A Brief History of Women’s Sports at Pembroke College and Brown University

Sayles Gymnasium, now Smith-Buonanno Hall.
Mabel Potter, Class of 1897, persuades President Andrews to purchase gymnastic equipment for women, and she becomes the first physical education instructor for students of the Women's College in Brown University. The Department of Physical Culture, which organizes interclass competitions for students, is established.

The first women's tennis team begins to compete against other colleges.

Women's Basketball competes against Radcliffe College.

A competitive field hockey program and women's varsity baseball are inaugurated.

Frank Sayles, Class of 1890, contributes $50,000 for the construction of Sayles Gym, to be used for women's athletics. The facility included a running track, basketball court, locker room space, and two bowling alleys. The gym remained active until the 1990s, when it was remodeled for classrooms and renamed Smith-Buonanno Hall.

After the sinking of the Titanic, Brown initiates a mandatory swim test for men as a graduation requirement. It was not until 1931 that women were required to pass a swim test.

The Pembroke College student government bans women from wearing bloomers, knickers, and sneakers (sports uniform) in classrooms on the main campus.

Marjorie Brown '21 becomes the Director of Physical Culture. The Smith Swim Center was named on March 24, 1976, for Marjorie Brown Smith and her husband H. Stanton Smith '21.

Albina Osipowich '33 wins two gold medals in the Olympics in Amsterdam, Holland. In 1930, Osipowich becomes the first woman permitted to swim an exhibition in the Colgate-Hoyt Pool on campus.

The Pembroke Center Associates thank Arlene Gorton '52 for her invaluable research and guidance in developing this timeline.
1930 – Bessie Rudd begins her 31 years of service as Director of Physical Education for Pembroke College, bringing a determined commitment to the value of sport participation for women, and advocating for instructional, intramural, and intercollegiate programs.

1932 – Helen Johns ’36 wins a gold medal as part of the 100 meter freestyle relay team at the summer Olympics in Los Angeles.

1961 – Arlene Gorton ’52 is named Director of Physical Education at Pembroke College and Professor of Physical Education, a tenured position. In 1968, Gorton is named Assistant Director of Athletics for Brown University, in addition to her position at Pembroke College, creating a combined administration of Pembroke and Brown’s overall program.

1964 – Women’s Ice Hockey begins and becomes the country’s first intercollegiate program in women’s ice hockey. To raise funds for equipment, the women’s team sells hockey rule sheets at men’s games. The team is named the Pembroke Pandas.

1969 – Not until the appointment of Jacqueline Court did the Athletic Department have any minority instructors/coaches. Court also started and coached Women’s Gymnastics until her retirement in 2001.

1972 – Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 are passed by Congress. The law prohibits any recipient of federal funds from limiting, on the basis of sex, any person’s participating in or benefiting from any education program or activity. This law is applied to all aspects of school curriculum, including sports and athletics. The law paves the way for women students to fully participate in the University’s athletic programs.

1974 – Official Ivy competition begins in women’s sports, 32 years after men’s competition began, although the women’s competitive teams had existed since 1903. Women’s Crew wins the first Ivy Championship in the sport.

1975 – Brown names Rose Gatti to be the Director of Sports Information. Gatti is the first woman to hold this position in the Ivy League.

1978 – Outdoor Track and Field wins its first Ivy League Championship – in the team’s second year of varsity competition.
1980 – Brown Women’s Soccer wins the Ivy League Championship, and would win the championship every year for the rest of the decade, except for 1981 (when they finished second).

1989 – Brown Field Hockey wins the Ivy League Championship, under the leadership of three sisters: Joann Monteiro ’88, Natalie Monteiro ’90, and Christine Monteiro ’93.

1991 – Suzanne Bailey ’91 is named All-American for both soccer and lacrosse, a very rare accomplishment.

1992 – Brown students sue the University for violating Title IX after the University had announced the previous year that it would eliminate funding for four varsity teams: Men’s Water Polo and Golf and Women’s Gymnastics and Volleyball. The University settles in 1997 and restores funding to Women’s Gymnastics and Volleyball and elevates Women’s Crew, Water Polo, and Equestrian teams to varsity status, adding a total of 60 varsity places for women. Equally important, the budget increases significantly.

1994 – Brown Women’s Hockey becomes first Ivy League team to win an Eastern College Athletic Conference Championship.


1998 – Katie King ’97 and Tara Mounsey ’00 help the U.S. Women’s Hockey team win Olympic gold in Nagano, Japan.


2000 – Women’s Golf added as Brown’s 37th varsity intercollegiate sport.

2006 – Brown Women’s Basketball Head Coach Jean Marie Burr and former player Tammy Sanchez ’95 are inducted into the New England Basketball Hall of Fame.

2012 – Kia Mosenthal ’12 wins gold in the slalom at the U.S. Collegiate Ski and Snowboard Association National Championship, leading Brown Women’s skiing to the slalom team title.