
Personal Recollections of Biographical Research

JOANNA DAVENPORT
Auburn University
Auburn, Alabama 36849

In 1973 I began to investigate the literature for material on Eleonora Sears, considered by some authorities as one of our country's greatest woman athletes. Surprisingly there were few citations about her in books and magazines and it became apparent that the many achievements of this woman were not known by most people. Having become intrigued with the idea of finding out more about this person, I subsequently applied for a sabbatical leave for the academic year 1974-1975. Upon receiving approval my naive plan was to do research first semester and write a book the second semester. As Eleonora Sears lived to be eighty-seven years of age and her sports covered tennis, squash, walking, riding plus numerous other activities, the research developed into an expansive venture that in no way could be done thoroughly in one year's time.

Before expanding on the research it seems appropriate to present a brief overview of her life. Born in Boston in 1881, Eleonora Randolph Sears was definitely a Boston Brahmin. Great-great-granddaughter of Thomas Jefferson and granddaughter of Thomas Jefferson Coolidge, Ambassador to France and founder of the First National Bank, she took to sports at an early age. Combining her affluence with her sporting interests, she soon became known as a champion in many activities. It is estimated that she won 240 trophies during her sporting career. Active until near the end of her life, she died of leukemia in Palm Beach, Florida, in 1968.

As indicated earlier, written material on her is rather scarce, so much of my research depended on gaining information from many personal contacts. I soon discovered that a fascinating personality like Eleonora Sears had equally fascinating people for friends, and the research has been a wealth of interviews with very unique individuals.

Amazing leads often developed from people who did not even know Eleonora Sears. For example, one day I was playing golf with a lady I barely knew and upon hearing that

I was writing about Eleonora Sears, she commented that her sister had won the Sears Field Hockey Cup in the 1930s. I speculated that it must be another Sears because I had never heard that Eleo participated in field hockey. But she was adamant it was Eleo and brought me a picture the next day showing her sister with the Eleonora R. Sears Field Hockey Cup. Thus, I investigated, and sure enough, there was such a cup that seemed to get lost during World War II, and yes, Eleo had engaged spasmodically in club hockey, a fact I never would have suspected.

A larger dividend came after chatting with a librarian about my project in the library that had been donated by Eleo's grandfather, T. Jefferson Coolidge. A week after this visit, I received a telephone call from a friend of the librarian who said she heard I would like to see Eleo's Beverly estate. She said she was a friend of the present owner and would arrange it. Ecstatic at this good luck, I very shortly had a complete tour of her house which consists of thirty-seven rooms and fifteen bathrooms. It was my good fortune that the owner's hobby was decorating all these rooms and she took great delight in showing me all of them.

As many of you have conducted biographical research, I am sure you have your own stories to tell. By sharing some of mine, I have tried to illustrate that what started out as an investigation into the sporting achievements of one person turned into a project full of exciting, complex, and sometimes humorous details, and as I mentioned before, being a sportswoman was only part of Eleonora Sears' life. Indeed, some human beings seem to have a compulsion, a burning desire to be and do and act uniquely. I believe Eleonora Randolph Sears was such a person.
