

The Golden Age of Women and Sport in Canada

by David McDonald

Dans cet article, l'auteure brosse un tableau des triomphes des femmes dans une grande variété de sports. Elle démontre par le fait même que l'intérêt et la participation des femmes dans les sports canadiens existent depuis longtemps.

Almost every woman you talk to these days seems to be out jogging, pumping iron, or knocking various sized and shaped projectiles around big and small places, open and closed. In the midst of the fitness boom, it's easy to imagine that sporting progress runs in straight lines, that Canadians, and especially women, are evolving from inert, sedentary creatures into a nation of athletes who are

working harder, sweating more, and having more physical fun than ever before in our history. On the contrary, rather than a steady linear progression, what has actually occurred has been a somewhat cyclical phenomenon. Thus we have a period from 1920 or so, through the Great Depression, and right up to the outbreak of World War II, that might well be called the Golden Age of women's sport in Canada.

The Golden Age was followed by a Dark Age (as Golden Ages inevitably are) from which Canadian women did not really begin to emerge until the late 1960s. This Dark Age came about as a perhaps unavoidable consequence of the Second World War.

Following the War the national psyche demanded a different kind of woman than had begun to emerge in the years between the Wars. The housewife and mother role prescribed for women in the post-World War II period, was, it seems, a natural reaction for a society that wished to integrate a large number of men back into its work force and also to make up for its human losses by replenishing its population.

On the whole, Canada's international sporting performances tailed off badly in the 1940s and 1950s. There were exceptions of course: great individual talents who would have excelled in any era, women such as Barbara Ann Scott, Marilyn Bell, and Lucile Wheeler.

Perhaps, though, it was gymnast Ernestine Russell who best personified the era. Russell was a one-woman national team in the mid-to-late 1950s and the first Canadian woman to compete in gymnastics at the Olympics (1956, 1960). Despite never having ranked highly in the world, Russell was awarded the Velma Springstead Trophy as the country's female athlete of the year a record three times (1955-57). This is not to diminish Russell's considerable, pioneering accomplishments. It is merely intended to illustrate the perilous lack of depth in women's sport during the Dark Age.

Eventually, around the late 1960s, spurred by such factors as expanding options for women and government financial assistance to sport, Canadian women again began to emerge from their athletic doldrums. The new age—whether or not it qualifies as a second Golden Age we'll leave for future observers to decide—saw Canadian women capture world titles in an unprecedented number of activities: among them, Susan Natrass in trap shooting, Helen Vanderburg in synchronized swimming, Pat Messner in water skiing, Cathy Townsend in bowling, and Lucille Lessard in archery.

Because of the relative mediocrity of the sporting performances of Canadian women between 1940 and 1967, the achievements of our athletic stars of the 1920s and



Ada MacKenzie

Photo: Canada's Sports Hall of Fame

'30s, and the environment that spawned and supported them, tended to be neglected.

The First World War broke down many of the barriers women had faced in joining the mainstream of Canadian life, just as the end of the Second World War erected new ones. Thousands of young women filled office and factory jobs and took up what had always been considered male occupations. They also took to the playing fields and arenas of the country. Women competed at a high level in almost every conceivable sport, including some—hockey, lacrosse, cricket—which even today are generally considered male preserves.

On today's highly demanding international sporting scene, specialization is not only a fashion, it's a necessity. In the 1920s and '30s, however, many athletes enjoyed outstanding success in a number of sports simultaneously. The Golden Age was the age of the all-round athlete.

For instance, the only three Canadian women in history to have won two Olympic track and field medals—Bobbie Rosenfeld and Ethel Smith in 1928 and Hilda Strike in 1932—were proficient at a wide range of sports. Rosenfeld,



Susan Natrass

Photo: Canada's Sports Hall of Fame

selected Canada's outstanding woman athlete of the half-century, competed in seven track and field disciplines, won tennis titles, and starred in basketball and softball. Her favourite sport? Hockey. Smith was a very good basketball and softball player and Strike excelled at everything from swimming and skating to badminton.

Other stars of the era had similarly eclectic sporting tastes. Golfer Ada MacKenzie, whose career on the links spanned six decades, played, among other sports, lacrosse and cricket, and in 1926, she won the Canadian figure skating championships.

And there was Dorothy Walton, who on her first attempt at the title at the age of 31, won the All-England Badminton Championships (equivalent to a world crown) in 1939. While a student at the University of Saskatchewan, Walton had been a member of no fewer than 14 intercollegiate teams in sports as diverse as field hockey and diving. In the early 1930s, Walton took a few years off to raise a family and came back to become one of the premiere tennis players in Canada and then the finest badminton player in the world.

Canadian women athletes of the Golden Age seemed to hold a disproportionate number of world records in a wide variety of sports. One of the most remarkable was a record of 61 consecutive free throws made by Maggie MacBurney of the legendary Edmonton Grads basketball team. MacBurney's mark was a record for both men and women in the 1930s.

Despite their non-specialized approach to sport, all-rounders of the 1920s and '30s set standards of performance that were to remain in the record books for years. Ethel Catherwood's 1.60m high jump at the 1928 Olympic Trials stood as a Canadian record until 1954, and many of Bobbie Rosenfeld's marks were also unsurpassed until the 1950s.

Canada was a major force in women's sport in the 1920s and '30s. For instance, our most successful Olympic track and field squad ever was the "Matchless Six" women's team that competed in Amsterdam in 1928, the first year women were allowed to compete in the "strenuous disciplines" at the Games.

In 1928 there were three track and two field events and the Canadian team came home with two gold medals, a silver, and a bronze. In the unofficial points standings the six Canadian women accumulated 34 points, compared to the 28 gathered by the 20-woman American team. The 19-woman German team was third.

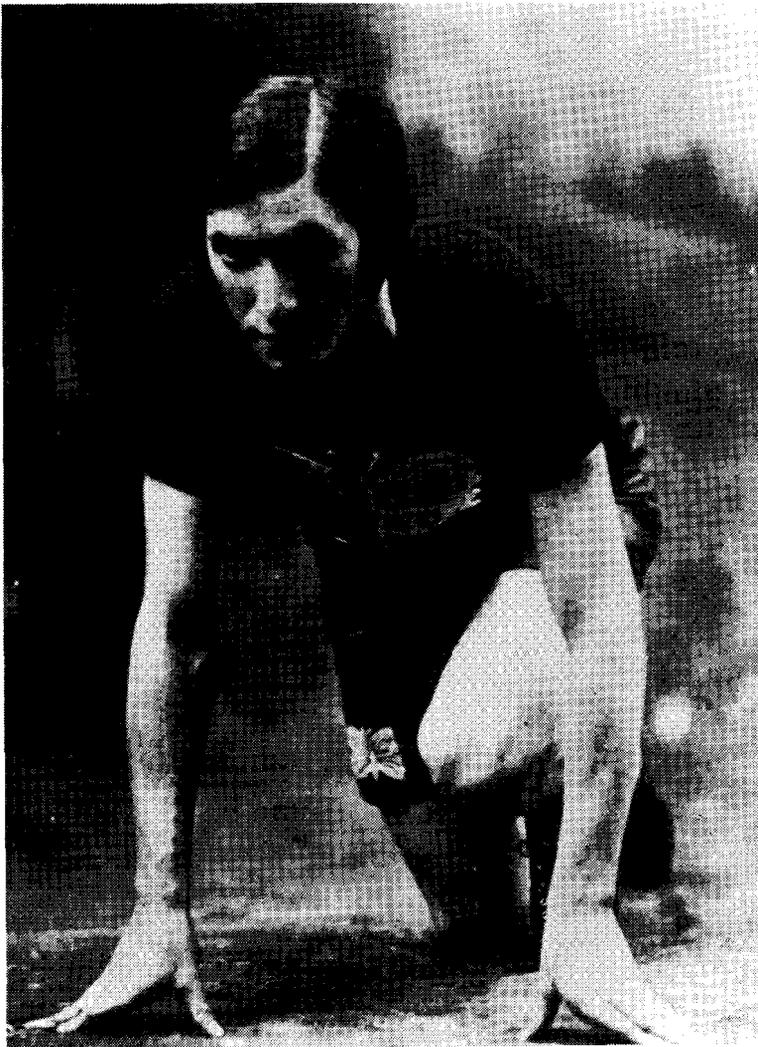
Canada's all-time Olympic medal totals too, would undoubtedly be much greater but for the fact that women's sport was slowly and only grudgingly accepted at the international level.

Behind the scenes in Amsterdam, for instance, Olympic officials were hotly debating the inclusion of women in track and field. The opposition found some powerful spokesmen in the likes of Pope Pius XI and Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the modern Olympic movement. Even the Canadian medical unit at the Games

spoke out against participation by women on the grounds that such activity might prove harmful to the female reproductive system. These quaint views, however, were largely derided by the newspapers back home and, most eloquently, by the achievements of the Canadian women on the track.

After 1928, a compromise of sorts was reached. Women continued to compete in track and field but the 800m event was dropped until the 1960 Olympics. The longest women's track event in the 32-year period between Amsterdam and Rome was the 200m.

Other sports in which Canadian women excelled had even more difficulty being accepted on the international scene. In speed skating in the 1920s and 1930s, three of the best—Lela Brooks, Jean Wilson, and Hattie Donaldson—were Canadians. Brooks was the best of them all. She set six world records in 1925 and won several world indoor and outdoor championships between 1926 and 1935. The Canadian trio performed below par at the Lake Placid Olympics in 1932, picking up a first and a second and two world records—but no medals. Women's speed skating in



Bobbie Rosenfeld

Photo: Canada's Sports Hall of Fame

1932 was merely a demonstration event and did not, in fact, become an official Olympic event until Squaw Valley in 1960.

In basketball, the second-class international status of women's sport cost Canada at least four Olympic gold medals. Between the Wars, the legendary Edmonton Grads dominated women's basketball more convincingly than any other team has ever dominated any sport. From 1915 until they disbanded in 1941, the Grads reportedly won 502 games and lost 20, a record which included a 147-game winning streak and a 7-2 exhibition record against men's teams. The Grads participated in four Olympic-related tournaments between 1924 and 1936 and never lost a game. Yet despite the popularity and peerless proficiency of the Grads, women's basketball did not debut as an Olympic sport until 1976.

Despite limited opportunities for Canadian women on the international sporting scene, support at home was enthusiastic. Almost 5000 fans turned out to watch the Canadian women's track and field championships and Olympic Trials in Halifax in 1928. The Edmonton Grads were largely self-sufficient based on their popularity at the box office; a 1930 Underwood Trophy (tantamount to a world championship) match in Edmonton drew, not unexpectedly, 6792 spectators. When the 1928 women's Olympic team returned to Toronto, a reported 200,000 people jammed Union Station and adjacent Fleet Street. Another 100,000 lined a parade route through downtown Toronto.

In the 1920s and '30s women athletes were often able to find ready corporate and individual sponsors to support their training and competition. Sprinter Ethel Smith began her career on a team supported by a local hydro commission in Toronto. Olympic teammate Bobbie Rosenfeld competed for the Patterson Athletic Club, which was funded by the chocolate company where she worked.

A number of other prominent athletes attracted the generous attention of private patrons. One of the most flamboyant of these was Toronto mining millionaire and former pro hockey player Teddy Oke. Oke sponsored the likes of Lela Brooks and 1928 Olympic gold medal high jumper Ethel Catherwood. Oke brought Catherwood and her sister to Toronto from Saskatchewan, sent the young women to business college, found jobs for them in his brokerage firm (already wall-to-wall with amateur athletes), and hired one of track and field's outstanding coaches, Walter Knox, to prepare Catherwood for the Olympics.

Part of the interest in women's sport in the 1920s and '30s undoubtedly sprang from the enthusiastic coverage it received from the sports journalists of the day. This was especially the case when a number of prominent figures of women's sport began writing for some of the country's major newspapers. Alexandrine Gibb, the "chaperone" of the 1928 Olympic team, was a popular columnist and two of her prize athletes, Myrtle Cook and Bobbie Rosenfeld,

went on to write for the *Montreal Star* and the *Toronto Globe and Mail* respectively. Rosenfeld's "Sports Reel" column ran for more than 30 years.

When women weren't competing or writing about sport, they were often found coaching other women or starting athletic clubs of their own. Myrtle Cook started the Canadian Ladies' Athletic Club in Montreal in the late 1920's where she "discovered" athletes of the quality of Hilda Strike. In 1932, Bobbie Rosenfeld coached the women's track and field team at the British Empire Games in London. Golfer Ada MacKenzie launched, virtually single-handedly, the first golf facility in the world exclusively for women, the Ladies' Golf and Tennis Club of Toronto.

In 1956, nine-year-old Abby Hoffman of Toronto, who went on to represent Canada at four Olympics as a runner, created nation-wide headlines when it was discovered that she was playing in a minor hockey league disguised as a boy. In the Golden Age, it is unlikely Hoffman's subterfuge would have been necessary.

Lela Brooks, for instance, became the first female member of Toronto's Old Orchard Skating Club in about 1921. There was no reaction one way or another, she recalled in 1979. "It just seemed like the natural thing to do." Canada's first great woman swimmer, Phyllis Dewar (four gold medals at the 1934 British Empire Games), swam on the boy's team at school in Moose Jaw in the 1920s.

Said sprinter Hilda Strike of the Golden Age of women's sport in Canada: "There weren't really a lot of barriers for women in those days. We were just too busy to have problems like that."

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MILESTONES

The solemn periodic manifestation of male sport based on internationalism, on loyalty as a means, on arts as a background and the applause of women as a recompense.

—Baron Pierre de Coubertin,
Founder of the modern Olympic Games.

Since Baron de Coubertin uttered those words in the late 1890's, the world has changed almost beyond recognition. Instead of merely applauding the achievements of others, women now share the spotlight.

Consider that no women took part in the first modern Games in 1896. Today the balance remains weighted in favour of men, but it is tilting. At the XXVth Games in Barcelona, Spain, for example, 86 of the 257 events were open to women, with 12 contested by both genders; 3,008 of the 10,563 athletes were women. For the 1996 Games in Atlanta, the Canadian Olympic Association's projections point to the strong possibility of a 50:50 split of Canadian athletes, an impressive shift in a short time.

The movement towards this statistical improvement has been slow and has by no means been a certainty. Many barriers to full participation remain on the world stage, although Canada can point to a measure of progress and some inspiring milestones as the 20th century comes to a close.

—compiled by Sheila Robertson

- 1500 BC Female bull jumpers in Crete defy death
- 1000 Atalanta out-wrestles Peleus; the women-only Herean Games take place in Greece
- 440 AD Kallipateira sneaks into the Olympic Games and men devise the first sex test to keep women out
- 396 Princess Kyniska of Sparta is the first female Olympic champion, winning the chariot race
- 1424 Madame Margot outplays Parisian men at *jeu de paume*, an early version of tennis
- 1805 Sophie Armant Blanchard solos in a gas-powered balloon
- 1849 Bloomers are invented by feminists in New York
- 1900 Women are included on the program of the modern Olympic Games competing in golf and tennis; tennis player Charlotte Cooper of Great Britain becomes the first woman Olympic champion
- 1900s Canadian women climb the Rocky Mountains
- 1905 Over the next 35 years, the Edmonton Grads win 502 of 522 basketball games and four world championships