

Sport plays an important role in New Zealand culture and for many women, and a small number of men, netball is the sport of choice. Netball has the highest number of players for any women's sport in the country and receives greater media interest and TV coverage than any of the others. As such it holds a privileged position in New Zealand, a position it hopes to build on by developing into an international sport with even talk of a place in the Olympics in the long term. These are optimistic times for the sport, but the reality is that there are also underpinning risks that may impact negatively in the future. It is a game developed for a different age and an argument can be mounted that netball has been outgrown by a 100 years of feminism and the resultant changes in the expectations of what female athletes can achieve. It is this conflict between the capabilities of modern day women athletes and the restrictions on movement and competitive involvement that is perhaps the greatest challenge facing the game today.

In many ways it is difficult to objectively critique a sport such as netball, a sport that has been an integral part of New Zealand culture for many years. It is, therefore, interesting to see the game through the eyes of sportspeople who have not seen it played before. A number of years ago I took two visiting physical education academics to a New Zealand versus Australia netball test in Palmerston North. My assumption was that they would be impressed by both the attention given to women's sport in New Zealand and the degree of athleticism that the players demonstrated. They were impressed by these aspects, but what I did not expect was their judgement that netball must be an incredibly frustrating game for athletes. For them the restrictions on moving freely throughout the court, the refusal to allow players to put effective pressure on opponents when they held the ball and the incessant whistling of the referees, with the resultant high number of stoppages, were all points of critique. The action that had the greatest impact on them, however, was the requirement for players to stand next to the player they had contacted or obstructed with their hands by their sides until the ball was passed. The turning of aggressive highly skilled athletes into demure non-participants astounded them and was a topic of conversation for a number of days.

The recent controversy on Fair GO involving Christchurch school girl Niamh Wills battle with officialdom for the right to wear warmer clothing on the netball court may appear to be unrelated to the above observations. The reality is, however, that both situations are the direct result of the historical development of the sport. Games and sports do not exist in isolation but are influenced both by their history and societal expectations of what is acceptable behaviour. In the Niamh Wills controversy two things were notable. The first was the sheer volume of emails received from players throughout New Zealand, all offering support for Niamh's stance and detailing their own experiences of suffering from the cold while playing. The second was that, to the best of my knowledge, nobody asked the obvious question. Is it acceptable for a sport, that is assumed to have some impact on the fitness and health of its participants, to have so little activity that for so many, playing the game equates with standing around getting cold? It takes little time when observing netball to identify the reasons for the lack of activity, the restraints on movement so central to the game are a major influence in the amount of (in)activity experienced by the players. Any parent watching their daughter stranded at goal-keep will readily agree with this observation. In reality it was the societal context in which netball was created that has led, a century later, to Niamh and many others freezing while playing the game and to

defenders accepting that they must stand away from the shooters and not distract them while they have a free shot.

The historical development of netball is closely entwined with that of basketball<sup>1</sup>. In 1891 James Naismith invented the game of basketball as an off season game for male athletes. While originally designed for males, the game also interested teachers involved in women's sport. A difficulty in introducing the sport to women, however, was the strong tensions between the physicality and athleticism required to play the game and the strong beliefs about what was acceptable femininity at this time. In an attempt to produce a game that allowed for the limitations of gender, Senda Berenson produced the rules for an adapted game called women's basketball. In modifying the rules Berenson was influenced by her belief that women must not be involved in rough overly competitive play or be overly exerted. The five modifications introduced for woman's basketball were:

1. The court should be divided into three equal parts. Players should then be restricted to one of the three parts to lessen the risk of them exhausting themselves by running the whole length of the court.
2. Snatching and batting the ball was not allowed. This rule was designed to stop roughness and to prevent women doing "unwomanly things"
3. Holding the ball for more than three seconds constituted a foul. This was introduced to ensure that the ball was moved quickly and restricted the opportunities for players to move.
4. There shall only be a three bounce dribble. This rule was again intended to restrict the degree to which players would move.
5. There may be five to ten players on one team. This allowed the introduction of greater numbers to reduce the level of exertion on individual players

In effect these rule changes were based on the beliefs at the time of what was acceptable behaviour for, and the physical limitations, of women. Within the US women's basketball became a popular sport although, while still maintaining its separate name, it underwent a number of rule changes that moved it progressively back towards the men's game. Finally in 1971 the modifications to women's basketball was removed and from that point most women's games in the US were played under the full or "men's" rules.

In England both men's and women's basketball was introduced in the 1880s where they gained a small following. In 1899 the Ling Association, a group of English physical educators, was formed and it was this group who in 1901, deciding that women's basketball was still not sufficiently aligned with acceptable femininity, further modified the rules. One of the major elements in their rule changes was the emphasis on the non-interference game where players could not interfere with the ball when held by an opposition player in any way. It was considered vital to emphasise the non-contact aspect to allow for the games promotion as a suitable game for girls and women. It was at this time that the name women's basketball was changed to

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<sup>1</sup> The section on the historical development of netball has used Mandy Treagus's 2005 article "Playing like ladies: Basketball, netball and feminine restraint" as a major source. This article was published in the International Journal of the History of Sport.

netball, a change made in response to the introduction of nets attached to the rings. It is interesting to note that the change in name from basketball to netball did not occur in New Zealand until 1970. Until then netball was known as basketball and basketball was called indoor basketball.

While it is easy to criticise the beliefs that drove the changes from our modern day viewpoint, it is important to realise the reality of the cultural expectations at this time. Without the modifications made to women's basketball it would be difficult to imagine that netball could have been successful in building into the most popular women's sport in countries such as Australia and New Zealand. It was the very fact that netball was modified in a way that did not openly challenge the limitations placed on women by society that allowed it to be accepted and grow.

Many of the present day rules are still strongly associated with the underpinning beliefs on the place of females that drove the initial changes. A consistent theme throughout the development phase of the sport has been the emphasis on restraint and control as being central to appropriate female behaviour. This can still be seen in the modern game with the restrictions on player movement and the high levels of control by the umpires. In the recent semi final game between the Magic and the Thunderbirds, for example, a total of 104 contacts and 32 obstructions were called within the 60 minutes of play, on average a stoppage every 22 seconds. It is difficult to think of any other sport where this degree of umpire involvement would be acceptable. When netball is compared to other similar sports, such as hockey, soccer or basketball, the degree to which the game is reduced to a stop start affair is staggering. The original belief in the unacceptability of aggression for women is also influential today with the almost automatic response of referees to penalise any sign of successful defence on a shooter. Defenders appear to be immediately penalised when they are in any way effective, they are then required to stand demurely next to the player they have "fouled", this is the ultimate in gender stereotyping. It is difficult, for example, to envisage male players such as Tana Umanga or Steve Price, being penalised for an early tackle by being made to stand next to their opponent, hands by their sides, without speaking.

In looking at the differences in rules between netball and other similar women's sport it is possible to identify the underpinning beliefs about appropriate female roles behind the development of these rules. A small sample of the differences is shown below but readers may be able to identify others and deduce the reasons behind them.

<b>Basketball/soccer/hockey</b>	<b>Netball</b>	<b>Reason behind differences</b>
Freely run throughout court/field	Restricted areas	Players move less. This reduces exertion of players
Strong punitive action for fouls/contact. Five fouls removed from game/ or yellow and red cards.	No maximum number of fouls. Stand next to opponent arms by side and without speaking	An assumption that women are not aggressive and that any fouling will be accidental
Can take ball directly from	Cannot touch ball when	To reduce likelihood of

opponent	held by opponent	aggressive acts
Can mark and pressure opponent including tackling in soccer/hockey	Must stay 0.9 metre from opponent	To reduce likelihood of aggressive acts
Can throw/pass ball length of court	Must be caught in each third	Slow down play and prevent aggressive actions
Any player can shoot ball, play defence and bring the ball up the court/field	Designated roles for different players	Limits degree of activity and requirements for skill
Players can dribble the ball while bringing the ball up the court	Players cannot dribble but must catch and pass	Reduces movement and exertion

While the restrictions and limitations associated with netball may appear to be of little concern there are a number of very real consequences. The first is quite simply one of potential danger and injury for the players. The high levels of knee and leg injuries occurring through the constant need to stop suddenly are well documented. Of greater concern is the risk of injury that occurs through the essentially uncontrolled contacts that led to players hitting the floor on a regular basis. Because these often occur when one or both players are off the ground it is difficult for those involved to control what happens after impact. This situation is a direct result of placing highly competitive athletes into a game that lacks rules designed to discourage potentially dangerous actions. As mentioned above, the lack of rules in this area was based on the historical assumption that women were not capable of foul play and that therefore if contact occurred it must be accidental. This is a prime illustration of the disjoint between the rules of the game and the reality of modern athleticism. There is also a strong contrast with other women's sport where the possibility of giving up a penalty, of earning a yellow or red card or of being fouled out of the game is a strong incentive to avoid making dangerous contact. To be "punished" by being required to stand next to the player they have fouled appears to have little impact on mediating player behaviour.

The second consequence is that for netball to be developed internationally it must be sold to female athletes who have no previous understanding or cultural commitment to the game. It is difficult to see modern day female athletes accepting the restrictions inherent in the game when so many other options are available. When the game is compared to such games as women's soccer, hockey or the game it was derived from basketball, it takes on a decidedly old fashioned and rather quaint appearance.

The essential difficulty for netball is not the rules as such. The problem is that they are incongruent with the highly trained, aggressive athletes now playing the game. One problem facing netball administrators is that if they decided to change the game to more closely align it with the reality of modern female athletes then the obvious changes would take the game closer to basketball. Having established its own strong position within the New Zealand sporting landscape, and having a long history of competing with basketball for female athletes, this seems highly unlikely. Unpalatable as substantial rule changes may be, however, if netball intends to become a truly international game and it wishes to reduce the potential for injuries to players then it needs to consider this as an option. To resist offers the possibility that in a few years

netball may be looking back at this time as being one of seemingly unlimited potential, a potential that somehow did not eventuate.

