

WOMEN AND SPORTS CHAMPIONS FOREVER!

YOUTH FACT SHEET

Did you know that October is *Women's History Month* in Canada? This special month gives us a chance to celebrate and learn more about the great accomplishments and contributions of women throughout Canadian history. This year, the theme is *Women and Sports – Champions Forever!*

Today, more than ever before, girls and women can participate in all kinds of sports and physical activities! You don't have to look very far to find examples of women who are sport champions.

Who can forget the Canadian Women's National Hockey Team's gold medal victory after an exciting match against their American rivals at the 2002 Winter Olympic Games in Salt Lake City?

Many Canadian women sport heroes come to mind – synchronized swimmer Claire Carver-Dias, cross-country skier Beckie Scott, kayaker Caroline Brunet, figure skater Jamie Salé, swimmer Marianne Limpert, freestyle skiers Veronica Brenner and Deidra Dionne, wheelchair racer Chantal Petitclerc, speed skater Catriona Le May Doan, mountain bike racer Alison Sydor, and water polo player Waneek Horn-Miller. Can you think of others?

Believe it or not, not too long ago, running shoes and playing fields were for boys and men only. Girls and women were not allowed to participate in sport activities! Over the years, they had to work really hard to get into the game and play the sports that we take for granted today.

A real obstacle race...

- ▶ Queen Victoria's reign, which ended in 1901, was over 60 years long. During that era, women had to wear corsets and long, heavy skirts that went down to their ankles. This made it very difficult to play any sport! To make it even tougher, women were considered physically and mentally weaker than men. Ice-skating, horseback riding, croquet and roller-skating were about the only physical activities considered appropriate for a "lady."
- ▶ At the turn of the 20th century, more and more girls and women rode bicycles. Doctors tried to discourage them, especially teenage girls, telling them that taking part in sports was likely to cause problems with their menstrual cycles or if they ever wanted to have children.
- ▶ By the 1930s, competitive and team sports – like basketball, ice hockey and softball – were becoming more popular for girls. People began to think that if girls and women played such sports, they would start acting like, and even looking like, men!
- ▶ After World War II (1939-1945), society became obsessed with the need to create clear roles for men and women. Girls and women were expected to embrace femininity in all areas of life – including sport. Sports that seemed more graceful, feminine and less "sweaty" (like gymnastics, figure skating and synchronized swimming), and individual sports (like skiing, tennis, badminton and golf) became the ideal for girls and women. With the exception of softball, team sports began to lose their popularity.

It is amazing to think that such views continue, to some extent, even today! Because of them, many girls and women didn't participate in their favourite sport – and many still don't. Of course, these old ideas are false! Sports are fun. Apart from helping us to stay fit, they help us to have a good body image and self-esteem. They reduce stress. They help develop leadership skills, friendships and teamwork. These are good things that can benefit all girls and women!

You go, girl!

There are many historic success stories of girls and women who have proved, over and over, that they can make their mark in sport – despite the obstacles they faced. Here are just a few of the brave and determined women who made it to the front lines – as athletes or as sport leaders:

- ▶ The most successful team in basketball history is not the Chicago Bulls. It is the Edmonton Commercial Graduate Basketball Team, a women's basketball team. In their 25-year career, from 1915-1940, the Edmonton Grads had a record of 502 wins and only 20 losses. Their longest winning streak? A total of 147 consecutive games!
- ▶ In 1900, the Olympic Games allowed women to compete – the same year Canada sent its first man to the Olympics. But it was 24 years before the first Canadian woman went. She was 15-year-old figure skater Cecil Eustace Smith, who competed in the 1924 Winter Olympics. That's a long wait!
- ▶ In 1925, Alexandrine Gibb founded the Women's Amateur Athletic Federation (WAAF) of Canada and lobbied to allow women to enter track-and-field events at the Olympics. Three years later, in the 1928 Summer Olympics, women were allowed to participate. Under her supervision, the "Matchless Six," the six women track-and-field athletes who represented Canada, brought home four medals: two gold, one silver and one bronze.
- ▶ In the late 1920s, major newspapers across the country started hiring women sports journalists to bring greater attention to women in sports. For over 30 years, newspaper columns written by women sportswriters, like Phyllis Griffiths, and former track athletes Myrtle Cook and Fanny "Bobbie" Rosenfeld, were major sources of information about Canadian women's sports.
- ▶ Peggy "Peg" Seller played a key role in encouraging the development of synchronized swimming. In 1952, she wrote the rules for international competition and lobbied to have her sport recognized as an Olympic event.
- ▶ In 1954, 16-year-old Marilyn Bell became the first swimmer to cross Lake Ontario. The following year, she became the youngest person ever to swim across the English Channel.
- ▶ In 1956, when she was nine years old, Abby Hoffman had to pretend to be a boy to play on an all-boys hockey team because there weren't any girls' teams. When her team made it to the playoffs, it was discovered that "Ab" was really a girl. The story made headlines around the world. She later moved into track-and-field and took part in four Olympic Games. In 1981, she became the first woman to be elected to the Canadian Olympic Association and the first woman director general of Sport Canada.
- ▶ In 1962, 15-year-old figure skater Petra Burka became the first woman figure skater in history to complete a triple Salchow (three complete rotations in the air).
- ▶ In 1963, in North Bay, Ontario, Sam Jacks invented ringette, a winter sport for women. It's played on ice with a stick and a rubber ring. Today, thousands of young girls and women around the world play this sport.
- ▶ In 1966, at 15 years of age, swimmer Elaine "Mighty Mouse" Tanner became the first person ever to win four gold medals at the Commonwealth Games. Two years later, she became the first Canadian woman to win three Olympic medals – two silver and a bronze.
- ▶ In 1968, 14-year-old Betsy Clifford became the youngest Canadian skier ever to compete at the Olympics.
- ▶ In 1972, along with team-mate Roseann Allen, 18-year-old cross-country skiers Sharon and Shirley Firth (twin sisters) became the first Canadian aboriginal women to ever compete at an Olympic Games. In 1984, they also became the first Canadian women to compete in four straight Winter Olympics (1972, 1976, 1980 and 1984).

- ▶ In 1976, cross-country skier and kayaker Sue Holloway became the first Canadian woman to compete in both the Winter Olympics and the Summer Olympics in the same year.
- ▶ In 1988, at age 18, Chantal Petitclerc entered her first wheelchair race. Since then, she has become a world-class athlete, winning several medals, including two gold and two silver at the 2000 Paralympic Games in Sydney, and a gold in the women's 800 metre wheelchair final at the 2002 Commonwealth Games.
- ▶ In 1988, synchronized swimmer Carolyn Waldo became the first Canadian woman to win two gold medals at the same Olympics.
- ▶ Ten weeks before the 1992 Summer Olympics, rower Silken Laumann was badly hurt in a boating accident. Her injuries were so serious that she required five operations within a short time. Through it all, Silken kept on training. Wearing a bandage on her injured leg, she competed at the Olympics that year and won a bronze medal!
- ▶ Just a week before the 1992 Barcelona Olympic Games, synchronized swimmer Sylvie Fréchette's fiancé died. Despite her grief, she competed in the Olympics, but her nightmare continued. Although she had a magnificent performance, an unfortunate judging error cost her the gold medal. After months and months of appeals, Sylvie finally received her gold medal in December 1993.
- ▶ In 1992, Manon Rhéaume became the first woman to play in the National Hockey League. She was a goalie for the Tampa Bay Lightning.
- ▶ The "Michael Jordan" of women's wheelchair basketball is a Canadian! Chantal Benoit is probably the world's greatest woman player and builder of the sport. At the 2000 Sydney Paralympics, her team made history by winning its third consecutive Paralympic gold medal, defeating the hometown Australians. She also led the team to its 1992 and 1996 gold medals.
- ▶ In 2002, Clara Hughes became the first Canadian athlete (male or female) to win medals at both summer and winter Olympics – in 1996, she won two bronze medals in cycling and in 2002, a bronze in speed skating.

There are many other girls and women – little-known and famous alike – who succeeded in sport. They are proof that with determination and courage, girls and women can do it! Many female athletes and sports leaders continue to break records, excel at their activity and be role models for all Canadians. Their bold and colourful stories are worth discovering. Why not find out more about them?

Like these great athletes and sports leaders, get out there and work at what is important to you. Take pride in Women's History Month in 2002. Celebrate the sporting achievements of Canada's girls and women – *Champions Forever!*

To learn more about Women's History Month, and about women and sport, check out the following links: <http://www.swc-cfc.gc.ca/whm/> and <http://www.caaws.ca>.

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PHOTO CREDITS:

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