

Rise & Decline of Organized Women's Sports (1890-1960)

All-time best

- Who is the greatest female athlete of all-time – at least, according to ESPN's Sports Century survey?

All-time best

No. 10 – Babe Didriksen (for golf, track)

No. 19 – Martina Navratilova (18 major tennis titles)

No. 23 – Jackie Joyner-Kersey (track)

No. 41 – Wilma Rudolph (track)

No. 50 – Chris Evert (tennis)

No. 65 – Althea Gibson (tennis)

No. 69 – Bonnie Blair (speed skater/Olympics)

There were 3 horses – Secretariat (35), Man o' War (84),
Citation (97)

All-time best

1. Michael Jordan
2. Babe Ruth
3. Muhammad Ali
4. Jim Brown
5. Wayne Gretzky
6. Jesse Owens
7. Jim Thorpe
8. Willie Mays
9. Jack Nicklaus

Sports & Sexuality

- Cultural constructions of femininity and masculinity challenged
- Dissonance between how society defined **womanhood** vs. perception of **masculine sport**
- At start of 20th Century, incongruities of manly sports vs. Victorian womanhood

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Women restrained

- Women in late 1800s, wore clothes that were far more restrained than today.
- Regular, full-length dresses
- Tight-laced corsets
- Did not place mallet between legs to hit
- No overhead shots or running fast in tennis
- All of this **reinforced gender differences**

Cycling

- Allowed women to gain some freedom
- “Physicians – ”worried that cycling might lure young women away from the home and its duties, lead them to remote sports alone with men where they might succumb to seduction or stimulate the genitals resulting in unimaginable horrors.” (p. 220)

Pioneers

- **Eleanora Sears** – won 4 national women's tennis titles; squash title; swam 4.5 miles in Newport, raced cars & flew planes. But could not ride astride her horse to play polo in 1912, something a women's club called 'immodest and wholly unbecoming a woman.'

Basketball

- Soon after Naismith invented the game in 1891, became most popular sport among college women.
- Reasons – freedom of movement
 - Vigorous competition
 - Could assert self physically
 - Instilled confidence denied elsewhere in lives
 - Could indulge in emotions disallowed elsewhere

Women's rules

- In 1890s some rules awarded points fo fouls, and disallowed women from moving from their assigned areas. (Smith College)
- By 1914, most women still played by men's rules
- Some started to see sports could teach women cooperation

1920s

- Sports grew extraordinarily for women during the Golden Age of sports
- How did public react? With mixed feelings.
- Some writers thought it was quite modern, other greatly disapproved

1920s

- **Suzanne Lenglen** – dominated tennis from 1919-27
- Flaunted her sexuality. I just throw dignity to the winds and think of nothing but the game.”
- Her actions Victorian version of beauty: that it was connected to reticence and purity

1920s

- **Helen Moody Wills** — replaced Lenglen as top star in mid 20s and into 30s.
- Pigtails, schoolgirl costume, placid temperament
- Writer embraced 'The American Girl,' saying she was the epitome of femininity: “a gay sprightly,pleasing young girl who could enjoy herself and be gracious in the process.”

1920s

- **Gertrude Ederle** – swam across English Channel, bested male mark by two hours
- Practiced Victorian domesticity. Mother said she developed strength from doing chores and preferred sewing and cooking to drinking and smoking.
- Movie, stage and commercial offers pored in
- **Older virtues** (modesty/domesticity) vs. **newer traits** (strength/independence)

Basketball

- Posed serious challenge to traditional gender order.
(p. 222)

Women pioneers

- Babe Didrikson – broke 5 American, Olympic or world records in track and field between 1930-32
- All-American in basketball same years
- Won 34 of 88 pro golf tournaments
- broke 4 world records and won 6 golds at 1932 women's track and field championships
- Never wore make-up & despised silk undergarments
- Cut her hair short, like a man's
- Used as a bogeyman by mothers wanting to change tomboys

Sports in small towns

- Thrived because school administrators saw game gave smaller towns a sense of identity.
- Basketball thrived in Iowa

Cheerleaders

- In 1930s, mostly males
- Women, people worried, could hurt their reproductive organs with acrobatic stunts and could lose their voices yelling
- Cheerleaders more respected than female athletes

Polarization

- What were appropriate female and male activities?
- Aren't we still doing this?
- Do we consider female athletes lesbians? What perceptions do we have today?

All-American Girls Baseball League

- Softball took USA by storm in 1930s – b/c less expensive, took less room for fields and relatively inexpensive
- AAGPBL drew more than 1 million fans a year at its peak
- Game sold as novel exhibition of feminine beauty and masculine playing skills
- Short skirts, charm school
- League collapsed in 50s when people left inner-cities, started watching sports on TV and started playing sports at home (tennis, golf, bowling) rather than attending games