

An Uphill Climb for Women's Cricket in Auckland

“With coaching, however, the players should rapidly improve, for they display a great keenness in the game.” - M.H.W.¹

Cricket is a game steeped in tradition and can trace its origin back to the 17th century.² The name itself conjures images of long, hot, sunny days and complicated rules. The games are long—and to most, tedious. It is certainly true that anyone who willingly spends a solid chunk of their weekend involved in or playing cricket must harbour a real love for the sport. This was the case for the women in the early days of women's cricket in Auckland.

Traditionally a men's sport, it has only been in the last hundred years that women have begun to gain a respected footing within the sport. From the late 1920s to the 1970s, women's cricket in Auckland grew from a small, fledgling association into a large sport with international connections. While women's cricket appeared to suffer (particularly in its early years) from attempting to occupy a space in a male dominated sphere, it was the enthusiasm of the women cricketers who saw it through to what it is today.

Although women had been involved in cricket for decades before the 1920s, they faced an uphill climb when it came to forming their own weekly competition. Popularity for the game among women rapidly increased following the First World War, leading some to believe that such an interest in the sport was an entirely modern phenomenon.³ In June 1928, a group of women cricket enthusiasts explored the possibility of forming a female cricket organisation. Out of this interest, the Auckland Girl's Cricket Association was formed.⁴ The A.G.C.A organised weekly Saturday matches— the structure of which is still used today. The Association was young and inexperienced. There were no women's cricket clubs so, for the most part, the association relied on organisations like the Young Women's Christian Association, Hockey Association and ex-students from Grammar and Technical schools to field teams each Saturday.⁵ The enthusiasm of the women involved was never in doubt. In a majority of the reports made about the Saturday games, most noted the lack of players or the sup-par skills of the women, but almost all state that the women playing show “no little amount of keenness” for the sport.⁶

¹ M.H.W, “Cricket for Girls.”

² ICC, “History of Cricket.”

³ Anonymous, “Waspish-Waisted Women in Billowing Skirts of the Eighteenth Century were Pioneers of the Present-Day Girl's Cricket Matches.”

⁴ “Cricket,” 2.

⁵ M.H.W, “Cricket for Girls.”

⁶ M.H.W, “Cricket for Girls.”

The Association took steps towards establishing itself as a respected woman's sporting body, ensuring as much of its executive staff as possible were women and in 1933 changing its name to the Auckland Women's Cricket Association—the name that it would carry for the rest of its life.⁷ The A.W.C.A endeavoured to and proved adept at managing the growing sport; by the late 1940s, the Saturday championship had expanded to include a senior, intermediate and junior grade.⁸ There was also discussion around the prospect of introducing a secondary school grade to accommodate the rising interest among school girls.⁹

The influence of the A.W.C.A during this time period was invaluable in fostering interest and supporting women wanting to play cricket. The Association's contributions are still recognisable in the structure of the championships played for in Auckland today. In 1935 the A.W.C.A was given two trophies. The first was donated by the Auckland and National Party politician, Hallyburton Johnstone. The Hallyburton Johnstone Shield would be competed for by representative women's teams across New Zealand each season.¹⁰ Whichever team won the shield the previous season would then host the match between themselves and the challengers at their home ground.¹¹ This trophy fostered an annual domestic championship that teams like the Auckland Hearts compete for against other regional representative teams. It has since expanded to a nation-wide championship instead of relying on challenging the current holders of the shield. The second trophy the A.W.C.A received was from Pearl Howard Dawson— an avid cricket and hockey player.¹² This cup was to be attained through an intra-Auckland competition with the intention of encouraging more teams to enter.¹³ The Pearl Dawson Trophy is now a T20 competition played during the post-Christmas period by the Premier Women's teams in Auckland.

⁷ Anonymous, "Women's Cricket: Enthusiastic Support."; Anonymous, "Women in Field."

⁸ Simons, "Cricket: Game attracting recruits," 38.

⁹ "Cricket," 2.

¹⁰ Anonymous, "Cricket."

¹¹ "Women's Championship Cricket," 10.

¹² Coney, "Dawson, Pearl Howard."

¹³ Anonymous, "Cricket."

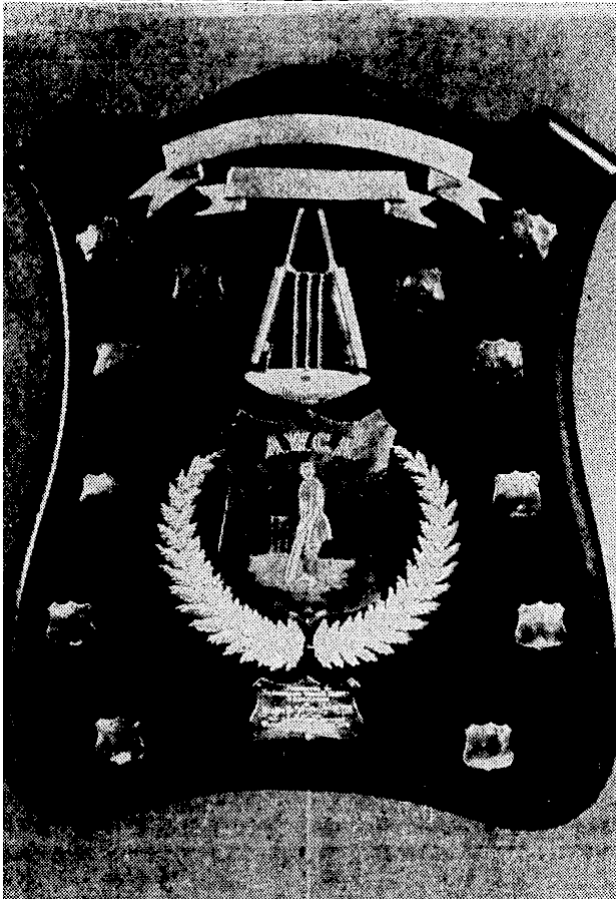


Figure 1: The Hallyburton Johnstone shield. It is the major domestic shield regional women's teams play for across New Zealand. (Evening Post. *The shield presented by Mr. and Mrs. Hallyburton-Johnstone to the Auckland Women's Cricket Association for presentation to the New Zealand Women's Cricket Council on the understanding that the shield is to be competed for on a Dominion basis.* February 14, 1935.

<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/EP19360214.2.158.2>)

Lack of support for women's cricket

A common theme women's cricket battled with throughout its life was a lack of experienced personnel. Although associated with the Auckland Cricket Association, the A.W.C.A. was a separate organisation. In the early years, the players' lack of skill was noted by many. The A.W.C.A often had to request coaching from men's teams and assistance with umpiring

matches.¹⁴ In some cases, members of teams were called upon to score, umpire or otherwise fill in gaps within the administrative capabilities of the organisation.¹⁵ In the lead up to the match against the English side in 1935, the A.W.C.A asked L.F. Townsend from the A.C.A for assistance with coaching.¹⁶ Although the public interest in the sport and numbers of girls' enrolled continued to grow, the growth was reliant on the contribution of individuals to keep the wheels turning. Some notable examples are Bev Brentnall and Dorothy (Dot) Simons. Their contributions to both Auckland cricket and New Zealand women's cricket would strengthen the A.W.C.A going forward and increase the exposure of women's cricket nation-wide.

Bev Brentnall of the North Shore and born in 1936, played for Auckland and New Zealand in the 1960s and captained the NZ side in the 1973 world cup.¹⁷ Alongside her impressive record as a New Zealand representative, Bev was heavily involved in grassroots cricket in Auckland. She held administrative roles in the Auckland and North Shore Associations and encouraged the younger generations to pursue the sport by both coaching and umpiring Saturday and school games.¹⁸

Dot Simons (1912-1996) was perhaps one of the most influential contributors to women's cricket—both for Auckland and globally. Dot managed the first NZ women's team that toured overseas in 1938 and was chairman of the AWCA from 1941-48; 1952-53 and 1958-59.¹⁹ Her administrative acumen did not go unnoticed; Dot was also the first life member of the New Zealand Women's Cricket Council and chairman from 1947-51.²⁰ Adding to an already impressive resume, Dot was then appointed president of the International Women's Cricket Council in 1966 and in 1974, received an OBE for her contribution to women's sport.²¹

One of Dot's most notable contributions to the sport in Auckland was the work she did for the *Auckland Star*. Dot was single-handedly responsible for much of the media coverage of Auckland women's cricket received in the 1970s. When Dot approached the staff of the *Auckland Star* 8 O'clock to ask why no one was reporting on the numerous women's sports events, she was told there was no one to do it and so she took on the task.²² In 1974, Dot was

¹⁴ M.H.W, "Cricket for Girls."

¹⁵ "A Healthy Summer Pastime for New Zealand Girls: Organised Club Cricket at Auckland."

¹⁶ Anonymous, "Cricket: Auckland control of game."

¹⁷ Simons, "Bev's Caught Behind the Wickets."

¹⁸ "Bev's Caught Behind the Wickets."

¹⁹ Anonymous, "First Life Member."

²⁰ "First Life Member."

²¹ Anonymous, "Auckland to Head World Cricket Body."

²² Nissen, "Simons sidelined after 45 years."

the only female sportswriter on the *Auckland Star* 8 O'clock staff and was responsible for most of the articles written on female sport— not just cricket— in the weekly 8 O'clock publications.²³ Without Dot's reporting, it is likely the greater Auckland area would remain unaware and uninformed on both the results of games and the steadily growing sport amongst women. Her contribution is what women's cricket needed when other sports began to grow more popular.



Figure 2: Auckland Women's team entering the field for the 1935 match against England. (Unknown photographer: *Oval at Eden Park, Auckland, Women's cricket team entering the field, Tuesday January 29th, 1935*. 1935. Women's Cricket Association tour of Australia, 1934-1935. <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-148704692/view> .)

Comparison to the men's game

Women's cricket struggled when it came to finding a stable footing of their own in the sport. Often compared to the men's game and suffering from a lack of players through to today, the

²³ "Kickoff With Our Team— It's a Winner."

sport grew slowly. In the early days of the A.W.C.A, a report in the *Auckland Sun* mused over the need to adapt the rules of the game to accommodate the women playing. Women already played with a lighter ball (and still do today) and on two occasions, the skirt of a batswomen deflected the ball away from the stumps, forestalling wickets.²⁴ If a batsman's leg or pants prevented a wicket from being taken, an LBW call (see glossary below) would be made. However, both a 'skirt-before-wicket' call and the abolishment of skirts from the game did not appear to be an option to the author.²⁵ The uniforms of women cricketers appeared to be a common point of contention in the early years. In the 1934 annual A.W.C.A meeting, the subject of uniform was a cause for debate, in particular due to the upcoming tour of the English women's team. Three main uniform choices were discussed, each a feminine variation of the men's traditional 'whites'. The options were short, white dresses, 'longs' (which were 'divided skirts') or 'longs' with shirt-blouses.²⁶ The matter was discussed vehemently but ultimately left unresolved at the meeting. Photographs of the 1935 match between Auckland and England show the A.W.C.A ultimately settled on the 'longs' with shirt-blouses.²⁷

²⁴ Anonymous, "Skirt-Before-Wicket."

²⁵ Anonymous, "Skirt-Before-Wicket."

²⁶ Anonymous, "Skirt-Before-Wicket."

²⁷ Unknown photographer. *The Auckland women's cricket team, 1935, to play the English visitors.*



Figure 3: The Auckland women's cricket team (1935) in uniform (cotton, divided skirts and no stockings) preparing to play the English women's team. (Unknown photographer. *The Auckland women's cricket team, 1935, to play the English visitors.* 1935.

<https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-148698648/view>.)

Many commentators and critics of women's sport in the early years and well into the 1950s, noted the lack of varied attacks Auckland had in their bowling line up. Women tended to favour a medium pace over-arm delivery, and Auckland women especially found it difficult to play anything else.²⁸ This was described as a "peculiarity of women's cricket in New Zealand" in the 30s and the sight of a woman needing to defend her wicket against spin was indeed rare.²⁹ This trend continued, with the scarcity of spin bowlers worrying selectors in the 1948 match against Australia.³⁰ Although it appeared to some that women may not be proficient at bowling spin, the conclusion was that it was often, once again, to do with the lack of effective training rather than a defect of women cricketers.³¹ Alongside bowling, the batting technique of women was also brought under fire. Early in the A.W.C.A.'s existence it

²⁸ Anonymous, "Women on Pitches."

²⁹ Anonymous, "Women on Pitches."

³⁰ "Cricket," 2-3.

³¹ "Cricket," 2-3.

was common to see women bat without technique and play either too defensively or “lash out at every ball irrespective of style.”³² This would make for a couple of impressive overs for the batter, but provides a poor defense against a skilled bowler. Like with the spin bowling, these weak spots noticed early on were a result of poor or no-training and relatively easy to remedy.

Struggling to find players

Although the interest and participation in the game has increased tenfold since its kick-off in Auckland, a lack of players has followed the development of the game through to today. From the beginning of the A.W.C.A's season in 1929 there has been a drive to raise the participation numbers.³³ Advertisements appeared in newspapers stating that both ‘new clubs and members [were] urgently required’ as well as less conspicuous advertisements for various clubs over the decades to come.³⁴ This appears to be a common enough thread through the decades, regardless of how much the sport evolved. Perhaps this is due to more popular team sports that gained momentum among women like netball or hockey, or because of the heavy comparisons to the men's game. Unfortunately, it does not appear to have been left in the past. In 1935, a newspaper article noted that there was “too great a disparity [...] between the senior and junior grade” mostly due to the junior teams being less experienced and no middle grade between them.³⁵ Although close to a century ago, some could argue that this issue appears to remain in women's cricket today. There are many Saturdays where Premier Reserve and Under 16 teams have needed to forfeit because of a lack of players. This prevents keen players who are not yet ready or able to play in the Premier Grade from playing cricket on Saturdays. Ideally, there would be enough girls and women to be able to introduce a casual grade into the Saturday competitions, but the possibility is once again inhibited by a lack of players.

Other versions of cricket

Cricket was a very masculine, very British, upper-class sport. This tended to exclude women, people from different socio-economic brackets and non-Pakeha from participating in the traditional form of the sport.

³² Anonymous, “Women's Cricket.”

³³ M.H.W, “Cricket for Girls.”

³⁴ “Auckland Women's Cricket Association.”; Advertisement for Akarana Women's Cricket Club.

³⁵ Anonymous, “Women's Cricket.”

As we have seen, this did not prevent these people from playing, and the sport was often adapted in order for them to do so. Outside of the adaptation of women's uniforms, there was the adaptation of the sport itself, particularly for Pacific communities.

The game of Kirikiti originated in Samoa in the early 1880s.³⁶ Although the game resembled the British sport of cricket, it became distinctly Samoan and involved the mass participation of communities and rules that differed depending on the locality.³⁷ Kirikiti expanded and grew in popularity across different Pacific communities in New Zealand. In the 1980s, a set of rules was established and in 2001, a professional league was formed.³⁸



Figure 4: Two women from Mangere (left, Sopo Pula and right, Pofity Laga'ia) cheering for the Mangere Kirikiti team during the Pacific Island Presbyterian Church games in Auckland. (Unknown photographer. *Kirikiti Fans, Tamakin*, 1990. January 1990. Footprints Collection. <https://kura.aucklandlibraries.govt.nz/digital/collection/photos/id/37274/rec/3>)

Today, there are more drastic steps being taken to maintain and promote racial diversity within cricket, both nation-wide and within Auckland. One example of this is the inaugural competition between Māori and Pasifika Secondary School team's in early 2023. This year was the first time two Pasifika squads (a girls and boys squad) had been formed, and each

³⁶ Sacks, "Cricket, Kirikiti and Imperialism in Samoa, 1879–1939," 2.

³⁷ Sacks, "Cricket, Kirikiti and Imperialism in Samoa, 1879–1939," 2.

³⁸ Sacks, "Cricket, Kirikiti and Imperialism in Samoa, 1879–1939," 74-75.

boasted up and coming talent from around Auckland.³⁹ Many of the Pasifika and Māori players, although young, have already begun to represent Auckland at various age level competitions.⁴⁰

Although the sport began as a white, masculine pastime, it has since outgrown its origins. Cricket has become as much a part of Auckland society as any other popular sport and the inclusion and support of women cricketers has increased dramatically since the 1930s.

Women's cricket in Auckland struggled to gain recognition and support in the early days of the A.W.C.A. Only through the combined efforts and enthusiasm of the women playing and running administrations did the sport grow. The development of women's cricket suffered from attempting to find a space within a traditional male sphere which is likely why it took so long to gain momentum. This was not the case for women's marching which thrived in the 1950s because it did not need to contend with a men's version of the sport.

³⁹ NZC, "Māori and Pasifika Schools Name Squads for Inaugural Matches."

⁴⁰ NZC, "Māori and Pasifika Schools Name Squads for Inaugural Matches."

Glossary

Over: A bowling spell made up of six deliveries.

LBW (Leg-before-wicket): a mode of dismissal for a batter. The umpire can call an LBW after an appeal from the fielding side if the ball would have hit the wickets but was deflected by the batter's body.

Spin bowling: a bowling technique where the ball deviates sharply after bouncing.

Pace bowling: a bowling technique that relies on speed. Bowlers can be further classified depending on their bowling speed (i.e. medium-pace bowlers.)

Premier grade: The highest women's grade in Auckland. Domestic players are selected from these teams.

Premier reserves: Usually part of a club's premier squad, but competes in the grade below the premier team. Players are called up to play for premier teams if they are short.

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