school that, due to the influence of strong leaders like Wilson, had established an equal allocation of resources for both girls and boys. Clair did not work at a school that had experienced strong female leadership and found she had to be far more forceful about fighting for resources for girl's sports programs.

“In her school she had to fight for everything for the girls. She would get the ‘girls don’t wreck the equipment as much as boys,’ so when boys needed it the department head would go and take it. I know that used to happen.”²⁹⁴

Although my participants had numerous stories to tell about their efforts on behalf of gender equity, they did not readily identify themselves as ‘feminists’ or as aggressive pursuers of equal opportunities. Even though they had all been elected into several sports halls of fame and museums they were quite modest in acknowledging their own contributions to promote women’s basketball. Just as Wilson had been, Lana, Sharon, Clair and Tracy were all uncomfortable in accepting praise for their contributions and found it difficult to regard themselves as sporting pioneers or sporting heroines. Rather, they attributed their successes to being in the right place at the right time. Sharon, when questioned about the significance of their contributions, compared their involvements to that of the Canadian women’s hockey team that had recently won a gold medal at the winter Olympics stating “I guess we were [then] like the women in hockey now that have really established themselves.”²⁹⁵

²⁹⁴ Sharon, 2006.

²⁹⁵ Sharon, 2006. The Canadian women’s ice hockey team and their success at the Olympics and several world championships have been credited for raising the status of the sport for women in Canada.

Reflecting on her own experiences as a female physical educator and her first encounters with the topic of feminism, Ann Hall has addressed this issue pointing out that “I grew up in the 1940’s and 1950’s, when ‘feminist’ (like ‘career woman’) had become a dirty word.”²⁹⁶ In many respects my participants shared a similar association with the word feminist preferring to disassociate themselves with the label because in the sporting world, a community traditionally dominated by men, it often drew “professional fire or evoked misunderstandings.”²⁹⁷ In addition to their perceived negative connotations of the word, Lana, Clair and Tracy also acknowledged that they did not want to take a political stand when their goal was promoting opportunities for competition and self development through sport. Sharon felt quite strongly about not being aligned with radical feminists and made a conscious effort to highlight their non confrontational demeanor and strategy:

Christiane: What have your experiences been like? From an organizational perspective being a leader, has it been a struggle? Can you identify with any of that? Being a feminist?
Sharon: Yes for my generation. I guess we just did what we could and didn’t make a show of it. Whenever we could we organized.²⁹⁸

The Birmingham women’s history group describes women of this generation’s experiences this way:

“We can only understand the political activity described by those involved as ‘feminist’ by placing it in the context of the particular and dominant version of femininity in operation then.”²⁹⁹

²⁹⁶ Hall, *Feminism and Sporting Bodies*, 1.

²⁹⁷ Don Sabo and Janie V. Ward, "Wherefore Art Thou Feminisms? Feminist Activism, Academic Feminisms, and Women's Sports Advocacy," *The Scholar and Feminist Online* 4, no. 3 (2006), 7 <http://www.barnard.edu/sfonline/sport/index.htm>

²⁹⁸ Sharon, 2006.

Feminism was, therefore, bound by femininity in such a manner that feminists today may not easily recognize their actions and style of advocacy.³⁰⁰ Today multiple intersections exist between women's sport advocates, academic feminists and mainstream organizations that advocate for girls and women.³⁰¹ In analyzing my participants' responses to the questions surrounding feminism and their roles as sports advocates one might consider that they demonstrate what Sabo and Ward have defined as implicit feminisms. This term refers to individuals who are guided to one extent or another by feminist values or aims, but they do not publicly identify as "feminist".³⁰² In choosing this label to describe their views on advocacy it is important to indicate that these women were actively promoting opportunities for girls and women in sport during the 1960s, a time that was politically charged and where the plight of mainstream feminists and their struggle for equality would have been visible. These sportswomen were informed about the social movements and women's press for equality in other domains of their lives. They were also well versed in the struggles and challenges women faced in the sporting community.

In determining the significance of their sporting experiences, particularly in evaluating their experiences as compared to Wilson's, I had to be reflective of my own social background and standpoint surrounding contemporary understandings of feminism. In many respects I felt I was able to identify with

²⁹⁹ Birmingham, "Feminism as Femininity in the Nineteen-Fifties?" 6.

³⁰⁰ Ibid.

³⁰¹ Sabo and Ward, "Wherefore Art Thou Feminisms?" 5.

³⁰² Ibid.

the women I interviewed. In fact among my own friends and the sportswomen I associate with who are teaching, coaching and mentoring young women outside of academia, very few identify as feminists. Like my participants they opt to align themselves with implicit feminisms, highlighting their actions not the label. Thus this study highlighted the fact that inside and outside women's sports, "feminisms are morphing into multiple forms."³⁰³ Sabo and Ward suggest that while conscious feminisms have waned in some contexts and been muzzled by political expediency in other circumstances they maintain a presence. Today we can learn from sporting women who made a conscious effort to be sports advocates and follow in their footsteps to "inform, inspire and inflame" others to do the same.³⁰⁴

Life History Research

The history of women's basketball in Canada has been influenced by key individuals who have challenged systemic barriers and social mores demanding appropriate female behaviors and activities. Women's experiences in sport and physical activity in Canada defy neat historical generalizations. In this study I have highlighted several similarities and some distinct differences in the experiences of a dedicated group of sportswomen who sought to advance opportunities for girls and women in the sport of basketball in Canada. The narratives of their experiences provide dynamic accounts of both the social and sporting environments that they and Wilson encountered as the organization of women's basketball in Canada evolved.

³⁰³ Ibid.

³⁰⁴ Ibid.

Qualitative research has shown utility in providing deeper explanations grounded in thick description (rich commentary) of the beliefs and values held by older people themselves.³⁰⁵ It is from the narratives of those who participated and played basketball in western Canada that we may better understand the changing dynamics of the sport and the significant contributions of those who sought to advance opportunities. Many of the narratives analyzed in this study indicate just how the participants were able to negotiate and seek sporting opportunities in the city of Vancouver that may not have been as readily available elsewhere in the Country. O'Brien Cousins suggests that:

“the voices and lived experiences of older people do not necessarily contradict current theory, but the inductive nature of narrative data can bring new dimensions or alternative ways of looking at or measuring the issues.”³⁰⁶

By paralleling multiple individual stories against an overarching narrative surrounding Ruth Wilson's involvements this study provides an account of women's involvements in the sport of basketball in Vancouver, western Canada and on the national level. In examining their narratives in the context of the historical moments from which they emerged, it became evident that Ruth Wilson and her successors worked to not establish fixed identities, but rather ones that encompassed a broad range of possibilities. The use of life history methodology provides insight into these key individuals lives as well as

³⁰⁵ Sandra O'Brien Cousins, "Seniors Say the Darndest' Things about Exercise: Quotable Quotes that Stimulate Applied Gerontology Source," *Journal of applied Gerontology* 22, no. 3 (2003): 361.

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

provides information that has until now only been accounted through undocumented oral histories and personal narratives.

Future Research

The practice of sport and the means by which they are organized and played provide informative glimpses into cultural values and guiding principles that influence and shape society. Canadian women's history and in particular sport history is shaped by numerous individuals who challenged barriers and fought for women's rights and freedoms. My decision to use Ruth Wilson's contributions to Canadian sport as a vehicle to analyze the shifting cultural values and opportunities for women in sport is an example of how one woman's experiences can highlight shifting patterns of opportunities. Ruth Wilson is but one of many influential women who contributed to sport in Canada. It is important to document the stories and narratives of other women, from many different regions and in many different sports, who have contributed to development of women's sports at the Canadian local, provincial and national level.

This study highlighted the development of the first national women's basketball team in Canada, as well as individuals who were involved with the development. The sport of women's basketball and the sporting culture in Canada in general has experienced many changes since the late 1960's. Inter-university sport for women became increasingly competitive in the late 1960s and today serves as the primary training and development site for women wishing to represent Canada on national teams. An examination of the

Canadian sport model as well as the impact of Canadian sport policies for women such as *the Sport Canada Policy on Women in Sport (1986)* in relation to the sport of basketball would be an interesting area to research further.

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APPENDIX no. 1

Photo disused on page 112

The Photograph has been removed because of copyright restrictions. The photo depicted the *Eilers* basketball team forming a human pyramid. The two coaches depicted on either side of the pyramid are looking away, avoiding eye contact with the camera.

“Pyramid Club Craze” *The Vancouver Daily Province Sports*, December 14 1950.

APPENDIX no. 2

Letter of Initial Contact

19 January 2006

Dear (Name of potential participant),

I am a Masters student in the school of Human Kinetics at The University of British Columbia. I am currently investigating the unique sporting life and accomplishments of Ruth Wilson and am writing to request your assistance. My present research project is entitled: *Envisioning Basketball: A Socio-Biographical Investigation into Ruth Wilson one of Canada's Foremost Sporting Pioneers*.

The rationale for this study is grounded in the need to better understand how specific individuals contributed to the development and unification of basketball in Canada. Using interview methodology, the project focuses on collecting and analyzing the life experiences of those directly related to Ruth Wilson's career as a student, an athlete, an educator, a journalist and as a coach.

I am asking for your assistance with this research. You have been selected as a participant in this research project because of your relationship with basketball in Vancouver as well as your relationship with Ruth. Your knowledge and expertise in the sport of basketball will provide vital information and data for this project. Your participation in this study will entail involvement in one interview, approximately 45 to 60 minutes in length. Questions will encompass you explaining your experiences in the sport of basketball and the impact these experiences had on you. I am especially interested in your opinions about how Ruth Wilson impacted the sport in Canada.

The data obtained from the interviews will be published in a report, academic articles, and in my Masters thesis. Please be aware that you have the right to ask me to omit any information that you do not wish to be included. The information will help inform academics and sports administrators about gender and power relations in basketball and give light to women's experiences with these relations.

Attached you will find an informed consent form. Please take a moment to look at the form. If you are able to meet with me, please e-mail or telephone me as soon as possible to establish a suitable meeting time and place. I will telephone you in a couple of days to follow up on this letter. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

<u>Dr. Patricia Vertinsky</u>	<u>Christiane Job</u>
Professor (Advisor)	Masters Student
School of Human Kinetics	School of Human Kinetics
The University of British Columbia	The University of British Columbia

APPENDIX no. 3

Consent Form

Socio-Biographical investigation into the life of Ruth Wilson and Her Contributions to Basketball in Canada

Researchers:

Dr. Patricia Vertinsky School of Human Kinetics The University of British Columbia	Christiane Job School of Human Kinetics The University of British Columbia
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Brief description of the study: This study is intended to provide a history of women's sport participation in Vancouver and the integral role Ruth Wilson played in its development. I am interested in your personal sporting history as well as your memories of Ruth and her various contributions in the development of women's basketball and industrial sport teams in Vancouver.

Researcher: This study is conducted by Christiane Job former member of the University of British Columbia Women's basketball team, through the School of Human Kinetics at the University of British Columbia.

The Interview: The interview will take anywhere from 45 minutes to one hour in length. Most of the questions are specific to your own experiences in the basketball community and specifically your relation to Ruth. The interview will be recorded on a cassette recorder.

You have been selected as a participant in this research project because of your relationship with women's basketball and Ruth Wilson. In researching the history of women's basketball in Vancouver through a variety of sources, including the British Columbia Sports Hall of Fame and the University of British Columbia's Athletics Hall of Fame, your name appeared as an expert in the area of women's participation in athletics. Your knowledge and expertise in the sport of basketball will provide vital information and data for this project.

Results: The data obtained from the interviews will be published in a report, academic articles, and in a Masters thesis. The information will help inform academics and sports administrators about gender and power relations in Vancouver's female sporting history and give light to women's experiences with these relations.

Confidentiality: If you wish, your identity will be kept strictly confidential as all documents will be identified by a code number and kept in a locked filing cabinet. The cassette tapes and transcripts will also be coded and kept in a separate locked file. You also have the option of allowing your name to be acknowledged in the publications of the collected data.

Your Voluntary Participation: You participation is strictly voluntary. You are free to not answer any question and withdraw from the interview at any time.

Risk: There are no expected risks to participants in this research project, but as you will be re-living previous life experiences, sensitive topics may arise.

Further Contact Information or Concerns: If you have any questions or require further information about the study, please contact Christiane Job.

Concerns about the Rights of Research Subjects: If you have any concerns about your treatment or rights as a research subject, you may contact the Research Subject Information Line in the UBC Office of Research Services at 604-822-8598.

I have read the *consent form* and understand the nature of the study. I understand that my participation in this study is strictly voluntary and I may withdraw from participation at any time. I also understand that in signing this consent form, I am not signing away any of my legal rights.

Your signature below indicates that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records.

Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in this study.

Signed: _____ Date: _____

Printed Name of the Participant signing above.

I consent to having my responses tape-recorded.

Signed: _____ Date: _____

I consent to having my name acknowledge in this project and understand that my name and statements may be published.

Signed: _____ Date: _____

I wish to have my name remain confidential in this project.

Signed: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX no. 4

Potential Interview Questions/ Script

Please tell me about your experiences as an athlete in Vancouver?

Can you highlight the various activities that you and Ruth participated?

Tell me about what sport was like for women based on your experiences in the late 1940's?

Tell me about what sport was like for women based on your experiences in the 1950's and 1960's?

Tell me about the various levels of basketball you participated?

Did you play for a commercial or /Senior A/B team? By that I am referring to the *Hedlunds, Eilers, Maids* etc.

What factors contributed to sport changing/evolving during this time?

Can you think of ways Ruth was involved with this evolution/ progression of basketball?

Please tell me about your knowledge of Ruth Wilson?

What was your relationship to her?

How do you think she influenced the sport of basketball?

Do you consider her a sporting pioneer? If so why?

How did her involvement in sport change as she advanced in her career? Was she more, less or just differently involved later in her life?

Did Ruth strive for the advancement of Women in other areas of her life?

Can you tell me about her experiences as an educator as well as member of the National Basketball association?

How might she have influenced your experiences in sports and specifically basketball in Canada?

What sort of challenges do you think Ruth may or may not have experienced with her involvement in sport organizations?

APPENDIX no. 5

Ethics Approval



The University of British Columbia
Office of Research Services and Administration
Behavioural Research Ethics Board

Certificate of Approval

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR Vertinsky, P.A.	DEPARTMENT Human Kinetics	NUMBER B05-1190
INSTITUTIONAL HUMAN RESEARCH REVIEW BOARD (IRB) UBC Campus ,		
DEPARTMENT Job, Christiane, Human Kinetics		
SPONSORING AGENCY		
TITLE Socio-Biographical Exploration into the Life of Ruth Wilson		
APPROVAL DATE JAN 26 2006	TERM (YEARS) 1	DOCUMENTS INCLUDED IN THE APPROVAL Jan. 19, 2006, Consent form / Contact letter / Dec. 5, 2005, Questionnaires
<p>CERTIFICATION</p> <p>The application for ethical review of the above-named project has been reviewed and the procedures were found to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Approved on behalf of the Behavioural Research Ethics Board by one of the following:</i> Dr. Peter Suedfeld, Chair, Dr. Susan Rowley, Associate Chair Dr. Jim Rupert, Associate Chair Dr. Armince Kazanjian, Associate Chair</p> <p>This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above term provided there is no change in the experimental procedures</p>		