NAGWS: Core Values Through the Years

Kay Morgan, Kirtland Elementary School, Albuquerque, NM
Joy Griffin, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM

The National Association for Girls and Women in Sport (NAGWS) began in 1899 and has continued to positively impact society through many name and structure changes. Core values have always guided NAGWS in its broad mission to increase sport participation and leadership opportunities for girls and women. NAGWS’ role in the fight for female equality has evolved through societal changes and changing attitudes toward women in sport. However, the core values reflected in “a sport for every girl and woman, and every girl and woman in a sport” have remained.

First 100 Years

In the 1800’s professionals believed that women were not physically strong enough to survive the rigors of college. The introduction of physical education and hygiene courses helped make female college attendance acceptable. By the 1900’s, sports and formal exercise dominated both women’s and men’s physical education programs. Men’s athletics, organized by students without administrative sanction, resulted in a division between men’s physical education and athletics. In contrast, women’s sport developed within the educational context. Because female physical educators had control of women’s athletics, core educational philosophies and values remained similar for class instruction, intramural, and extramural sports.

In 1892, basketball was introduced at Smith College, and it rapidly became popular among women students. Schools and colleges began printing their own rules, which resulted in different rules appearing nationwide. In response, in 1899, the American Association for the Advancement of Physical Education (AAAPE) appointed the Women’s Basketball Rules Committee to write one set of rules. This rule-making body was the forerunner of NAGWS. Through a succession of name and structure changes, this group assumed responsibility for women’s rules, officiating, and governance for many sports. Educational values guided the philosophy of proper sport behavior and appropriateness of competition. As intercollegiate competition progressed, many female physical educators became concerned about the problems they saw with men’s athletics and began substituting intramural programs. However, girls’ basketball thrived in small towns. These games, played mainly outside the educational system, generally had little crowd control, poor sportsmanship, and excessive roughness. This brought condemnation of interscholastic sports from both physicians and physical educators.

Controversy continued over control of women’s athletics. Between 1917 and 1957, NAGWS experienced four name and structure changes. Although women leaders promoted sports for girls and women, they objected to intensive training for the few and the exploitation of
athletes. The following values dictated the direction for girls and women’s sports for the next half century: “every girl in a sport and a sport for every girl,” “play for play’s sake,” and “qualified women in immediate charge of athletic and other physical activities.” During this time, two popular types of participation were “play days” and “sports days.” Although structurally different, the emphasis for both was on fun and social development. However, varsity competition that remained popular in some parts of the country was usually administered outside of this structure. In addition, some women leaders began to endorse intercollegiate contests.

In 1957, Division for Girls’ and Women’s Sports (DGWS) evolved. Earlier philosophy and values continued, but with added recognition of the highly skilled. Interscholastic and intercollegiate sports were accepted as extensions of the instructional or intramural programs. The new pyramid model of athletics included highly competitive opportunities for girls and women as long as educational values remained primary. DGWS supported agencies with similar values that fostered elite competition.

The Commission for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (CIAW) was organized in 1967 as a substructure of DGWS to control intercollegiate sports, while the National Federation of State High School Associations was recommended to control interscholastic sports. CIAW conducted national championships in accordance with DGWS philosophy and values. In 1971, CIAW was replaced by the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (AIAW) with the power to enforce its policies. The AIAW provided an educational model of competitive athletics in which there were no major or minor sports. With AAHPERD reorganization in 1974, DGWS became the current NAGWS, a separate national association under the new AAHPERD umbrella.

In the past, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) made many attempts to change or eliminate Title IX, in hopes of lessening the legislation’s impact on men’s athletics. AIAW joined with other groups to lobby for the law’s passage, which gave legislative support to the idea that sex discrimination had no place in educational institutions or their athletic programs. The NCAA’s next strategy was to gain control over women’s athletic programs and finances. The AIAW halted initial takeover attempts, but eventually the NCAA prevailed.

Second 100 Years

In 1999 NAGWS celebrated its 100th birthday. A century of NAGWS influence and values was recognized in the centennial theme of “Celebrating the Past, Shaping the Future.” The theme was central to a new NAGWS video and an issue of the Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance (JOPERD) that premiered at the birthday party celebration held during the AAHPERD National Convention and Exposition.

NAGWS continues to be a watchdog over social justice values both nationally and within AAHPERD, particularly related to gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. NAGWS was a leader in creating the AAHPERD Social Justice Committee and continues to offer a variety of educational sessions on these topics at the annual AAHPERD Conventions.

NAGWS also continues to build important coalitions. NAGWS and the Women’s Basketball Coaches Association (WBCA) formed an alliance to make the Wade Trophy the premiere award for intercollegiate women’s basketball. In 2001, following a formal meeting of NAGWS and Women’s Sports Foundation leaders, a “Memo of Understanding” was written that emphasized the unique contributions of each organization. NAGWS has built alliances with other sport, physical activity, education, and legal groups. NAGWS is a primary member of the coalition that sponsors National Girls and Women in Sports Day. The Day was chartered by Congress in 1986.