In first decades of the 20th century, interest in athletics was high at institutions of higher education. ISNS was no exception. Principal Waller did much to advance the development of varsity and intramural sports. At a time before radio, television, and the Internet, athletic contests which could be enjoyed either as a participant or as an observer, were major sources of entertainment and contributed to building a feeling of community at the school.

Concern for the health of students and the belief that exercise was important to improving student health continued from the last century. In the early years of the 20th century, female students participated in a special physical education program called “physical culture” which was popular during the period at many women’s colleges. It involved gymnastic moves with weights done to music in recreation hall (now the Blue Room) in Sutton Hall. The Normal Herald reported that the “soundness of brain depends on soundness of body, and they have taken hold of physical culture with a will.” They also developed a program in physical education so teachers could teach it in the schools.

Female interest in sports and pride in female athletic prowess is clear in the photographs of female athletes, sometimes labeled “strong girls,” that were found in yearbooks and catalogs of the period.

While yearbooks and other school publications give more coverage to the male dominated sports of football, baseball, and track, they also mention...
that women participated in intramural sports from the first years of the school. During the early 20th century, female students began to participate with great success in women’s varsity sports such as basketball.

Women began playing basketball in the 1890’s as a recreational activity. Interest grew to the point that a number of teams were created and admission was charged for games to pay for expenses. By 1911, it had developed into a varsity sport and they had developed a champion team.

In 1913, they were the champion of western Pennsylvania, and by 1914, their team was unstoppable. They played sixteen games and won them all, including one against an Alliance, Ohio, team which was the undefeated champion of their state. Women’s basketball was so successful that the school developed a boy’s basketball team in 1915-1916. Women also continued to participate in longtime favorite sports such as tennis, and in new sports such as women’s field hockey.