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LSS 105

The Smith College Campus and the Evolution of Athletics

Throughout the years, college campuses take shape to the many influences, one being the changes in physical activity. Smith College, a small women's college in Northampton, Massachusetts, was founded in 1871 with the inheritance of Sophia Smith. Among the vigorous academics, Smith wanted students to receive instruction in "gymnastics and physical culture" (SC Archives). Many parts of the college grew throughout the years, and continues to grow, too. The size of the campus, the amount of buildings, the student body, the desire to participate in sports and physical activities, and with all of that growth, the expansion of athletic facilities has been necessary since 1871.

Student involvement in physical activity at Smith has been prevalent since before the dawn organized women's intercollegiate athletics. In the early years, the college pushed students to be active and were required to take part in physical education classes (SC Archives). The campus did not drastically change for this until the Alumnae Gymnasium was built in 1891. Land where the current Quadrangle is was home to fields and tennis courts, as well as open space around the center of campus was used for fields, too. Early photos of the campus reveal tennis courts embedded between Green Street houses and academic buildings, bringing the spirit of physical activity right into daily life. When the college expanded academically and the student body grew, more houses and academic buildings were built, absorbing the land where sports and

games were previously played. In 1904, ten acres across the river were gifted to the college by Mr. F. G. Allen, under the conditions that the land be used for the “physical well-being of the members of Smith College” (SC Archives). The land across the river continues to be used how Allen intended.

In Smith’s early years, the course of study was much more structured than it is today. As opposed to the current open-curriculum, students had a prescribed set of requirements to complete in addition to their major requirements, within those requirements were mandatory physical education classes (SC Archives). The first gymnasium was built in 1879, but shortly after, in 1891, the Alumnae Gymnasium was built with the entrance of Senda Berenson, the person who pioneered the game of women’s basketball. Berenson brought the start of an academic department devoted to all of this, originally named Physical Culture, then Physical Training, it is now known as Exercise and Sport Studies. Berenson brought a lot to the college, from Swedish Gymnastics and fencing at her start to aesthetic gymnastics, basketball, swimming, rowing, tennis, field hockey, archery, volleyball, and cricket by the time she retired in 1911. Her addition of nine sports needed facilities to thrive, which is why Allen’s contribution to the college was so vital. While women’s entrance to sport was emerging around the country at this time, Smith is unique in that the college enforced exercise and brought athletics to a forefront while maintaining the academic integrity.

The growth in athletics at Smith brought more students across Paradise Pond to the Allen Fields to play outdoor sports. The pond cannot be overlooked though, as it was being used in new ways, too. In 1911, the Boat House was constructed, abruptly changing the landscape around Paradise Pond, marking the beginning of a changing landscape. The Crew House was

built nine years later, again changing the face of Paradise (SC Archives). The pond had originally been a result of the damming of the Mill River to accommodate a mill that was steps away from the college, but since the closing of the mill, Paradise Pond has acted as a gem of the Smith College campus. Water has calming features, and the slowly flowing water through the pond can be a source of peacefulness and refuge for students. The pond and river also have more importance to the Campus. In the 1940's, the Army Corps of Engineers diverted Mill River from flowing through downtown Northampton to flow into Hulburt's Pond by building a dike that extends downriver from the pond (millrivergreenway.org). The dike built a hill into the landscape of the primary location for Smith athletics. The pond has been tied to a rich geological history and athletic history of the college.

Following the nation in a wave of feminist strength after the passing of the Nineteenth Amendment, a surge in women's sports was apparent at Smith, too. In 1924, Scott Gymnasium was built (SC Archives). This was the last major addition to the campus until Ainsworth Gymnasium and the Indoor Track and Tennis (ITT) facilities were built in the 1970's. Potentially due to the Great Depression, or the war, but women's involvement in sports dwindled in that fifty year period. The greater landscape of women's sports made strides to be recognized, but at Smith, athletics were continually celebrated. In 1932, the New York Herald Tribune reported that close to one hundred percent of the student body at Smith participated in some type of sports activity (SC Archives). This was all under the great leadership of Dorothy Ainsworth, '16. Joining the Smith College



SC Archives

faculty as the Director of the Physical Education Department in 1936, Ainsworth created an undergraduate curriculum to aid in “students’ well being and development so that they could live a richer, more abundant life” (SC Archives). In her 34 years as Director of Physical Education, the department boomed, and Ainsworth was a key player in the development of facilities to accommodate the growth. She was a part of the addition of riding stables, squash and tennis courts, six outdoor athletic fields, crew shells, an ice hockey rink, and even golf holes and archery ranges (SC Archives). If there was one person to thank for athletics and recreation at Smith, Dorothy Ainsworth is the woman, and in a sense the college has thanked her by naming a gymnasium after her.

Ainsworth Gymnasium, built in 1977, the home of the college’s basketball and volleyball programs, is the college’s most recent built addition to the athletics facilities. Ainsworth



SC Archives

Gymnasium connects and bridges to Scott Gymnasium, and with the addition of the ITT in 1985, the buildings encompass the college’s athletics and recreation programs. The Allen Fields, tennis courts, and the riding stables are just a quick jaunt across the river, making all of Smith Athletics easily movable across platforms.

While the landscape has seen minor changes and facelifts since the 1980’s, it is primarily unchanged. Buildings have aged, railings have rusted, field surface updates, fences and scoreboards have been added, and collegiate athletics have changed. It is interesting, though, that a large departmental facelift occurred right after the passing of Title IX, which states that “no person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied

the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance” (US Dept. of Education). Title IX has, since its passing in 1973, been a huge leap forward in women’s participation in sports. Due to the tight tie between sports programs and education, schools had to provide equal opportunities for women not only in the classroom, but on the field, track, and courts. Two years earlier, Smith joined the Northeast Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (NIAC), but the college had sports that participated in intercollegiate competitions prior to their entrance to the conference (smithpioneers.com). In 1981, Smith became the first women’s college to join the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), with other women’s colleges in order to have Seven Sisters Championships. All the while, the college was adapting to the new, national scope of intercollegiate athletics, by building Ainsworth Gymnasium and the ITT. Title IX had a great impact on college athletic facilities nationwide, and even if Smith is a women’s college and did not need to adapt to equal opportunities on the basis of sex, it did need to adapt to the grander changing athletic climate.

Now, almost 45 years after Title IX became law, and about 40 years since Ainsworth Gymnasium was built, Smith needs to consider the advances in sport and take a look at changing the landscape yet again. From a new boathouse on the Connecticut River to a new pool on campus and countless smaller undertakings, the college’s facilities ought to be brought into the new age of athletics and recreation. Sophia Smith’s wishes for instruction in physical education and Dorothy Ainsworth’s strides forward for women in sports cannot be overlooked when thinking of changing the campus landscape in the future.

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