

**O**ctober is *Women's History Month* in Canada. This special month provides an opportunity to learn more about women's historic accomplishments and their contributions to Canadian society. This year, the theme is *Women and Sports – Champions Forever!*

Today, more than ever before, girls and women are free to participate in all kinds of sports. Canada is home to countless women who are sport champions. However, this has not always been the case. Throughout history, ingrained customs, sexual stereotypes and myths were often barriers to women seeking to participate, compete or take a leadership role in sport.

Long before the Europeans landed on the shores of the New World, sports and games were an integral part of Aboriginal culture for both women and men. Women played ball games such as shinny (a form of hockey), double-ball (similar to football and lacrosse) and a soccer-like form of football. *Baggataway* (lacrosse) was a game played mostly by men, but in some cases, women were also allowed to play.

As New France became established in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, French colonist women were busy adapting to their new lives without the luxury of leisure time to engage in sport. Some, particularly those of the upper class, turned to horseback riding or minuet and cotillion dancing lessons for physical activity. British rule, imposed in 1763, brought further change to Canada. Fox-hunting, horse racing and croquet began to appear. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the creation of urban sports clubs for golf, curling and tennis, sport had become a pastime reserved mainly for rich white men. Those wishing to participate in these clubs were often discriminated against based on social and economic status, education, language, class, ethnicity and gender.

Constrained by corsets, crinolines, voluminous skirts and by the Victorian misconceptions about their physical and mental frailty, women had access to very few physical activities in the 1860s and 1870s. Those considered appropriate, like ice-skating, horseback riding, croquet and roller-skating, were individual and/or recreational activities, and were mostly reserved for women of wealth.

Despite cultural opposition, women made inroads in sport and physical activity – as they did in other areas – during the first wave of feminism, which began in the late 1870s. While fighting for suffrage and temperance, women also worked to create parks and recreation programs for children, and to improve public health. In the 1880s, the daughters and wives of urban

sports club members were admitted as “lady associates.” Their presence in these clubs as spectators, combined with their increasing desire to participate in sport, eventually led to the formation of associated women’s clubs. The bicycle revolutionized women’s fashion by forcing the introduction of bloomers. It also gave women from all walks of life a way to assert their independence through a new means of travel. As more women became physically active, however, the medical profession issued warnings against women’s vigorous physical activity, especially for teenage girls, claiming it was likely to disturb their menstrual cycles or cause damage to their reproductive systems.

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, high schools, colleges and universities introduced women’s basketball and ice hockey. In 1915, the most successful team in the history of basketball was founded – the Edmonton Commercial Graduate Basketball Team, or the Edmonton Grads. Until the team’s demise in 1940, the Grads held an impressive record of 502 wins and 20 losses. Their longest winning streak totaled 147 consecutive games.

World War I (1914-1918) was a turning point in the history of women in Canada – and sport was no exception. Thousands of young men were recruited to serve in the military or to work in the war industries. As a result, women – especially single women – were called on to fill the void in factories, businesses and stores. Seeking recreational activities to fill their spare time, many of them turned to sport. Since they could not afford to join private sports clubs, working-class women led the grass-roots movement that established women’s athletic clubs, organizations and leagues in a variety of sports, such as basketball, ice hockey, softball and track-and-field. Women’s teams played to raise morale and money for the war effort. Through their war efforts, women proved they possessed greater physical endurance than previously believed.

Often called the “Golden Age of Women’s Sports,” the period immediately following the war and throughout the 1920s was extremely active for women in sport. Team sports like basketball, ice hockey and softball became sufficiently organized to support provincial and Dominion championships. Claiming they knew what was best for girls and women, female sports leaders were also determined to take control of women’s sport ensuring that women managed and coached their own teams. In 1921, pioneer sports leader Alexandrine Gibb helped to establish the first all-women’s multi-sports club in Canada, the Toronto Ladies Athletic Club. Five years later, Gibb spearheaded the formation of the Women’s Amateur Athletic Federation (WAAF) of Canada

and pressured the Amateur Athletic Union of Canada (AAUC) to enter Canadian women in track-and-field events at the Olympic Games.

In 1924, at the first official Olympic Winter Games at Chamonix, France, 15-year-old figure skater Cecil Eustace Smith became the first Canadian woman to represent Canada at an Olympic Games, skating in both ladies' and pairs' competitions. Four years later, at the 1928 Olympic Summer Games in Amsterdam, Canada's first women's team included six participants in athletics: Jane Bell, Ethel Catherwood, Myrtle Cook, Fanny "Bobbie" Rosenfeld, Ethel Smith and Jean Thompson; and one in swimming, Dorothy Prior. Although the decision of the Canadian Olympic Committee to send a women's track-and-field team was controversial, the "Matchless Six," as the media called them, brought home four medals: two gold, one silver and one bronze.

In the late 1920s, to draw further attention to women in sports, major newspapers and national magazines across the country started to run columns written by women, like pioneer women sportswriters Alexandrine Gibb and Phyllis Griffiths. For over 30 years, they were major sources of information about Canadian women's sports.

The 1930s saw a growing condemnation of women's increasing involvement in team sports and competition. It was believed and feared that such involvement could foster "manly" behaviours in women. Influenced by Americans, women physical educators and male sportswriters in Canada began to advocate an approach that would segregate sports by gender. In doing so, they sought to feminize women's sports by limiting aggressive play and changing existing rules.

While major national championships, the Olympics and many individual athletic careers were put on hold during World War II (1939-1945), sport continued to flourish at the grass-roots level. To promote national health, readiness and productivity, the Government of Canada encouraged the expansion of sport and recreational programs in organizations like the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) and in industrial plants, where thousands of women were working. As in World War I, women's sports teams also raised money for the war effort.

An obsession with normalizing gender roles characterized the post-war period and the 1950s. The media portrayed women as "queens of the household," meant to enjoy domesticity and embrace their femininity in all areas of life – including sport. Beauty-producing sports which featured grace and "femininity," like gymnastics, figure skating and synchronized swimming, as well as individual sports like skiing, tennis, badminton and golf, which were perceived as less "sweaty," became the ideal for women's participation in sport. With the exception of softball, team sports began to lose their popularity. Barbara Ann Scott, "Canada's Sweetheart," was one of the post-war era's best-known athletes, fitting the standards of the time for femininity. In 1948, Scott became the first Canadian figure skater to win an Olympic gold medal.

In 1961, a new era began for sport in Canada when the federal government enacted Bill C-131, the *Fitness and Amateur Sport Act*. That legislation committed the Government of Canada to ensuring that sport and fitness opportunities would be available to all Canadians. It was some time, however, before women began to see concrete changes in this regard.

In the 1960s and 1970s, women's team sports, like volleyball, ice hockey and the newly invented game of ringette, were flourishing at the grass-roots level. The media, however, virtually ignored this wellspring of activity, focusing instead on men's professional sports. When the media did report on women's sports, their main focus was on women in individual sports, especially those who brought international awards and attention to Canada. The media's portrayal of female athletes, however, underwent a significant and negative change. For the first time, they resorted to explicit, sexualized descriptions of the physical appearance of women athletes, frequently treating them as sex objects.

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Women's Liberation Movement was well under way. In 1970, the *Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada* was published. It contained two recommendations addressing the lack of equal opportunity for girls in school-based sport programs. Two years later, Fitness and Amateur Sport (now Sport Canada) hired sport advocate and former Olympian Marion Lay to work on defining and solving the problems facing women in sport. Lay organized the first *National Conference on Women and Sport* as a forum to discuss successes and the challenges in that area. The conference was held in Toronto in 1974.

In the mid-1970s, provincial human-rights commissions were established. Soon after, several cases involving young girls wishing to play on all-male sport teams were brought before the courts to address sport-related sex discrimination and to increase public awareness of the issue. Many old myths about medical complications, the "unfeminine" side of sport and other misconceptions were still circulating. They discouraged many girls and women from participating in sport. From the mid-1970s and on through the 1980s, there was an increasing concern over the under-representation of women leaders in the Canadian amateur sport system, especially at the national level.

In 1980, the Government of Canada created the Women's Program within Fitness and Amateur Sport (Sport Canada). The Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport (CAAWS), known today as the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity, was established as a result of the *Female Athletic Conference*, the second national conference on women in sport, held that year in Vancouver. A year later, sport advocate and former track athlete Abby Hoffman became the first woman director general of Sport Canada. In 1986, under her leadership, Sport Canada issued its Policy on Women in Sport, calling for, among other things, equal opportunities for women and men to compete, coach, officiate and administer sport at all levels of the system. In 1987, the Coaching Association of Canada, in partnership with several national organizations, established the Women in Coaching Program.

Through the 1970s and 1980s, a number of young, Black track-and-field stars – such as accomplished athletes as Angela Bailey, Charmaine Crooks, Molly Killingbeck, Marita Payne, Jillian Richardson and Angela Taylor-Issajenko – were brought to Canadians' attention. Many of them were new immigrants from the Caribbean and played a major role in Canada's success at international track meets, bringing even more attention to women in sport.

The 1990s and the new millennium have brought some interesting changes to women's sport. One is the validation and the remarkable growth of team sports for girls and women, especially hockey, ringette, soccer, softball and basketball. In 1992, Manon Rhéaume became the first woman to play in the National Hockey League. A few years later, in 1999, the National Women's Hockey League made its debut as a senior women's league, with the hope of expanding to a professional league with franchises in cities across North America. There has also been a significant increase in opportunities for Canada's top-level female athletes to compete internationally. The media are becoming more involved in promoting women's sport through new venues, such as WTSN, the world's first 24-hour sports television network dedicated to celebrating the achievements of women in sport, and in making female athletes into sport stars and commodities. However, this trend can have negative implications, such as the potential objectification and sexualization of female athletes strictly for marketing purposes.

Many challenges remain for women in the sports arena. Despite ample evidence that women and girls have more interest and participation in sports, far too few Canadian women (and men) are active enough to benefit their health. According to Statistics Canada's *National Population Health Survey, 1998/99*, only 41 per cent of adult women aged 20 and over, and 36 per cent of female youth aged 12-19, are active (compared to 48 per cent of adult men and 48 per cent of male youth).

Unfortunately, there are still not enough women in leadership roles at all levels of sport – from the community to the international sport federations. Although women's involvement in sports journalism is on the rise, they remain under-represented in that profession, as well.

While some progress has been made in the last decade, language has also been an additional barrier to Francophone female athletes, particularly at the national selection stage of high-performance sports. This unfortunate reality has deprived many young talented French-speaking girls and women of the opportunity to participate in the Olympics for the past several decades.

Canada's sports halls of fame play a strategic role in the public memory and interpretation of sports, yet they lack adequate representation of women athletes and leaders throughout the history of sport. In addition, there is not enough information available about the historic contributions and accomplishments of women athletes of colour, Aboriginal women athletes, Francophone women athletes and athletes with disabilities.

Finally, today's trends are toward a growing level of violence in sport and the commercialization of overpaid athletes in men's professional sports. In the future, one of the biggest challenges facing female athletes will be whether they can bring about positive change in the world of sport – change that will encourage the increased involvement of women and girls.

**Having a better understanding of women's bold and colourful history in Canadian sport means having a better understanding of our heritage. It also means having an endless and ever-growing source of inspiration for our future – both our own and the future of Canada's young people. Join in the celebration! Take pride in Women's History Month 2002 by celebrating the sporting achievements of Canada's women and girls – Champions Forever!**

**For more information on women's history and sport, feel free to visit the Web sites of Status of Women Canada (SWC) at <http://www.swc-cfc.gc.ca/whm/> or that of the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity (CAAWS) at <http://www.caaws.ca>.**

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