

The Survival of Women's Sport in Auckland

“Well, they obviously like the exercise and prove they are deadly serious, they train really hard.”- Steve Lee.¹



Figure 1: Members of the Yendarra Primary School softball club that won the Auckland Softball Association's Saturday tournament. (Unknown photographer. *'Successful Girls' Team'*, Otara, 1981. May, 1981. Footprints Collection.

<https://kura.aucklandlibraries.govt.nz/digital/collection/photos/id/41329/rec/2>)

Women's sport has changed dramatically over the past hundred years. The sports that were just beginning to set feelers out in organised championships in the late 1890s are almost unrecognisable today. As we have seen over the past four articles, cricket and marching had vastly different journeys into Auckland's sporting culture. Cricket's slow and sometimes stagnant growth into a popular sport was largely due to it being a traditionally male-dominated sport. Marching, a more 'feminine,' female-dominated sport, did not have this issue, and burst into the public scene seemingly overnight. The difference was, however,

¹ Simons, "They're not laughing now," 33.

while women's cricket remained and grew into the popular summer sport, marching disappeared almost completely. So why did this happen?

Both women's cricket and marching existed at the same time and provided a sphere for women to inhabit and make their own. In some ways, neither sport was that different from the other, and they shared many similarities. Both sports were reliant on community participation to get off the ground; without the managers, coaches and chaperones willing to help, it's unlikely either sport would have evolved at all. Both sports promoted fitness and exercise for girls and women, a positive that should not be overlooked. Unfortunately, both were outdoor sports, meaning that each was weather dependent. Across New Zealand, marching displays and cricket matches were often abandoned because of wet weather.² For competitions in Auckland, this often meant many games or displays were at the mercy of the weather. Still today, many outdoor sports are postponed or cancelled because of poor weather.

² Simons, "Disappointed Marching Girls," 17.



Figure 2: Three marching girls from Otara chosen to represent New Zealand on a world marching tour in July 1970. (Unknown photographer. *Marching and Smiling, Otara, 1970*. March, 1970. Footprints Collection. <https://kura.aucklandlibraries.govt.nz/digital/collection/photos/id/41772/rec/7>)

Despite the similarities, each sport and its formation were vastly different. Women's cricket suffered from comparison to the men's game although, as we shall see, this became an asset in later years. Marching did not have this problem. Being a uniquely New Zealand phenomenon, marching flourished in Auckland. The sport reached its peak of popularity in the 1970s-1980s, just as women's cricket was beginning to take off.³ Because marching did

³ Macdonald, "Marching Teams and Cheerleaders - Marching Teams, 1950s Onwards."

not have a men's version to contend with, it was able to flourish in the three-decades after the Second World War. The military connections and its strenuous, but not physically taxing nature meant that it was the perfect female sport of its time and yet disappeared, almost completely, when social climates shifted.

Ironically, I would argue that not being connected to a men's sport—an overt positive in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s—ended up being its downfall. Where women's cricket appears to have gained ground in the 1970s and onwards, marching seemed to decline from the 1980s. There is an argument to be made that the nature of marching, its intense militarism and its enforcement of beauty standards and gender roles fell suspect to second-wave feminism in the 1980s. If this is the case, then perhaps cricket's traditionally masculine history became a protection of sorts for the women's game. The profile of men's cricket provided – once women became publicly associated with it – an established social and financial platform by which to grow the sport.

Another contribution to its decline was the commercialisation of many sports between the 1970s-1990s. As was explored in previous articles, both cricket and marching (and most other sports during this time) were held together through community participation. In order to maintain the increasing cost and complexity of sports bodies, many women's teams sought corporate sponsorship and/or amalgamated with men's organisations.⁴ For example, in 1992, the New Zealand Women's Cricket Council was absorbed into the men's cricket body, the New Zealand Cricket Council.⁵ Marching did not have a counterpart and so did not have this option. Given the increasing commercial nature of sporting bodies, it would appear marching struggled to find volunteers willing to take up administrative roles and corporate patronage, likely because marching was typically a sport aimed at the working class. As such, marching was heavily reliant on community support and many teams relied on sponsors to fund their excursions.⁶ Cricket, in comparison, has always traditionally been seen as a middle/upper class sport, which could be another reason that women's cricket was able to survive when marching did not. Charlotte Macdonald argues that it was a combination of factors that saw marching fall into oblivion. The rise of other recreational sports and the “changing work patterns” all contributed to marching's decline.⁷

⁴ Macdonald, “Organisations in Sport, Recreation and Leisure.”

⁵ Macdonald, “Organisations in Sport, Recreation and Leisure.”

⁶ The New Zealand Marching Association, “Advice to Marching Girls,” 10-11.

⁷ Macdonald, “Marching Teams and Cheerleaders - Marching Teams, 1950s Onwards.”



Figure 3: A netball field day held at Mangere Intermediate School with teams across Auckland and Hamilton attending. (Unknown photographer. *Netball Field Day, Mangere, 1972*. July 30, 1972. Footprints Collection.

<https://kura.aucklandlibraries.govt.nz/digital/collection/photos/id/35745/rec/4>)

While marching was declining, other women's sports in Auckland were slowly progressing. By the late 1970s-80s there was an increase in sports available to women and an upsurge in the number of women playing them. Although this is a marked improvement from the first struggles they faced, the increase in participation did not come without difficulty. Like cricket, sports that originated in traditionally male spheres, suffered from similar issues. A recurring theme for many in the 1970s was the sexualisation of sportswomen. This was often followed by a comparison to the men's version and a commentary on how women's teams fell short.

Women's rugby, for example, struggled to gain the respect of a wider audience. One article published in the *Auckland Star 8 O'clock* criticised the women's sport and published unflattering and revealing photographs of women rugby players alongside it. The author lamented their lack of skill in comparison to the men's sport but ultimately came to the conclusion that it did not matter because it was not Shield Rugby stating that "all sorts of odd things happen when women's lib invades the rugby field."⁸ This is not the first time we have seen the idea that women have been 'invading' or 'infiltrating' men's sports to degrade them (see article 1).

⁸ Anonymous, "Hey Girls, That's Not Rugby!"

A similar stance was taken by another *Auckland Star* article on the success of women's tennis, although this is perhaps more surprising given that tennis had little disparity between the men's and women's game prior. This article mused that it was no wonder that attention for the sport was growing because women tennis players seemed to be "in a rush to wear less and less."⁹ The article was again accompanied by action photos of women tennis players that exposed their underwear. The author commented on his appreciation for women's games and that it was surprising more men were not watching, especially that the "dull years of ankle length dresses" were over.¹⁰ As with many other traditionally male sports, it is suggested that the women competing in these matches did so for the male gaze and that wearing "less and less" was for their benefit as "it took a long time for women to wake themselves up."¹¹

This is alarmingly similar to a report from 1891 that stated a large number of men were drawn to the Alfriston tennis club because of the "the graceful flutter of feminine garments as the wearers flitted to and fro, racquets in hand."¹² As it would seem, the reasons for appreciating women's sport— particularly tennis— have not changed all that much in 80 years. The common sentiment appears to be that if women were going to attempt to occupy their own space in male-dominated sport, they owed it to the men with whom they were competing with to be as attractive as possible while doing so.



⁹ Anonymous, "Why Men Are Watching More Women's Tennis."

¹⁰ Anonymous, "Why Men Are Watching More Women's Tennis."

¹¹ Anonymous, "Why Men Are Watching More Women's Tennis."

¹² "Meetings from Papakura Valley Board Meetings," 40.

Figure 4: Members of the Papatoetoe women's rugby club; taken from the bottom of a scrum.(W.A. Austin. *Not a Sewing Circle, Papatoetoe*, 1972. September 30, 1972. Footprints Collection. <https://kura.aucklandlibraries.govt.nz/digital/collection/photos/id/40959/rec/3>)

This did not mean that women's sport was completely degraded by the public. In fact, a large majority of Auckland successes was covered and publicized by none other than Dot Simons. Not only was she instrumental in the development of women's cricket, but in women's sport as a whole. Her articles in the *Auckland Star 8 O'clock* issues covered many different women's sports. Dot covered women's hockey, noting their improvement in the national ranking and six of the Auckland members being selected for the New Zealand squad.¹³ She also covered athletics, and individual achievements such as the 18-year-old Alison Deed's Olympic heading.¹⁴ Another sport Dot provided a breath of fresh air into was women's football. She acknowledged that previously, it had been "a bit of a joke really – girls playing soccer," but in just two years since its formation, a women's soccer championship had taken off.¹⁵ Her articles, although one of the few that provided media coverage of women's sports across Auckland, did not appear in every issue of the *Star*. When they did, they were often towards the back of the sports section, under the sub-heading, *The 8 O'clock Looks at Women's Sport*. In 1982, Dot also published her book, *New Zealand's Champion Sportswomen*, which covered 26 different athletes from across the country.¹⁶ Her work pushed Auckland's sportswomen from the fringes of society and into mainstream awareness. Although women's sport was beginning to be more widely known and accepted into society, it still had a long way to go.

¹³ Simons, "Well Done Auckland!"

¹⁴ Simons, "Alison's on the Road to Morocco."

¹⁵ Simons, "They're not laughing now."

¹⁶ Devlin, "Dorothy, Simons Edith."



Figure 5: The Papakura ‘Ladybirds’ soccer team vs the Mount Roskill team.(W.A. Austin. *Soccer Girls, Papakura*, 1972. July, 1972. Footprints Collection.
<https://kura.aucklandlibraries.govt.nz/digital/collection/photos/id/36737/rec/15>)

As we have seen over the course of these articles, women’s sport in Auckland has always been progressing. However, the speed with which different sports developed appears to be reliant on whether it fell into a traditionally male or female sphere. Female dominated sports like marching made significant progress and even today, typically ‘feminine’ sports like netball and hockey are more popular compared to others. For male dominated sports, the progress was slower and often very difficult to track any improvements. Yet, quite recently, such sports have made significant progress. Women’s rugby, which had come a considerable distance since the 1970s, was encouraged, but took a backseat in favour of the men’s game. Despite this, New Zealand hosted the Women’s Rugby World Cup in 2022 and became the first host nation to win.¹⁷ Not only did the Black Ferns make history with their win, but they did so in a sold-out Eden Park stadium and a record number of people watching on free-to-air television, indicating that, perhaps for the first time, public interest in women’s rugby—and women’s sports in general—was at an all-time high.¹⁸

Women’s cricket too, despite having a professional Auckland team from 1935, has made great leaps and bounds within the last decade. In 2014, the top ten women cricketers in New Zealand were awarded annual contracts, whereas previously they had only been paid

¹⁷ “Black Ferns Beat England to Create Rugby World Cup History.”

¹⁸ “Black Ferns Beat England to Create Rugby World Cup History.”

assembly fees.¹⁹ Almost a decade later in 2022, women and men's match fees were changed to the same price.²⁰ This means that entry fees to both international and domestic matches are now the same as they are for men's games. Although it was a ridiculously long time coming, this match fee parity is another indication that women's cricket, and women's sport in general, is slowly but surely becoming a permanent fixture in Auckland's sporting culture.



Figure 6: Auckland Hearts vs Wellington Blaze SuperSmash game at Eden Park's outer oval. 20 Jan, 2023. Photograph taken by Katia Kennedy.

As with cricket and marching, the driving force behind the evolution of women's sports in Auckland was the women themselves. Their dedication to their chosen sports pushed sportswomen from an afterthought into the forefront of Auckland society. By looking back to the late 1880s where this series of articles started, it is easy to see how much Auckland women enjoyed the sports they played. In order for masculine sports like cricket and rugby to thrive in a women's sphere, they needed enthusiastic players. Despite the criticism and backlash these sports faced, the women involved progressed, pushing their sports to become a permanent fixture in Auckland's wider sporting culture. Although women's sport has dramatically improved over the last hundred years, criticism for sportswomen still exists, indicating that sports still remains a realm to explore the ever-shifting social trends and sentiments surrounding women.

Public support or backlash, the enjoyment the Auckland sports women have found in sports has never been in doubt. A common thread throughout these articles has been the enjoyment that has shone through in the many photographs of girls and women participating in various sports. Without women's willing and enthusiastic participation, these sports would never have survived. The popularity they enjoy today has been a long time coming and with so many talented sportswomen in Auckland, the future of women's sport has never looked brighter.

¹⁹ "Cricket: NZ Women Cricketers Awarded Annual Contracts for the First Time."

²⁰ "NZ Women's Cricketers Get Match Fee Pay Parity with Men."



Figure 7: Members of the Papatoetoe Women's Bowling Club celebrating the club's 50th Jubilee. (Unknown photography. *'Birthday Bowlers'*, *Papatoetoe*, 1999. October, 1999. Footprints Collection.

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