Roots of Resistance: The Origins of the Black Women in Sport Foundation and the Politics of Race and Gender

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Tina Sloan Green, Nikki Franke, Alpha Alexander, and Linda Greene represent an integral part of a culture of Black women in sports who created a place and space for themselves and others in opposition to the long history of racism and sexism that suffused sports in the United States and global world. As founders of the Black Women in Sport Foundation (BWSF), their activism and organizing on behalf of Black women and girls in, and beyond sport, is as varied as it is vast. While the founders have been interviewed about the BWSF numerous times throughout their respective careers, those interviews fail to capture the paths that led them to successful careers or the incorporation of the BWSF. Using oral history narratives, this paper contends that their experiences from childhood to young adulthood offer incredible insights about the origins and evolution of their critical consciousness around race and gender that emerged during their formative years. It illuminates the familial, communal, educational, and sporting legacies of BWSF founders from childhood to the mid-to-late 1970s, when their worlds collided at Temple University. Their histories underscore how they navigated and negotiated the ideologies of racism and sexism from childhood to adulthood. As young Black women who lived before the passage of Title IX, their stories depict the early struggles and successes of women and girls’ participation in sports and broader society. Individually and collectively, BWSF founders’ oral history narratives offer a great understanding of Black women in sports and society in the past and present.

\textbf{Keywords}: civil rights, activism, Title IX

\textbf{Key Points}

\begin{itemize}
  \item Tina Sloan Green, Nikki Franke, Alpha Alexander, and Linda Greene represent a culture of Black women in sports who created a place and space for themselves and others in opposition to the long history of racism and sexism that suffused sports in the United States and global world.
  \item As young Black women who lived before the passage of Title IX, their stories depict the early struggles and successes of women and girls’ participation in sports and broader society.
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On June 22, 2022, the Black Women in Sport Foundation (BWSF) hosted a “Sneaker Gala” to celebrate its 30-year anniversary. The gala was held on the campus of Temple University in Philadelphia, where the BWSF was founded and formalized. For 30 years, the BWSF has been committed to increasing the role and participation of Black women and girls in all aspects of sports and society. Upholding the BWSF motto, “from the playing field to the board room,” the gala honored Black women and women of color like Emmy winning journalist Jemele Hill and legendary women’s basketball coach C. Vivian Stringer, who have been catalysts for change in sports and their local communities (Tucker, 2022). On stage, to help present the honorary awards, were BWSF founders—Alpha Alexander, Nikki Franke, and Tina Sloan Green—who, along with Linda Greene, sowed and watered the seeds of the BWSF more than 30 years ago.

BWSF founders crossed paths, for the first time, on the campus of Temple University in Philadelphia in the mid-to-late 1970s. By that time, despite the advancements of the Civil Rights Movement and the passage of Title IX, many Black women remained on the margins of public life in and out of sports. The opportunity for Black women to participate in sports, beyond track-and-field and basketball, was limited. Moreover, Black women’s access to power in athletics, through leadership and administrative positions, was virtually nonexistent.

In those early days, we were going to these different conferences run by NAGWS [National Association of Girls and Women in Sport] and AIAW [the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women]. We weren’t seeing people who looked like us or were addressing some of the concerns of people of color in the athletic field (Nikki Franke remembered).

Similar to the lived experiences of BWSF founders, the scholarship on race, gender, and sport has favored the experiences of White women, while the historical contributions of Black female athletes have remained at the periphery of collective knowledge and attention. Though scholars have made efforts to highlight and examine Black women in sport as athletes and leaders in recent years, there is much more to be uncovered to adequately answer, and respond to, sport historian Yevonne Smith’s call to center Black women (Ariail, 2020; Brown, 2023; Lansbury, 2014; Liberti & Smith, 2015; Purkiss, 2023; Smith, 1992; Vertinsky & Captain, 1998). By focusing on the histories of BWSF founders, we add to the growing literature on Black women in sport and redress their historical marginalization, silencing, and erasure. We also

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underscore the intersection of race, class, and gender oppression and its impact on Black women and how BWSF founders challenged the racial and gendered stereotypes that sought to sideline Black women and girls in sports and society (Smith, 1992).

Centered on Black women and girls’ advancement and achievement in sports and society for the past three decades, the BWSF has developed and sustained numerous community-based grassroots programs that focus not only on providing instruction in a variety of sports, but also the mentorship of athletes, coaches, and administrative personnel. For instance, the Foundation cultivated youth clinics in fencing, golf, tennis, and lacrosse in an effort to bring sports to Black children and young people who otherwise might not have been exposed to such activities. It also initiated its “Gear Up” program to introduce junior high school students to college and various undergraduate degrees. These programs, along with a wealth of videos, training manuals, and academic literature, have reached thousands of educators, students, coaches, and players in the Philadelphia area and beyond. In the 1990s, for example, the BWSF produced the videos, Amazing Grace: Black Women in Sport and After the Whistle Blows: Highlighting Minority Careers in Sport, which underscored the achievements of Black women and girls in sport and physical activity. In addition, the BWSF has hosted numerous local, regional, and national workshops and conferences that provide professional development opportunities beyond the fields of sport (Greene & Sloan-Green, 2007).

As Black female educators, coaches, and athletes, Sloan Greene, Franke, Alexander, and Greene witnessed, first-hand, the historic underrepresentation and marginalization of Black women and girls, and decided to enact change through grassroots organizing. Notably, their efforts were reflected in the first of many Black Women in Sport Workshops in 1976, where Sloan Green and Franke as coaches, and faculty members first met Alexander, a potential graduate student. Two years later, the three were joined by Linda Greene, Temple’s first Black female law professor. Together, they founded the BWSF to redefine the role of Black women and girls in sports and society. Yet, we contend that the BWSF has even deeper origins, which do not lie in its formation as a 501c(3) nonprofit organization in 1992, nor in the workshops held at Temple in the 1970s, but rather in the early life histories of Sloan Green, Franke, Alexander, and Greene.

Sloan Green, Franke, Alexander, and Greene have been interviewed about the BWSF numerous times throughout their respective careers. Many of those interviews failed to capture the paths that led them to successful professional careers or the BWSF’s incorporation. Born between 1944 and 1954, their experiences from childhood to young adulthood offer incredible insight about the origins and evolution of their critical consciousness around race and gender that emerged during their formative years. Arguably, a consciousness shaped by a racist and sexist society that altered the lives and experiences of Black women and girls. Using oral history narratives, this paper stories the familial, communal, educational, and sporting legacies of BWSF founders from childhood to the mid-1970s as Title IX took shape.

Individually and collectively, BWSF founders’ memories break the silence around Black female athletes and athleticism, and offer a deeper understanding of Black women in sports and society, in the past and present (Smith, 1992; Vertinsky & Captain, 1998). Their histories underscore how they navigated and negotiated the realities of racism and sexism from childhood to adulthood. Moreover, their life histories shed light on the role and significance of Black families and communities that placed emphasis on race and gender equality while instilling the importance of education and self-reliance. As Black women who came of age before the passage of Title IX, their stories depict the early struggles and successes of young Black women and girls’ participation in sports and broader society. Using BWSF founders’ very own words, these are the stories and narratives that we bring to the forefront as concrete evidence of why the BWSF was needed in the first place.

Methodology

To explore the early educational and athletic experiences of BWSF founders, oral history interviews, with informed consent, were conducted with them in the months and weeks before and during the writing of this essay (Adams & Cronin, 2019; Cahn, 1994; Ritchie, 2015). After an initial group interview with us in November 2022, one-on-one interviews with the lead author were held to capture the individual biographies, stories, and perspectives for this narrative’s purpose until March 2023. Each interview was put through an ethical approval process. To accommodate the various geographical locations and time schedules, all interviews took place virtually, which also allowed for audio and visual recordings. BWSF founders were asked the same initial questions that focused on themes of family, community, education, race, gender, and sports throughout adolescence. They also answered follow-up questions based on their individual and unique experiences. BWSF founders were given free range to answer questions with as much or as little detail as they deemed appropriate, leaving researchers to transcribe, analyze, edit, and compile 7 hr of recorded material. In conducting new interviews with the 50-year anniversary of Title IX as the backdrop, instead of relying on those done by other scholars and journalists in previous years, we aimed to capture the most recent perspectives of BWSF founders’ early experiences and memories in sports to illuminate how they understood, and filtered those stories, and their meanings through the massive political and social changes that has occurred since the 1970s.

In producing qualitative research based on oral history methods and methodology, especially for publication, we were forced to make tough decisions. For instance, we discussed how much or how little of the interviewees’ stories to include. We also debated if we should include or exclude the questions asked and the general conversations shared with each BWSF founder. Moreover, transcribing—the process of converting the audio recording to written text—required us to consider when and where to add punctuation and whether to retain choice words (Frisch, 1989). Though these determinations may alter aspects of performance and conflict with other research approaches, we relied heavily on our participants over our own voice and the current scholarly fields of inquiry to highlight, contextualize, and refine the rich and detailed nuances surrounding the history of Black women in sport and society (High et al., 2014; Levitt et al., 2018; Madison, 1993; Pollock, 2010). These methods, we assert, allow BWSF founders to place emphasis on specific histories that they found most important to them. In doing so, we encourage readers and scholars to understand the value of “open-ended discovery” and self-drawn hypotheses and conclusions over academic interpretations and concrete findings (Levitt et al., 2018).

Given the historical marginalization and silencing of Black women in sports, society, and academic scholarship, the voices of Sloan Green, Franke, Alexander, and Greene take center stage in this document to transmit the power, meaning, and significance of their stories. To provide a clear and concise narrative for the reader, the oral histories were edited. First, we eliminated the
Results and Discussion

Educational and Athletic Opportunities of BWSF Founders Before and After Title IX

Tina Sloan Green, Linda Greene, Nikki Franke, and Alpha Alexander share a similar familial, educational, and athletic experience that marked the origins of the BWSF. Though born and raised in different states and regions throughout the country, they were products of strong Black families that provided them with the tools, resources, and foundation to succeed in life despite the constraints of race, gender, and class. They learned the value of family and community cooperation as they grew up in “close-knit” neighborhoods where, in the words of Franke, “everybody had their eyes on you,” and worked together to overcome the racial and economic oppression Black people experienced. “We may have been poor, but we didn’t know it. We never went without a meal. We may not have had a lot, but we had what we needed,” asserted Franke. Born in 1948, Greene—who moved frequently as a child and relied on the support and mutual aid of extended family members—shared similar sentiments and recollections. “We were poor,” Greene noted, “we were living on a military enlisted man’s salary. [Yet,] my family’s values are middle to upper class, and my parents acted on those values in the things that they did. They wanted us to have full participation in society.”

They came from familial and communal environments that instilled the importance of race, religion, and culture from an early age. For instance, Tina Sloan Green—born in 1944—quickly learned the importance of God and church. According to Sloan Green, the church was “the most important thing in life” to her parents who provided her “the confidence” and “the security” she embodied growing up. Surrounded by strong matriarchs, Franke—who was born in 1951—lived in a “West Indian haven” where they “went to Carnival in Brooklyn” and were “very proud of that heritage.” It was these family and cultural roots thatFranke relied on after having two back surgeries at 10 years old. “That’s when I started living with my grandmother. Someone needed to take care of me, because I couldn’t go to school,” Franke remembered.

Like many young Black children born before or immediately after Brown v. Board of Education in 1954, BWSF founders witnessed the sacrifices made by their parents and guardians and the great strides they took in nurturing and protecting them. Having lived and attended segregated schools in Louisiana and Virginia, where state officials would “rather close their schools than desegregate them,” Linda Greene and her family eventually moved to San Pedro, California, where racist policies and practices were present, but less hostile. “It’s not the south, but it is the south,” Greene recalled of San Pedro. Greene’s family migration was part of a much larger pattern, as Black Americans left the South seeking a better life for themselves and their families (Berlin, 2010; Lemann, 1992). Like Greene, Alpha Alexander—who was born less than a month after Brown—also had parents who wanted to shield her from the entrenched and state-sponsored racism in the Jim Crow South. Though born in Nashville, Tennessee, she was raised in Dayton, Ohio, because her father was “very, very adamant” about her not growing up in a southern state. Yet, despite the South’s racist environment, her parents maintained the importance of family and tradition by sending the holidays in Tennessee and sending Alexander there in the summers, where she spent time with her grandmother and her cousins.

Through family and community, they experienced their first introduction to sports, play, and recreation on the streets of Black neighborhoods and in the dirt, where they “played kickball and hopscotch” and “ran little manhole races,” Sloan Green noted. Alexander developed her love of basketball from friendly competitions with her cousins who played, and “had all these trophies.” She recalled, “Even though they would be playing half-court at that time, they got to participate in sports. That used to make me upset. They didn’t have such things in Ohio for the girls in the school system to play.” As Alexander detailed, experiences of exclusion and sexism were common in the lives of BWSF founders. For example, Nikki Franke, “a typical tomboy,” was one of only two girls “on the block that the boys would let play stickball.” Though their families and communities supported their participation in play and recreation, BWSF founders also articulated the value of education that their parents, guardians, mentors, and role models instilled in them beyond sporting interests.

Like sports, academic excellence was a constant theme in their adolescent lives as many Black families and communities saw education as the pathway to opportunity and success (Anderson, 1988; Williams, 2005). For instance, Alexander and Greene were, respectively, second and third-generation college students. “I don’t ever remember not knowing how to read. I don’t ever remember learning how to read, because my mother taught all of us to read before we entered school, and mathematics, and everything else,” recalled Greene. On the other hand, Sloan Green’s push toward academic success stemmed from her parents who did not have the opportunity to acquire a high school diploma. Sloan Green—who despite attending a predominantly Black elementary school—had White teachers who encouraged her to take her academic and athletic talents to one of the top high schools in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Franke’s grandmother, a domestic worker with a fourth-grade education “insisted” that all three of her children graduate high school, which they did. For Franke, “it wasn’t ‘are you going to college’ but ‘what college are you going to.’”

Their family and communities were the anchors in the young lives of all four BWSF founders and served as the springboard on which they entered the world. They found the support and discipline they needed to lead ambitious and independent lives in a racist and sexist society. Reminiscing on the importance of the twin pillars of family and church, Sloan Green recounted, “[they] had me believing I could sing, I could dance, I could do anything. I found out differently later on, but they gave you that confidence in yourself.” The centrality of family, community, education, and faith were fundamental elements of a larger strategy, employed by the families and communities from which they came, that ensured their success from childhood into adulthood. “Between my church, my high school, and my family, I had a lot of people demanding
that I do the work,” Greene stated. Ultimately, it was within these dynamics where their roots of resistance lie and where their individual perceptions about race, gender, class, politics, and sports were first developed and expressed before being carried into public and collective discourses on sports and education in high school and college.

Racial and Gendered Politics of Secondary Education and Interscholastic Athletics

Coming from families that stressed the value of education, BWSF founders were defined by their experiences, and the mentorship they received, in secondary education. With help from physical educator teachers and coaches, they carved out spaces to engage in athletics and physical activities, despite the limitations placed on girls’ participation in organized interscholastic sports in the 1950s and 1960s (Grundy, 2001; Purkiss, 2023; Verbrugge, 2012). Ultimately, the support they received in high school and various sporting sites influenced and shaped their pathways to college. These are their individual memories and stories.

Tina Sloan Green

At the recommendation of her primary school teachers, Tina Sloan Green attended the Philadelphia High School for Girls, a predominately White and Jewish school, also known as Girls’ High. As one of “twenty Black girls” in her class, she found herself in “a different type of environment.” As she recalled, “I would’ve probably ran back to my neighborhood school had it not been for a [Jewish] teacher, who recognized that I had some athletic ability and she invited me to come out for the team.” Sloan Green played “basketball and field hockey” as Girls’ High provided her with a space that encouraged her athleticism.

At the same time, the school was a location that on occasion placed limits on her because of race. As Sloan Green recounted,

I didn’t really experience racism until my senior year at Girls’ High, when everybody thought I was gonna get the award [for] the best athlete. I thought, “I’m not [an] academic person, but I’ll surely get this.” Everybody was shocked when I didn’t get that award, and quite frankly I was too. Later on, I found out that the award was designated to a Jewish girl, but they didn’t tell me that. That was my first experience where I thought I should have experienced, [and] because of the color of my skin I was denied something I thought I deserved. It really made me understand how things are out of your control, you don’t even realize it at the time and how others’ expectations can dictate your path.

Franke played basketball and tennis before being introduced to the elite sport of fencing her senior year.

I had never seen it, never heard of it. We had a new teacher who came to the school, introduced fencing, and started a fencing club. She was an Asian woman. I just thought it sounded cool. I was always involved in sports. But, this was something different and said, “I’ll try it and see.” I just tried it out because I didn’t know anything about it and found that I kind of liked it.

Though only a high school teenager, Franke’s experiences in fencing matches and tournaments shaped her understanding of race and sports at that point in her life.

When I got into fencing there were not many Black fencers. Having gone to a White middle school and a very diverse high school, I probably wasn’t as uncomfortable as others may have
been. Having the coach that I had, who also protected me from some of the racism that was there. There’s a whole history of racism in fencing. But, sport is such a leveler, because if you’re good no one can take that away from you. They may try, but they can’t take it away from you.

**Alpha Alexander**

On the heels of Martin Luther King Jr.’s death in 1968, Alpha Alexander entered Jefferson Township High School, where she embraced physical education and recreation, while learning the importance of race and representation.

We had a lot of Black instructors [including] the physical education teacher. They used to say, “Alpha, you stayed in the gym all the time.” I had my classes that I had to attend within the high school. But, anytime that I could, I would be in there because I had a female physical education teacher. For me, it was like somebody could be a physical education teacher and be a woman.

Along with its academics, Jefferson had a strong athletic reputation because of boys’ participation in football. Yet, because of gender, Alexander was left to settle with “a mere introduction [to] different sports,” through physical education classrooms. As Alexander asserted,

> When I look back on it, in retrospect, it was very sexist, because they did not have women’s sports or girls’ sports. We didn’t even have an intramural program for girls. [The boys] had football. But we had no sports for girls. I had no choice but to play in the band.

Though she never had the opportunity to compete in high school sports, Alexander’s parents found ways for her to learn and participate in competitive athletics outside of school, as they recognized the importance of physical activity in their daughter’s life.

> [My dad] taught me a lot about football and baseball. I also played tennis. I ended up winning the city of Dayton tennis championship. I really wanted to play softball. I thought I was a pretty decent catcher. My love is basketball. He [my dad] used to take me to see Oscar Robinson and Pete Rose and the Cincinnati Reds, so I got the chance to see professional baseball and basketball while I was growing up.

Despite the limitations placed on Black people in society and girls in Ohio sports, Alexander’s parents ensured that she experienced everything high school and the world had to offer.

> My father was also this type of person, “if White folks could take vacations all the time, we could take vacations all the time!” My junior year of high school they sent me to Europe on a trip. I got a chance to go to England, the Vatican, Switzerland, and France. He wanted his daughter to see the country. He also wanted his daughter to see the world.

**Racial and Gendered Politics of Higher Education and College Athletics**

As Black women who attended predominantly White institutions of higher education as the civil rights and Black Power eras collided, their collegiate experiences were deeply shaped by ideas and issues of race and gender in the classroom, in sports, and on campus (Corbett & Johnson, 1993). Inside and outside of college, BWSF founders participated in sports despite the racial and gender inequality of the 1960s and 1970s. The marginalization they faced as Black students and Black female athletes at predominantly White colleges and universities led them to protest, and resistance, as they displayed the importance of Black self-reliance and determination and the value of Black pride and solidarity (Wiggins, 1988; Williamson, 1999). These are their individual memories and stories.

**Tina Sloan Green**

In 1962, at the early stages of integration, Sloan Green enrolled at West Chester University, where she relied on her own perseverance to meet the challenges and opportunities that college life presented. “You had to do everything—gymnastics, swimming, sports psychology, all the stuff,” Sloan Green conceded. “It took me four years to get out of that swimming course ‘cause the way they handled it in high school, they just threw you in the pool assuming that you could swim.” Competing in elite intercollegiate sports prior to Title IX provided Sloan Green with numerous opportunities to grow as an athlete and a young woman, and she relished it.

> “I was having fun, I was just doing, just going along with the program, not realizing my own ability at the time. I would watch my soap operas and enjoy[ed] just being a growing young lady.” These same avenues for growth also tested her strength and were at times, isolating and demoralizing.

At West Chester, there were two Blacks in my class, so that was a challenge. [I] remember my mom warning me when I went to West Chester. She said, “those girls are treating you alright now, but you just watch when you get [there].” My mom would always tell me, “the same girls that you’re hanging around with now once you get to college and once you start, they’re not even going to recognize you.” And she was absolutely right, because I didn’t realize until later on, but in social situations, I was treated differently. In the classes or whatever, you could just feel the racial discrimination, or I guess, gender discrimination, or whatever it was. Many a day when it was social, I was in that room by myself.

Despite the racial and gendered constraints, Sloan Green discovered her own value and self-worth as a young Black woman at West Chester.

> I started watching these young ladies that I was with, in my classes. I realized that “wow! You’re just as good as this person, that I could do this, and I could do that,” so I began to realize my own abilities by comparing myself with other people.

**Linda Greene**

Unable to participate in intercollegiate track and field, Linda Greene competed on a women’s Amateur Athletic Union track-and-field team following her high school graduation in 1965. As Greene recalls,

> [The] coach, at Long Beach Polytechnic High School, which had a great reputation for track and field, [saw me compete]. I won the race, he came up to me, and asked me, “do you have a coach?” He says “we have practice at Wilson High School four days a week, and I have a team, it’s called the Long Beach Comets, and maybe you’d like to come out and try out.” I did, once I started college.

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She quickly became one of the top female 800-m runners in the nation. “I grew and changed as a person, as a woman, physically. Just developing that confidence about my physicality and my power. That was an interesting journey for me.”

With initial intentions to major in physical education, she attended California State University at Long Beach, where she became a leader in the Black Campus Movement as one of the founders of the university’s Black Student Union (Biondi, 2012; Kendi, 2012).

There were very few Black students, and there were very few Black professors. There were two of them [professors] who were supportive of our concerns about the lack of students, and we formed a BSU [Black Student Union]. We started to advocate for more Black students to come on to campus, and seeking out ways to recruit them. We also advocated for more Black professors on campus and for more courses on Black studies, [including] more courses on the history, sociology of the Black experience.

According to Greene, Black students at Cal State were well informed of the racial unrest, taking place on the local, state, and national level. “We were very aware of what was happening with people like Muhammed Ali. I and other students were a part of that conversation.”

It was in these elite academic and political arenas that Greene developed and honed corporeal power and agency.

I was one of the first girls to wear a natural on campus. The culture, at the time, was connecting hair with a sense of Black consciousness. Having made the decision, it immediately began to attract a certain number of students who also wanted to express their Black pride. That eventually led to the discussion of what changes did we want to make in this institution so that it can truly also serve Black people. It also allowed other people who were also interested in openly talking about Black consciousness to be able to approach someone and say whatever the opening comment [was] about “Iyani” or something that might've been the thing we said to show and express solidarity. The Black consciousness movement was not a secret with people with everything going on in the society. It was an important moment.

### Nikki Franke

In the fall of 1968, 2 months after the death of Martin Luther King, Jr., Nikki Franke enrolled at Brooklyn College. “Out of 35,000 students, probably 50 Black and Latino students at the time. You were very aware that you were a fish out of water.” As the only Black female fencer, Franke—who “grew up in a household that was very much proud of being Black”—became a participant of the Black Campus Movement (Biondi, 2012; Kendi, 2012).

I was involved in protests going on at Brooklyn College, sit-ins at the President’s Office, trying to expand and [get] more students of color [there]. We all met at a certain time and went to his office and sat down. We wanted to meet with the President and he would not. We stayed there until he would. Eventually, they moved us all out of there. We weren’t arrested, but we were definitely taken out. I wasn’t a leader, but I was someone who definitely saw the need for what we were doing and the changes that needed to happen. It definitely influenced who I am and what I tried to do.

As a student-athlete, Franke, on some level, was shielded from the racist turbulence of the period. Yet, the “home” she found with the fencing team did not operate in its own cultural vacuum. It, too, was saturated with asymmetrical racial relationships of power. As Franke remembered,

I had a team, and [that] was one place that I was part of, while there were many places that I was not. When you walk out of that gym, it’s a different world. I can remember being in a [campus] protest, looking out to all the White students that were yelling “get them off the campus,” and seeing some of my teammates. And yet, in the gym we were all one, we were a team. It’s a real dichotomy. “How do you deal with that? And do you bring that into the gym?” I remember being angry and saying, “well maybe that wasn’t them or was that them?”

Putting that self-doubt in my own head, which might have been my way of dealing with it. In the gym, my coach made sure that everyone was respected and treated fairly. It was kind of like two worlds. When you were inside the practice gym, it was the team, and there wasn’t hostility. That’s, in some ways, what sports does. It brings people together who never, never would interact with each other.

Yet, Franke could not avoid or ignore the issue of race in intercollegiate fencing.

The racism was subtle, and some of it was not so subtle. You were always questioned. You never got the benefit of the doubt. One of the things about fencing is that you have to shake hands when you’re done. Win or lose, you have to shake hands. I can remember some awful handshakes, or lack thereof. There was definitely a feeling that anything [a touch] that was close, you weren’t going to get [the call] because of the subjectivity and the assumptions that were made, [including] the fact that most of the referees were White, if not all. You try to leave little doubt. It’s like anything else being Black, you have to be twice as good as everybody else to get the same thing. It doesn’t change, it doesn’t change. You constantly have to prove yourself, you constantly have to be able to do things so much better to get the same result—to this day. As I got better, there were things you couldn’t deny.

### Alpha Alexander

Despite wanting to attend a historically Black university in the South, Alpha Alexander enrolled at College of Wooster in 1972, the year of Title IX.

I wanted to go to Tennessee State [University]. Needless to say, my father was paying the bills, [so] I ended up going to the College of Wooster. I [was] looking at the paper one day, and said “oh my god, Wooster has a women’s basketball team, and they’re participating in the state playoffs.” I got a little excited then. I said “well maybe I might be able to play basketball.” I entered college in 1972. That’s the year that Title IX became the law. I didn’t know what this Title IX thing was. I just knew I wanted to play sports.

At Wooster, Alexander was introduced to intercollegiate athletics and quickly became a dominant student-athlete in two sports.

I didn’t play volleyball my freshmen year, because I thought it would be best for me to study. I didn’t know about this
environment. It really was lily White. My second year there, I ended up playing volleyball and basketball. As it turns out, I could really shoot the ball in basketball and score. We played Central State [University], [an] HBCU. I got beat up on the court. It was really, really a rough game. We lost. My coach said, “that’s it, ok we’re not going to play after they were due to come to us.” I ended up scoring 40 points, and we beat Central State. But, unfortunately, that was it. My coach refused to play them again because of the roughness we encountered. Very interesting though, when I did play volleyball my sophomore year, we went clear to nationals.

Among only a few Black women on the campus, and even fewer Black female athletes, Alexander navigated issues of race and gender, and found ways to express her racial pride and solidarity.

It was definitely [an] experience, because you are the minority, and they [White folks] are the majority. I truly was a minority. In a sense, I was a minority in a minority, because I was the only female Black athlete that participated [in] sports, especially in my freshmen and sophomore year[s]. I was a minority within a minority on an all-white campus. Being a female Black athlete, and only one on campus at [that] point in time, I was also a Black female. Trying to merge the activities of the Black student activities—because I had a White roommate, and the rest of the Black females housed together, clear across campus—with the time, and the consumption of time, “you had classes, but also, I had practice.” I always felt like I was a true Gemini, split in half. Here I was, a Black female, and they’re like not questioning, “why didn’t Alpha show up at this event?” Well, “Alpha might have been away, playing basketball somewhere.” I was limited in terms of my athletics schedule, but I never lost my identity. Let’s make that clear! You couldn’t tell me, I wasn’t Angela Davis, in the sense of her being politically active, and very academic, very smart. You could see pictures of me, I had the afro.

**Conclusion: Resisting the Racial and Gendered Politics of Title IX From Temple University**

One by one, Tina Sloan Green, Nikki Franke, Alpha Alexander, and Linda Greene found their way to Temple University. In 1970, Sloan Green graduated from the University with a master’s degree in education, while touring, as the first Black women, with the U.S. National Teams in both lacrosse and field hockey. Pushing the boundaries placed on Black women in sports, Sloan Green, upon her return to Temple in 1975, transmitted her elite athletic skills into coaching lacrosse and became the most successful coach in the University’s history. In 1972, Nikki Franke—as a graduate student—brought her world class talents to Temple, where she taught and coached fencing. As an U.S. Olympian, she built a dynasty and left a legacy, having coached fencing for 50 years. Alpha Alexander arrived in 1976 to begin her graduate education. Her groundbreaking 1978 master’s thesis on the underrepresentation and marginalization of Black women in the AIAW illuminated Title IX’s ignorance of race and underscored why the BWSF was created.

As Black female graduate students, faculty members, and coaches at Temple University, they continued to experience the racial and gendered marginalization and exclusion that had existed since childhood. They labored not only in White male-dominated environments, but also within those controlled by White women. Both groups often overlooked the specific needs, interests, and concerns of Black women and girls. “I can distinctly remember when I stood up in an AIAW meeting, [and] said, ‘you need to include more women of color in terms of the leadership area,’” Alexander remembered. Upon earning her doctorate in 1981, Alexander left Temple, taking leadership positions with the AIAW and Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) to tackle racism and sexism in sports and beyond. In 1978, after launching her law career with the Legal Defense Fund, Linda Greene arrived at Temple, becoming the first Black female professor in the law school. Though her tenure at Temple was the shortest of the four founders, Greene’s legal expertise and commitment to social justice lent itself, seamlessly, to the work being conducted by Sloan Green, Franke, and Alexander.

In exploring the realities of BWSF founders’ lives and memories from childhood to young adulthood, we can better understand the BWSF’s origins and how, when placed at the forefront, Black women and girls expand the field of sport history. As their memories reflect, academic advancement and athletic excellence went hand in hand. Through family and community emphasis, education and sports became the major pathways of opportunity and success for Black women and girls before and after Title IX and embodied the tools to navigate the racism and sexism that contoured their lives. In their individual and collective work, BWSF founders carried with them the familial, communal, educational, and sporting roots and experiences that shaped their early lives into their roles as educators, coaches, and sport administrators and executives at Temple and beyond. Given the shared elements of their histories, the “double whammy” of racism and sexism, the formation of BWSF was inevitable (N. Franke, personal communication, October 28, 2022). At the crux of it all, the BWSF is the organization and network that Sloan Green, Franke, Alexander, and Greene needed growing up, “a safe space for people to talk about those things [racism and sexism] with people who understood and experienced it themselves. And, how could we come up with ways to assist, and help each other” (N. Franke, personal communication, October 28, 2022).

In formalizing the BWSF, these four women joined forces, bringing decades worth of experiences together, to impart “critical life-learning skills” on young women and girls, while advocating for racial and gender justice in sports and to all sites in which they moved (Black Women in Sport Foundation, 2020). For more than a half-century, from playing fields to boardrooms, BWSF founders have influenced and shaped the lives and experiences of a multiracial, multigenerational network of women and girls. Their impact and legacy continue today, and are seen in the many BWSF after-school programs, scholarships, and professional development workshops. Their influence is also evident in the existence of the document, as they willingly and openly shared their stories with us, two women historians of different races and ages, which only further exemplifies their continued commitment to providing opportunities for women. In conducting these interviews, we were reminded of our privilege as historians to capture the memories of BWSF founders and how relationships of power impact whose histories are counted and valued, as well as those that are marginalized and forgotten (Chafe et al., 2001; Valk & Brown, 2010).

Ultimately, BWSF founders represent an integral part of a culture of Black women and girls in sports and society who created a place and space for themselves and others because of, and in opposition to, the long history of racism and sexism that suffused
sports in the United States and global world. Their stories are compelling examples of resistance and perseverance. And, their inclusion in academic scholarship and public memory reminds us not only of their existence, but also of the richness and the nuances that lie in the many, varied sport history narratives shaped by race, class, and gender. In using oral histories to elevate their voices over ours, we allowed BWSF founders to speak for themselves and convey what was most important to them, in the way they desired to express it, while minimizing the bias and subjectivity that come with scholarly and historical elucidations (Chafe et al., 2001; Valk & Brown, 2010). While this methodology may appear to be a limitation, it is also an opportunity. We make room for, and encourage, scholars and the general audience to draw their own interpretations. Through our efforts to highlight the memories and experiences of BWSF founders, we hope to inspire future research that recounts and illuminates the names, voices, and histories of a countless number of Black women and girls who have gone unknown and unnoticed in sports and society.

References


