

Fair Play: The Girl Athlete in Young Adult Fiction, 1900-1980

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The *genre* of the sports heroine, barring a few earlier examples (e.g. Laura Richards, *Peggy*, 1899) found its most significant start with Jesse Flower's Grace Harlowe series, first published in 1910. Edith Bancroft, Amelia Walden, Rosemary Wells, and others followed her lead.

Given the importance of sport in American Life and the current interest in sport for girls and women, a study of girl athletes in young adult fiction should provide insight into the character of the female athlete, as reflected in literature. Three categories for the analysis were used: (1) the age of gentility (or nice-girls-who-did-something-athletic), (2) the age of metamorphosis (or the girl-athlete), and (3) the age of the new realism (or athletes who happen-to-be-girls).

The first area of consideration, the age of gentility, dominated the literature between 1900 and 1940. These stories, involving a potpourri of activities, generally portrayed the heroine doing-something-athletic somewhere within the sequence of events. On the recreational level they ice skated, skied, golfed, tumbled and rode horses. On the competitive level they starred or captained swimming, ice hockey, rowing, field hockey, tennis, track and field and basketball teams. Although there were some "varsity" sports, the competitions were generally intramural with the heroine playing for the honor of her class. Winning was important and fair play the rule. But win or lose, they were ever female. They sped from ball game to ball room with ease and confidence. Their personal appearance and deportment, both on and off the field added to their aura of gentility. Their futures were directed toward marriage.

The metamorphic age, which spanned the time period from 1941 to the early 1970s, saw the replacement of the genteel girl (who-did-something-athletic) with the girl-athlete. The girl-athlete's sports participation involved them in a wide range of activities including tennis, field hockey, scuba diving, flying, basketball and softball. These sports were more important to the heroine, and were usually varsity

in nature. Often times local, district and state championships were at stake. These championships were not easily obtained for the girl-athletes usually had to overcome some problem, such as a temper or sensitiveness, which prejudiced their performances. Sports participation was sometimes depicted as the vehicle the girl-athletes used to cover up their ineptitude in the social sphere. This problem was solved when, for some unexplained reason, the most popular boys in school became attracted to them. Thus inspired and as easily as changing their dresses the heroines were transformed into very attractive and stylish girl-athletes. As their stories ended, and their championships were but a fading memory, the impression was that the girl-athlete was on the road to matrimony.

The final category, the age of the new realism, more candidly portrayed the problems unique to the young adult in today's world. It was within this area that heroines appeared that could be classified simply as athletes. The intensity of their competition was far greater than that of their predecessors. They were depicted as playing more violent sports, such as football, as well as playing on or against formerly all-boys teams. Some of the girls were characterized as working towards pro tennis careers. Their conduct either on or off the field was not modified by the fact that they were female. As a result the problems they faced, alcoholism, cheating, loneliness and alienation were not resolved with a "happily ever after" solution. In their athletics violence and roughness as well as psychological warfare was the competitive world in which they had to deal. Their futures were less predictable than their earlier prototypes and marriage seemed only a very remote possibility.

The three categories mirror to some extent the change of attitudes of women toward sport and the attitudes of others toward women in sport. In the first category, nice-girls-who-did-something-athletic, the sport aspect was merely that, an aspect of the girl's character. It was considered something she would outgrow as she moved gracefully into womanhood and toward the inevitability of marriage. The second category, the girl-athlete, recognized that the girl may be athletic, but that her performance on and off the field of play was qualified in some way because she was a girl. In the third category, she was first of all an athlete . . . and her being female, like sport in the first category, was merely an aspect of her character.