

WE WANT TO PLAY ● ● ● WE'LL PLAY

Helen Lenskyj

Pendant les années 20 et 30 au Canada, les femmes commencèrent à pratiquer les sports d'équipe, surtout la balle-molle et le ballon-panier: toutefois, des barrières à leur participation complète dans le domaine du sport existaient encore. L'engagement de quelques femmes dans le monde des sports, dominé par les hommes, fut néanmoins exceptionnel. Cet article fait revivre les activités de trois de ces femmes: Doris Butwell Craig, Gladys Gigg Ross, et Hilda Thomas Smith.

The twenties and thirties have been called, by some historians, the "Golden Age" of women's sports in Canada. Others have written histories of sport and physical activity as if women were either invisible or incapable of participating — except perhaps as spectators. It is true that there was a remarkable growth of interest in women's team sports, especially softball and basketball, at this time, but barriers still existed to women's participation. In many respects, the experiences of Doris Butwell Craig, Gladys Gigg Ross, and Hilda Thomas Smith were exceptional. As Gladys explained, "We were into sports which weren't common for girls at that

time, so we just thought, 'what do we care about what you think . . . we want to play, we'll play!' " In another sense, the lives of these women are representative of many of their female contemporaries — athletes whose achievements remain unrecorded in a literature which still retains much of its early preoccupation with male-dominated, professional sport.

Doris Butwell Craig was born in 1908 in the Humber Bay area of Toronto. One of four children, she had a sister, Laura, who was fourteen years her senior, and two brothers close to her own age. Doris attended Humber Bay Public School and Central Commerce. After completing high school, she did secretarial work until her marriage in 1932.

Doris was labelled a tomboy by family members from a young age. Quite early in life, she discovered that climbing to the top of "a great big tree" in the backyard was an effective way to avoid doing the dishes. Other escapades included scaling a windmill and hopping a freight train for a mile or so. Family reaction curbed some but not all of Doris's adventures. Reflecting on the tomboy label, Doris said, "I am and I'm not." While her athletic

ability and her obvious relish for competition were labelled tomboyish, she perceived these as advantages in terms of friendship, since they allowed her to enjoy a camaraderie with the boys and men in her family and neighbourhood that was unusual for a girl in those days. "Anything the boys could do, I could do, too, and do it as well as they could . . . I didn't feel any different." Remembering ice hockey games on the Humber River, she said, "They knocked me down just the same as they knocked each other down . . . that didn't bother me." The idea of contact sports, however, did bother Laura, who did not share Doris's love of games like basketball and softball. "All that roughness, people sliding into you and hurting your shins" — this was not Laura's idea of fun. Doris attributed this to personality and age differences, noting that Laura did not have the advantage of growing up in the flapper era — the "crazy twenties"; Laura was a wife and mother by this time.

Doris began playing softball when she was about twelve. Her brother's novel training method was obviously a key factor: "He stood me in front of double garage doors that were mostly glass and he would

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say, 'you can't miss it now, you know!' and I didn't miss it! I never missed it! We never broke a glass on that door.' These sessions, Doris claims, taught her to concentrate — "thinking down to her fingers," in her words — and she attributed her subsequent success as "a pretty good hitter" to co-ordination and agility.

During her school years Doris played in interschool basketball competition. As a participant in regional tournaments, she travelled all over Ontario and recalled that the level of play in this team was more demanding. "You really had to play . . . we played boys' rules . . . and I can remember mother counting over one hundred bruises on me!" Doris viewed the introduction of men's rules and the interest taken by male coaches as "a breakthrough" in girls' team sports in the twenties. She explained her position in terms of commitment to the game. While acknowledging that there was, of course, a place for recreational sports in women's lives, she believed that good athletes needed the opportunity for serious training and competition and should not be limited by the "girls'-rules" mentality. Critics at this time, however, were agonizing over the alleged "masculinizing" effects of serious competitive sports on the bodies and the personalities of young women. These critics emphasized the dangers of men's rules and the risks to female players when men, who did not understand women's "peculiar physiology," acted as their managers and coaches. Little of this opposition appears to have affected players like Doris, who viewed men's role in women's team sports as a positive trend.

Apart from the basketball program, the physical education offered by the school system did not leave much impression on Doris. She remarked of the gym exercises, "I used to just walk through those things." Similarly, the contest often recommended for girls — throwing the ball for distance — posed no particular challenge to a softball player: "I could always throw the ball the farthest. I always won that. I didn't think that was any great

achievement." Her other sporting successes at school included a gold medal in the Ontario high schools' competition for standing broad jump. For a short time, too, Doris was coached in diving by Olympic swimming coach Ab Shilcock, until a back injury curtailed her training in this area.

Doris first played basketball for the Lakeside Athletic Club in the 1924-25 season. The club was sponsored by Silverwood Dairies, with the company providing uniforms and equipment. In the days before the diamond was enclosed with a fence, the practice was to "pass the hat" at games; later, admission was charged. It was at the games that Doris received several job offers, presumably from employers who saw publicity opportunities in having a secretary who was a public figure. Newspaper coverage of women's sports did, in fact, make Doris and her teammates public figures; columns written by former athletes Alexandrine Gibb and Phyllis Griffiths appeared regularly in two Toronto newspapers at this time, and a third, written by Bobbie Rosenfeld, appeared in the 1930s. One offer impressed Doris more than all the others: the chance to play softball for a Chicago team, for \$60 per week. At the time, Doris earned \$16 per week as a secretary, and her status in softball was strictly amateur. Yet she didn't even discuss the offer with her family. "No, you just didn't do that," she explained.

Gladys Gigg Ross grew up in North Bay, one of a family of ten children. A childhood incident served to bring her athletic ability to the attention of Claude Kewley, a sports writer who also coached girls' track and field. Kewley happened to notice the nine-year-old Gladys running down the street, pursued by her sixteen-year-old brother, and was impressed with her remarkable speed. In the following years, Gladys developed an impressive record as an all-round athlete, scoring the most points in high-school field-day events for four years as well as playing basketball and softball.

A 1933 newspaper report of the North Bay collegiate field-day pro-

gram showed interesting differences between boys' and girls' events. The longest race for girls was 65 yards, compared to 880 yards for boys. Throwing events for girls were limited to the baseball and basketball throw (for distance), whereas boys had javelin and shot-put events. Gladys's best performances were in sprints and high jump. Her introduction to jumping came about when Ethel Catherwood, the 1928 Olympic gold medalist, was competing in North Bay, and Kewley urged Gladys to jump with Ethel. Her first attempts were hampered by long gym bloomers, but a switch to her brother's shorts produced considerable improvement. She continued to practise at home daily in summer and a few times weekly throughout the winter, using high-jump stands which her father had made. At a time when coaching for girls was not particularly systematic or rigorous, Gladys's self-motivation was obviously an important factor in her success.

Gladys played on the collegiate basketball team, which was coached by the girls' physical-training teacher, but she was not very enthusiastic about "P.T." classes, which offered little more than wand drills and folk dancing. Her sporting activities, however, extended outside school. The CPR sponsored a girls' basketball team, in which both Gladys and her younger sister Bernice participated. Unlike school basketball, the "Ceepees" played by boys' rules and occasionally played against boys' teams, with several impressive successes. Girls' participation, however, was not without its restrictions. On one occasion when the team appeared on the main street on Sunday morning in their CPR shirts and shorts, having missed the Saturday night train, the CPR superintendent warned them not to repeat this kind of public display — shorts were considered appropriate only at the game.

Outside of school, a small group of North Bay girls, including Gladys, trained in track and field, first with Claude Kewley and later with Leo Troy, who taught boys' P.T. at the high school. By 1930,

when the first British Empire Games were held in Hamilton, Ontario, four girls, including Gladys, were ready to compete. This was at the time when there was a movement among American and some Canadian women to eliminate competition from all levels of girls' and women's sports, on the grounds that females were not physically and emotionally capable of coping with the strain and excitement. Other concerns included women playing during menstruation and the unsuitability of male coaches for girls' and women's teams. Gladys's experiences suggest that, without male coaches, opportunities for North Bay girls would have been minimal. She did recall, however, that the menstruation issue sometimes arose. Male coaches "wouldn't ask you right out, of course, and if they did in those days, we probably wouldn't know what the word meant!" Their indirect approach was to ask, "How are you today?" or "Do you want to practise today?"

In spite of the competition controversy, the 1930 games offered track and field, swimming, and diving for women. Track and field included 60-metre, 100-metre, and 200-metre races, 4-x-100-metre relay, hurdles, discus, javelin, running high jump, running broad jump, and the inevitable baseball throw. Controversy over the so-called "gruelling" 800-metre distance for women, following the 1928 Olympics, was responsible for the omission of this race from the British Empire Games and subsequent Olympics until 1960. Gladys won medals for high jump, broad jump, and running; a few years later, in the 1932 Olympic trials, she missed out on first place in the running broad jump by one-quarter of an inch.

Softball was Gladys's major sporting interest for over thirty years. There were few school teams when she was young, but women's softball clubs, sponsored by business or industry, were flourishing throughout Ontario. At the age of twelve Gladys joined the Senators' team in North Bay and became its secretary. At fourteen she was secretary of the Northern Ontario Women's Softball Association, and a few years later

was appointed northern convener of the Women's Amateur Athletic Federation (WAAF), Ontario branch. At this time, too she was writing a sports column in the *North Bay Nugget* — "In the Feminine Realm of Sport." She played softball until 1944 and continued in executive roles for many years after. It was in 1953, when Gladys assumed the presidency of the provincial Women's Softball Union, that it became, as Bobbie Rosenfeld expressed it in her column, "not only a government for the women, but by the women as well." For the first time in its twenty-two-year history, the positions of advisors, traditionally held by men, were filled by women.

Hilda Thomas Smith, like Doris, was growing up in Toronto during the 1920s, a time when women's team sports were thriving. Her interest in sport began as a student at Oakwood Collegiate and as a member of the Essex Playground softball team. Her brothers did not share her sporting interests and her family rarely watched her play, but obviously enjoyment of the game was the most important factor for Hilda. On occasions when someone expressed disapproval, her response was, "That's their business. I'm doing what I want to do!"

In the early 1920s, Hilda joined the Atheneum Ladies' Athletic Club, which was sponsored by the Atheneum Bowling Alley. This club was taken over by the Lakeside Ladies' Athletic Club in 1925, and so Hilda and Doris became teammates around this time. Like Doris, Hilda played softball for the Lakesides in summer and basketball in winter. The team achieved front-page coverage in the *Evening Telegram* in 1928, when they held a fifteen-point lead in the city intermediate basketball championship. Other important events in Hilda's sporting career included being the first player to hit a ball in the first softball game under floodlights, held in Toronto in 1930. On one of the team's frequent out-of-town trips, Hilda travelled to North Bay, where she met another softball and basketball enthusiast, Gladys Gigg Ross.

All of Lakeside's executive members were women; coaches and

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managers were male, and both men and women served as directors and patrons. The position of "Directress of Athletics" was held by Bobbie Rosenfeld, whose outstanding athletic achievements encompassed track and field, softball, and basketball. Specialization was relatively rare among either male or female athletes at this time. The weather and availability of facilities appeared to dictate, to some extent, what games would be played. Warming up and conditioning were virtually unknown, according to Hilda: "You never even stretched your arms or bent your knees." Players would practise just before the game, and the common pattern of playing for church teams ("fun games") as well as for school teams and athletic clubs may have compensated for lack of formal practice.

Like Gladys, Hilda made an impressive contribution to the organization of women's sports; she was treasurer of the Atheneums, the Lakesides, and the Olympic Ladies' Softball League; secretary and later treasurer of the Provincial Women's Softball Union; and treasurer of the WAAF from 1932 to the 1950s. As well, she served in a variety of officiating roles in track-and-field events, including the function of "assistant clerk of the course" at the Toronto Police Track and Field Championships in 1934. The letter requesting her presence at the police games (with the "Dear Sir" corrected to read "Dear Hilda") had this explanatory postscript: "We are putting on a senior and junior relay for the fair sex and your services will be much appreciated particularly around the dressing room where the stalwart policemen dare not go." Except for Mrs. Branston, Lakeside's nurse, who was listed as "chaperone," Hilda was the only female official. Her brother-in-law, Irving Smith, was the athletic director of the police force and a successful runner. It was Irving Smith who organized the first beauty contest at the Canadian National Exhibition in 1937. At that time sport, both men's and women's, was an integral part of the exhibition's program. But the advent of the beauty contest signified ambivalent views of women's bodies.

Newspaper reports on "girl athletes" (with the exception of women's sports columns) commonly noted their physical attractiveness as well as their athletic competence, but did not, for the most part, display the preoccupation with sexual allure and sexual orientation that characterizes much of the contemporary media coverage. It was, of course, unusual for journalists to make explicit reference to sexual matters in the 1920s and 1930s, but Elmer Ferguson, writing in *Maclean's Magazine* in 1938, was not inhibited by these conventions. He described a leading sprinter as "a big, lanky, flat-chested muscular girl with as much sex appeal as grandmother's old sewing machine." Men, he claimed, "want the gals to stay beautiful, graceful and sightly, not tie their bodies in scrawny, sinewy knots." Similar sentiments, expressed somewhat differently, had been appearing in the press since the 1890s, when women began cycling and playing games like golf or tennis. There were frequent warnings, too, that sport would "masculinize" women, if indeed female athletes were not already "masculine" at the outset. Medical arguments were often used to reinforce what were essentially expressions of male supremacy. In a society where men comprised the dominant group economically and politically, the power of the male "experts" to dictate what were safe and legitimate uses of the body was rarely questioned. It was the "taken-for-granted" nature of male-imposed definitions and restrictions that ensured their effectiveness — "You just didn't do that."

In the face of opposition, however, many women persisted, having discovered the health benefits of sport, the fun and companionship, the satisfaction of playing well, and, perhaps most importantly, the sheer pleasure of physical effort. Doris Butwell Craig, Gladys Gigg Ross, and Hilda Thomas Smith represented such women.

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