

Women's Sport in the 1920 Era

by

VIRGINIA EVANS

University of Massachusetts

An investigation of the American sportswoman of the 1920s served as the central theme for this paper. The woman who engaged in sports outside of the auspices of an educational institution was the central character. At times the accomplishments of a school girl were included because she made up part of the unique scene that was *woman's* sports in the 1920 era. The purpose of the study was to give a broad survey of what women were doing in the 1920s.

The 1920s, as an era, was viewed through the works of historians Frederick Lewis Allen, William Chafe, William O'Neill and author Sinclair Lewis. Chafe and O'Neill's works were used to briefly describe the women's movement and its place in the 1920s. Allen's *Only Yesterday* and Lewis' *Main Street* depicted the broad social life of the 1920s and with Lewis' work more specifically women's role.

Women's sport in the 1920s grew in number of participants and in variety of activities. In documenting the information on sports from the *New York Times*, it was evident that the number of articles written on women's sports had rapidly increased between 1920 and 1924 with a leveling off effect reached in 1928. The number and type of tournaments increased during the 1920s, as evidenced by information found in the *Sportswoman* and the *Times*. The inclusion of women's sports in popular magazines gave further evidence of increased popularity during the 1920s.

The majority of middle class and upper class women chose to participate in the individual sports of golf, tennis, and swimming. Female participation in aviation, channel swimming, bowling, speedboat racing, squash, and fencing underlined the fact that individual sports were the most popular. Team sport participation was noted in a wide range of sports from ice hockey to basketball and polo to lacrosse. Some woman chose sport for its sensational value as evidenced by a marathon swimmer breaking an endurance record to the accompaniment of a jazz band.

Women in and near urban areas with wealth and leisure composed the nucleus of the body of sportswomen as reported in the media. Young women associated with athletic clubs and/or country clubs made the Olympic and international teams. The East coast dominated the sports pages in the early twenties with the West coast and mid-America coming more into the forefront at the end of the time period.

The reaction of the general public to women's athletics was one of interest that had both negative and positive overtones. Obtaining the right to vote could be interpreted as the beginning of women's striving to enter into numerous areas such as sport that were once male domains. This resulted in the seemingly inevitable comparisons between male and female. These comparisons ranged from skill ability to differences in physiological make up. Reaction to women's participation was divided between those offering encouragement and those holding the opinion that the entire foundation of femininity was being threatened by women becoming too "mannish" through sport participation.

The supportive effect of the 1920s on women in sport was evidenced by the vastly increasing number of women active in sport and the growing variety of the activities in which they participated. The social milieu of the 1920s following the passage of the nineteenth amendment found women testing the limits of their new found freedom. Just as the pleasure-seeking flapper challenged previously accepted social conventions, so the woman athlete of the 1920s sought to assert herself in the world of sport.