

Meeting Success and Defeat with Dignity

FIFTY YEARS OF GIRLS' HIGH SCHOOL BASKETBALL AND SWIMMING

Joel Rippel

March 2026 will mark the fiftieth anniversary of the first “official” girls’ state basketball tournament, but the history of girls’ basketball in the state spans 125 years.

The game was invented in the late nineteenth century by Dr. James Naismith—director of the YMCA in Springfield, Massachusetts—as an indoor activity to fill the void between the boys’ football season in the fall and baseball season in the spring. The first basketball game was played in Springfield on December 21, 1891.

The game spread quickly through the nationwide network of YMCAs and was introduced in Minnesota at Carleton College in Northfield in 1892 by two of Naismith’s protégés: Max Exner, Naismith’s roommate and participant in the first game in Springfield; and Louis Joseph “L. J.” Cooke, who studied under Naismith and became director of the Minneapolis YMCA in 1895.

From the outset, basketball proved to be just as popular with girls as with boys. In 1898, University of Minnesota students formed a women’s basketball association, and two years later, the university fielded a women’s team. In 1901, the first official set of rules for girls’ basketball was published.

Proof of its popularity among girls: As early as 1902, debates arose over the top girls’ team in the state, even though there was no state tournament for girls’ basketball teams in the first 40 years of the twentieth century.





Dr. L. J. Cooke (right), the first men's basketball coach at the University of Minnesota, greets new athletic director Frank McCormick (circa 1932 or 1933).

In the Sunday, May 4, 1902, edition of the *Minneapolis Tribune*, a photo of the Austin High School girls' basketball team was published under the headline: "Champion Basket Ball Team of State," and summed up Austin's season. "The above cut [photo] shows the champion ladies' basketball team of the state together with their trainer, Dr. David Monticue Strang. After only four months' playing, Professor Strang has brought the team up to the best in state. They recently defeated Carleton college, whose team had trained four years."¹

The story caused an immediate rebuttal from a Minneapolis team, demonstrating the competitive spirit of the teams.

FACING: Janet Karvonen (with ball), of New York Mills, was the first girls' basketball player in state history to score 3,000 points and held the girls' state scoring record until 1997. Karvonen went on to play college basketball for Old Dominion and Louisiana Tech.

The *Tribune* reported:

The members of the Central High School girls' basketball team take exceptions to the claim made in the *Sunday Tribune* by the basketball team of Austin, Minn. that they are the champions of the state. The Austin girls claimed the championship because they had defeated Carleton, and said that Carleton had defeated the Central High of Minneapolis. This is not the case, however, as Carleton and the Central high have not played this year. Last year the Centrals defeated Carleton, and this year Carleton refused to play. The Centrals, however, have played six games and won every one of them, and they say that Austin has played very few games. Under these circumstances, the Minneapolis girls feel that they have more right to claim the championship than Austin.²

Also, to confirm the sport's appeal with girls, Fosston fielded its first girls' basketball team in 1905—a year before its first boys' team—and has a legacy in both girls' and boys' basketball. In 1913, the Fosston boys' team won the championship at the first state tournament held at Carleton College, and more recently, from 1999 to 2002, the Fosston girls set a state record by winning 78 consecutive games and won state titles in 2000, 2001, and 2003.

Encouragingly, the benefits of basketball for girls were featured in a lengthy story in the *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune* in early 1907. The story read in part,

It is safe to say . . . that the girl who goes in for athletics in school is just as thoroughly in earnest as her big brother of gridiron fame. Games are invaluable for a girl's training in that they develop just those qualities which women are finding necessary in their new fields, and basketball above all others has proved of the greatest worth. It develops physical and moral courage, self-reliance and self-control and the ability to meet success and defeat with dignity.³

Criticisms Roll In

Within a year of that story, however, criticism of girls' competitive sports appeared. In 1908, the Amateur Athletic Union, which oversaw non-inter-collegiate and non-interscholastic amateur sports in the United States, announced it would not permit girls to play basketball in public places. In 1909, the University of Minnesota said women's basketball at the university would be limited to intramurals.

At a teachers' convention in San Francisco in the summer of 1915, Elizabeth Burchenal, the inspector of

athletics for girls in the New York City public schools, said, "Interscholastic athletics for girls is merely showing off their attractiveness. That's the trouble in this country. We start something and then we want to exhibit it. Athletic teams of girls have been taken around the country in recent years and deliberately exploited." Burchenal recommended that girls' school athletics should be restricted to interclass games and that women should supervise girls' athletics instead of men.⁴

When the Minnesota State High School Athletic Association (now the Minnesota State High School League) formed in 1916 to oversee high school activities in the state, basketball for girls was not an officially sponsored sport.

Dorothy McIntyre, who spent 32 years as an associate director of the Minnesota State High School League before retiring in 2002, and Marian Bemis Johnson coauthored a book that documented the popularity of girls' basketball in the state—over 200 high schools had girls' teams—and its abrupt demise.

A Temporary End to Competitive Girls' Teams

The National Amateur Athletic Federation (NAAF), created in the 1920s to study the impact of athletic participation and physical education, was split into separate divisions for boys and girls, with the girls' division led by Lou Henry Hoover, the wife of future US president Herbert Hoover.

State and national groups, such as the Minnesota Department of Education and the American Physical Education Association, came to believe that intense competition for young women—which mirrored the model of competition for boys—was filled with potential negative effects on young women. These groups suggested that competitive sports were too strenuous for girls and that competitive interscholastic and intercollegiate teams, as well as competition conducted by community and sports organizations including the Olympics, should be ended. The NAAF began sending information to schools and organizations nationwide to replace girls' and women's competitive teams with recreational programs.

Meanwhile, the Litchfield girls' basketball team in Meeker County was experiencing a 73-game unbeaten streak beginning in 1927—they had a tie with Willmar in 1928—and ending in a 19–17 loss to Buffalo on February 9, 1932. Litchfield won a rematch 11–9 and finished with a 76–1–1 record in the six-season span. Paradoxically, prior to the loss to Buffalo, "school authorities previously had announced that they intended eliminating the sport as an experiment for one year at the school."⁵

A recap of Litchfield's successful season in a Minneapolis paper said, "Litchfield high school's 'point a minute' girls basketball team, although defeated once this season for the first time in six years, this week stowed

away its uniforms, perhaps for all time, with the most remarkable record ever set up by a feminine sextet in Minnesota."⁶

Likewise, Grand Meadow, about 20 miles east of Austin in Mower County, arguably had the most accomplished girls' team of the era. Beginning in 1929, they did not lose a game for a decade. The *Austin Daily Herald* wrote,

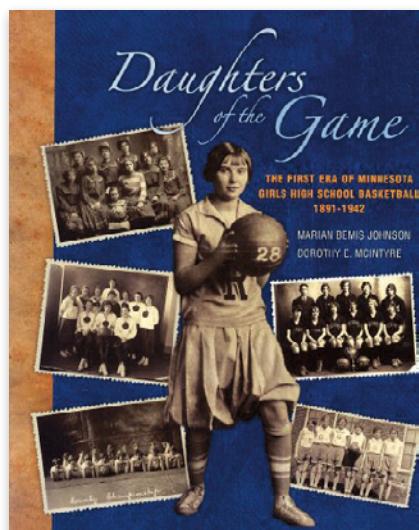
A basketball record, believed to be the best one in the state, is held by the girls' basketball team of Grand Meadow high school. The team has won 94 consecutive games to complete their year undefeated. The Larks played teams throughout southern Minnesota and northern Iowa.

This past 1938–39 season proved to be the best for the Larks in scoring points, as they held an average of 47.15 points per game. They chalked their best defensive record during the 1930–31 season, when they held their opponents to 7.08 points. For the tenth consecutive year, Grand Meadow can point with pride to an undefeated girls' team.⁷

During this winning streak, the Larks were led by three coaches: Lila Reiersgard, a graduate of Concordia College in Moorhead, for the first seven years; Marian Nestande, for two years; and Carolyn Rem for the tenth season. But following the 1938–39 season, the school dropped girls' interscholastic basketball.

Indeed, by the early 1930s, schools in Minnesota started to comply with the NAAF's recommendation. Larger schools dropped girls' teams first while some smaller schools kept them into the late 1930s and early 1940s.

In 1938, Harold Jack, the supervisor of health and physical education in the Minnesota State Department



Daughters of the Game, written by Dorothy McIntyre and Marian Bemis Johnson, documents the beginning of high school girls' basketball in the state and its early demise.



ABOVE: Girls are shown playing basketball outdoors (circa 1910). The first official rules for girls' basketball were published in 1901.



LEFT: The St. Paul Johnson girls' basketball team (circa 1915) was one of hundreds of girls' high school basketball teams in the state in the first 20 years of the twentieth century.

of Education, sent a copy of a Department of Education report to every school district in Minnesota recommending that interscholastic athletics be dropped for girls and replaced by a Girls Athletic Association program.

And in September 1939, Jack sent another letter to the school districts that described the statewide decline in girls' competitive teams. In the 1938–39 school year, 92 schools had competitive teams; in the 1939–40 school year, only 38 schools still had teams for girls.

Nationwide Demise

The demise of girls' basketball wasn't just limited to Minnesota.

In 1925, 37 (of the 48) states nationwide held girls' high school basketball tournaments.

Iowa held its first girls' state tournament in 1920. However, after the state's superintendents and principals decided at the annual Iowa State Teachers' Convention in 1925 that "competitive sports before paying crowds was good only for boys'

activities, not for girls," the Iowa High School Athletic Association said it would no longer sponsor girls' basketball as an interscholastic activity.⁸

That decision prompted a group of 25 men, from primarily small rural Iowa school districts, to form their own organization, the Iowa Girls High School Athletic Union, to oversee girls' basketball. (In 2025, Iowa is the only state to have separate associations for boys' and girls' athletics.)

By the late 1920s, girls' basketball only continued in Minnesota, Iowa, and a few other states—Maine, Oklahoma, and Texas. Texas held its first official girls' state basketball tournament in 1951. In Oklahoma, an unofficial champion emerged in 1919, and a sanctioned championship in 1924. Maine named its first official girls' state champion in 1931.

Driving the Bus

After earning a teaching degree from Luther College in Decorah, Iowa, Dorothy McIntyre began her teaching career at Ellendale–Geneva High School in Minnesota in 1957, teaching social studies and physical education/health. In 1959, she joined the staff at Eden Prairie High School, where she began conducting gymnastics clinics and organized a girls' gymnastics team. When she was told by the school district that there was no bus driver available to transport the team to out-of-town events, McIntyre got a bus driver's license and began driving the team.

She also worked on state and national committees. In 1966, she was named Eden Prairie's "Citizen of the Year" for her efforts to organize sports activities for girls, and after the Minnesota State High School League (MSHSL) adopted athletics for girls in December 1968, she was among a group that developed the

first guidelines for girls' high school sports in Minnesota.

McIntyre, who earned a master's in education degree from the University of Minnesota in 1970, joined the MSHSL staff on July 1, 1970, as an associate director with the primary responsibility of developing and managing the nascent girls' interscholastic program. Early in her tenure, she worked with the Minnesota Department of Education to publish a gender equity manual to assist schools in meeting the requirements of Title IX, which was passed in 1972.

In McIntyre's first seven years with the MSHSL, she oversaw the creation of state tournaments for 11 girls' sports, including the first official state tournament for girls—track and field—in 1972. Late in 1999, she was named by the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* as one of the 100 most influential sports figures in Minnesota of the twentieth century.

First Official State Tournament

In the early 1970s, girls' basketball grew quickly statewide. By 1972, there were 172 teams; the next year, 220. The 1974–75 school year saw more than 400 girls' basketball teams competing—about half played in the fall and half in the winter. "When the MSHSL adopted girls' sports programs in 1969, member schools could set up teams in any girls' sport and compete in invitational and district/regional tournaments in any season they and neighboring schools wished," McIntyre said.

The teams were split primarily geographically. "The western half of the state chose the fall season," McIntyre said.

The gyms were empty with boys outside, basketball officials were



Dorothy McIntyre, who oversaw the creation of state tournaments in girls' high school sports in the state during her three decades as an associate director of the Minnesota State High School League, is shown in her home in 2022 in Edina, Minnesota, with some of her prized possessions. Among them are a replica peach basket like the one used by basketball inventor James Naismith in 1892; a book on the history of girls' basketball coauthored by McIntyre and Marian Bemis Johnson; uniforms worn by Minnesota girl high school basketball players; and a replica basketball from the game's early days, as well as a trophy and photo from the Sherburn girls' basketball team in 1925.

available and fans came to the games and enjoyed it. The eastern side of the state chose the winter season. Volleyball was seen as another great team sport for girls and it could be in the fall with open gyms and little conflict for space. Girls' basketball could be shared with existing boys' teams.

Therefore, two champions were crowned in girls' basketball in the 1974–75 school year. On November 23, 1974, Glencoe defeated Wadena 46–29 at St. Cloud State in the championship game of the fall season state tournament. The victory capped an unbeaten season (21–0) and was the fifty-fourth consecutive for Glencoe, coached by Jan Willard. Three months later, on February 21, 1975, at Osseo High School, Holy Angels defeated Le Sueur 39–32 in the championship game of the winter tournament.

One month before these fall tournament games, on October 3, 1974, the MSHSL Board of Directors voted to make girls' basketball a winter sport beginning in the 1975–76 season. Predictably, the decision had critics. A Wadena radio station surveyed 68 athletic directors in its area: 65 favored basketball as a fall sport, two favored it as a winter sport, and one was undecided.

After the decision was made, McIntyre told the *Minneapolis Tribune*,

You set objectives for the overall program, and our aim is to bring the programs together, so we have a fall team sport and a winter team sport for girls. We have already established track as a spring team sport for girls.

There are more than 300 schools in our girls' volleyball program now, even though many are

competing against fall basketball at their schools. We want to give girls a statewide program of team sports in each season of the year. Basketball and volleyball are the two biggest, and eventually all schools are going to have programs. Obviously, one must be during the fall and one during the winter.⁹

The first official girls' state basketball tournament joined the growing list of state tournaments for girls sanctioned by the MSHSL, the first being track and field in 1972, followed by gymnastics, tennis, and volleyball in 1974–75. In addition to basketball, cross-country running, cross-country and slalom skiing, and swimming were added in 1975–76.

Bob Schrank announced, "It's here. Minnesota's first high school

girls' State Basketball Tournament. The four-day, two-class tourney begins at Met Sports Center at 1:05 p.m. Wednesday. Austin and Worthington open the Class AA (or 2A) portion of the newest state meet sponsored by the Minnesota State High School League."¹⁰

St. Paul Central won the Class 2A championship and Redwood Falls won the Class 1A state title.

The following year's state tournament introduced the first girls' basketball dynasty of the modern era. Led by ninth-grader Janet Karvonen, New York Mills won the first of three consecutive Class 1A state titles. In Karvonen's five seasons on the New York Mills varsity, the Eagles compiled a 116–10 record and made four appearances in the state tournament (they lost in the 1980 state

championship game). Karvonen, who scored 3,129 points in her career, received the Dial Award as the nation's top high school girls' basketball player in 1980.

To clarify the sometimes confusing history of the tournament anniversaries: The 2026 state tournament will be the Golden Anniversary of the first "official" state girls' basketball tournament (the 1975–76 school year).

The 2025 tournament was the fiftieth anniversary of the first season of MSHSL-sanctioned basketball for girls (the 1974–75 school year). Because half of the schools played in the fall and half played in the winter, there were two tournaments, but neither was considered an official state tournament. The 2024 state tournament was the fiftieth anniversary of the private schools state tournament.



Janet Karvonen, left, and teammate Kim Salathe raise the trophy after New York Mills' victory in the District 24A championship game in 1980. New York Mills went on to reach the state tournament for the fourth consecutive season.



A sign greets visitors to New York Mills in Otter Tail County (circa 1980s). The New York Mills high school girls' basketball team won three consecutive state championships in 1977, 1978, and 1979. New York Mills' population in 1980 was approximately 1,000.

In February 1974, teams from private high schools gathered at Concordia College (now Concordia University) in St. Paul for the Minnesota State Independent Girls Tournament. The participating teams were St. Margaret's, Holy Angels, Rochester Lourdes, Winsted Holy Trinity, St. Bernard's, Edgerton Southwest Christian, Hill-Murray, and Mayer Lutheran. St. Margaret's defeated St. Bernard's in the championship game. In May 1974, the MSHSL approved 34 private schools as members of the MSHSL, beginning in 1975-76.

Girls' Swimming in Minnesota

The fiftieth anniversary of the first official MSHSL-sponsored girls' state swimming meet will be held in November 2025, but similar to basket-

ball, the girls' state swimming meet is more than a century old.

From 1924 to 1942, about a dozen schools on the Iron Range held an annual swimming meet. The finances that mining generated made swimming an Iron Range sport. McIntyre said, "Taxes from the iron mines resulted in beautiful schools with pools that were the centerpiece of their school district."¹¹

That's how Rita Garcia, a Virginia High School alumna and amateur historian, tells it, too. "Some of the pools at the high schools on the Iron Range were considered the best in the nation," she said. "The Biwabik Natatorium was considered the best. The Biwabik pool and the Virginia pool were considered Olympic pools."¹²

The *Minneapolis Journal* reported in its March 9, 1924, edition that the "first competition to determine a state

championship in any form of athletics for girls" would take place in Biwabik that week. The meet was expected to draw 100 entrants from nearly all the area high schools.

One of the highlights of the era came in 1932, when Chisholm's Anne Govednik broke the US high school record in the 100-yard breaststroke. Two weeks after the state meet, 16-year-old Govednik swam at the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) national meet, where she broke the AAU world record in the event. She then competed at the US Olympic swim trials and finished second in the 200-meter breaststroke to qualify for the US Olympic team. That summer, Govednik and Evelyne Hall in track and field became the first women from Minnesota to compete in a Summer Olympics, which were held in Los Angeles.



In fall 1939, individual school superintendents of the schools that sponsored girls' swimming voted to discontinue sponsoring the sport in Minnesota, but they reconsidered, and the meet was held through 1942.

On February 21, 1942, seven teams competed in Virginia, Minnesota, at the nineteenth annual state meet. Nashwauk claimed the title with 57 points, and the Virginia girls' team, which had won 13 consecutive titles, came in second with 43 points. That was the last state meet held for girls in Minnesota in any sport until 1972.

The first MSHSL-sponsored girls' swimming state meet was held in November 1975 at Hamline University. Virginia, which had dominated the first era of the state meet by winning 15 titles in 19 years, was well represented by seven swimmers at the meet.

The 1975 state meet was especially memorable for at least one person: Virginia Rantala, coach of the Virginia team. "I swam for Eveleth my last three years in high school, the last three years before the state dropped the sport," Rantala said.

All things considered, I was pretty good, too. Or at least I've got a case full of trophies and medals at home to suggest I was. But I never won the state. I was a backstroker, always swimming against another gal named Betty Bemis. She held the state record and went on to swim in the Olympics. Fortunately, we both got through before (Harold) Jack spoke out against the sport. And ever since that day, I've been hoping they'd have a change of heart.¹³

FACING: From 1924 to 1942, girls' swimming teams from high schools on Minnesota's Iron Range held swimming meets in pools like the Hibbing High School pool (circa 1924).

Rantala lamented the demise of the sport. Harold Jack "was on the state board of education," said Rantala.

[He] got the idea that swimming and girls just didn't mix, that it was bad for them physically and dangerous for them emotionally. He must have made his point to the school board rather effectively. They didn't stop at just dropping the girls' state swim meet. They dropped girls competitive swimming all together.¹⁴

When Garcia, who competed in track and field and volleyball in high school and managed the swimming team, returned to Virginia High School for a class reunion several years ago, she learned that the high school building was scheduled to be torn down and replaced by Rock Ridge High School, which serves the students of Virginia, Eveleth, and Gilbert.

Garcia came across the trophies the Virginia team had amassed from those early swimming championships. "All of the trophies were sitting there," she said. "The school was going to be torn down and there was no plan for what to do with the trophies." Garcia has those trophies now, and great pride in Virginia swimming.¹⁵

"Coach [Jean] Healy created quite a legacy with the success of her teams at Virginia," Garcia said. "She got seventh- and eighth graders started, and her coaching strategy was fantastic."¹⁶

Garcia has spent time sharing her insight into the early history of high school swimming in Minnesota. "I made a presentation [at the History Center] with photographs and posters," she said. "I wanted people to know that there was somebody before Edina."¹⁷ ☐

Notes

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Unless noted, quotes from Dorothy McIntyre are from an interview in March 2025.

1. "Champion Basket Ball Team of State," *Minneapolis Tribune*, May 4, 1902, 22.

2. "Austin Girls Are Not the Champions," *Minneapolis Tribune*, May 6, 1902, 6.

3. "Girls Interested in Basketball," *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune*, Feb. 17, 1907, 9.

4. "Woman Opposes Making Girls Public Exhibits," *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune*, Aug. 1, 1915, 36.

5. "Litchfield Girls' Win Streak Broken," *St. Cloud Times*, Feb. 10, 1932, 12.

6. "Litchfield Girl Five Has Point a Minute," *Minneapolis Journal*, Feb. 28, 1932, 24.

7. "Grand Meadow Girls Basketball Team Unbeaten Past 10 Years," *Austin Daily Herald*, Apr. 4, 1939, 6.

8. "History," Iowa Girls High School Athletic Union, <https://www.ighsau.org/history>, accessed Sept. 7, 2025.

9. Bruce Brothers, "High School Sports," *Minneapolis Tribune*, Nov. 19, 1974, C4.

10. Bob Schrank, "New in State: It's Girls Basketball," *Minneapolis Star*, Feb. 16, 1976, 24.

11. Joel Rippel, "Iron Range Girls State Meet Nears Centennial," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, Nov. 17, 2023, C1.

12. Joel Rippel, "Iron Range Girls State Meet Nears Centennial," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, Nov. 17, 2023, C1.

13. Chan Keith, "Virginia Prep Coach Puts Girls in Swim," *Minneapolis Star*, Nov. 22, 1975, 12.

14. Chan Keith, "Virginia Prep Coach Puts Girls in Swim," *Minneapolis Star*, Nov. 22, 1975, 12.

15. Joel Rippel, "Iron Range Girls State Meet Nears Centennial," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, Nov. 17, 2023, C1.

16. Joel Rippel, "Iron Range Girls State Meet Nears Centennial," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, Nov. 17, 2023, C1.

17. Joel Rippel, "Iron Range Girls State Meet Nears Centennial," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, Nov. 17, 2023, C1.

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