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Caitlin Clark and History

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE - Caitlin Clark and History
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Over the past several weeks one of the major stories in sport in the United States has been Caitlin Clark's quest for the all-time scoring title in women's college basketball. Clark with her high-level skills: shooting, passing, rebounding, and defense were a source of amazement to many, especially those for whom women's basketball and women's sport have been of marginal interest.

Today in *The Athletic* Dana O'Neil wrote: "Caitlin Clark is no longer merely a basketball player. She is an experience, an outrageously talented athlete swaddled in NIL, social media and female empowerment who encapsulates the zeitgeist of college athletics."

Initially the focus was on Caitlin Clark and her quest for the woman's college basketball scoring record, but as that record fell, attention turned to college basketball in general.

Slowly over the past several years, women's basketball became more accessible on television. ESPN's all-sports NCAA contract was one important factor in this change. Equally, if not more important, the development of women's sport under the impetus of Title IX accelerated the number of teams playing at a competitive and highly skilled level. The increased competitive balance of the games, in turn, served to make the women's game more attractive to basketball fans.

When Caitlin Clark began making basketball history, the general sports public became interested in this phenomenal athlete. Her three-point shooting was changing that phase of the women's game in the same way that Steph Curry transformed the NBA three-point game. Her scoring was moving to higher and higher levels.

Television ratings moved up and, more significantly, attendance moved up. The closer Clark came to the scoring records, and the more she was seen by fans, going to an Iowa basketball game became a thing. The sellouts at home games were no big surprise, but what caught everyone off guard were the sellouts at every arena where Clark appeared.

The NBC owned Peacock Network purchased exclusive rights to fifty Big Ten Women's Basketball games as a means of "growing" the network. It might have been expected that NBC would put the Caitlin Clark run to the record on NBC Sports for all the nation to see. Instead, the games were kept on Peacock as a means to increase subscriptions to Peacock. In the end, if you wanted to watch Clark break records you had better subscribe to Peacock.

As the record-breaking games came and went, other interesting things happened. The press, and then the general public, discovered the previous record holders. The fog of history that covered women's basketball was beginning to lift. As it did, several elements of sport history came to light.

In the past week, three storylines emerged that offer some light on history and on the present state of sport. These all center on the records that Clark broke. First, as Clark approached the scoring record for women's basketball, the obvious question became: Whose record did she break? The answer was not simple. The reason it was not centers on the history of the NCAA and its disdain for women's sport. Not much is being said about that now, but it deserves some attention.

When Clark set a new record at Minnesota last week, it was the record of Lynette Woodard that Clark broke. Woodard played at Kansas before the NCAA recognized women's basketball as an NCAA sport. At the time Kansas, as with most major women's basketball programs, was a member of the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (AIAW). So, in the game at Minnesota, Clark broke the AIAW record set in 1981. Two weeks earlier against Michigan, Clark broke the NCAA record held by Kelsey Plum of the University of Washington set in 2017.

The breaking of these two different records is a reminder of the fact, once again, that women's basketball, as with women's intercollegiate athletics generally, was regarded with some disdain by the NCAA, which refused to recognize its legitimacy. However, once women's basketball began to increase in popularity and looked like a possible new source of revenue for the NCAA, it moved to take over the sport and destroy the AIAW. Ultimately, it succeeded in both while shouting from the rooftops that it had no such desire.

Caitlin Clark's next record to break was that of Pete Maravich who held the NCAA career scoring record for all NCAA basketball. Needing only eighteen more points after breaking Woodard's record, Clark eclipsed Maravich's record less than a week later

playing at home against Ohio State. Now clearly Clark was the undisputed scoring leader with 3685 points.

Maybe.

The AIAW was overshadowed by the NCAA, but there was still one more scoring record in the AIAW archives where the name Pearl Moore is found. Playing for Francis Marion College in Florence, South Carolina, from 1975 to 1979, Pearl Moore scored 4,061 points. This is the AIAW small school record. Moore was inducted into the Woman's Basketball Hall of Fame in 2011 and the Naismith Memorial Hall of Fame in 2021.

So, who is the overall scoring leader in college basketball? Most of the record books are likely now to acknowledge Caitlin Clark as the holder of that title. Some may insist on Moore. However, there is one more group of holdouts, a pocket of resistance, insisting Pete Maravich is the one.

There is, in fact, in the world of male sport a continued devaluing of women's sport. Over the past few weeks, numbers have been rolled out supporting Maravich by pointing out that he only played for three years and that he played before the three-point line. Others counter that Maravich took more shots and shot more free throws in three seasons than Clark did in four seasons, and by a wide margin in both cases. This is an argument not likely to be settled in any rational way. So be it.

In the end, are there any conclusions to be drawn? Perhaps a few: The NCAA has rewritten history; History is generally messy; Numbers often obscure rather than clarify; We have been lucky to see Caitlin Clark, and those who saw Moore, Woodward, and Maravich are even more fortunate.

For me, it is enough that all of these great players have been honored and all are to be admired.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a poor sport to be a bad loser.

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