

Those Who Dared: Victorian Sportswomen

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Women have remained outside the scope of history for so long, with the exception of the suffrage movement, that placing them in the proper perspective is a difficult task. Efforts to develop a historical context for women's roles have until recently been primarily distorted by a writer's concept of the innate womanly attributes as a factual base.

The history of women in sport has also been subjected to the same distortions. Within this context, a time frame that has not thoroughly been evaluated in terms of its contributions to sport is the Victorian era. The Victorian Age in the United States roughly spans the period of 1876 to the turn of the century. The term Victoriansim is used to describe this era defined by some degree by certain distinctive qualities common to ideas, outlook, customs and general culture. Women within this period of time were also subjected to a definition that had them sharing common qualities, ideas and customs. A related assumption existed that women had expressed an interest in sport, but few dared risk societal wrath by participating and thus jeopardizing their femininity. Those who did enjoy sport participation in the United States during this time have generally been viewed as anomalies rather than representatives of others who were experiencing the exhilaration of sport participation. Just as the attitude adopted by posterity towards the Victorians differs from actuality, the Victorian ideal of women contradicted the reality of the situation. Victorian women were involving themselves in sport, a fact made highly significant when viewed through the barriers of that time.

During the Victorian Era, women were being subjected to influences which attempted to stifle entry into sport participation. Medical theories and practices continually execrated women's abilities to operate effectively outside the home. Theories also "proved" women's biological differences meant natural inferiority intellectually, emotionally, and physically; in addition, fashion and diet reinforced stereotypes of women's incapacibilities by handicapping her movements and causing bodily harm. These forces formed a vicious cycle of self-fulfilling prophecies. Women were thought to be frail and incapable of emotional stress and physical strain. Modes of dress and health practices caused fainting, childbirth complications and other sundry health problems, thus exemplifying medical theories.

That women gained entry into sports participation and did so in increasing numbers is a remarkable feat. Despite the barriers, by the turn of the century, sport had permeated each social class, and the common denominator for all classes was the growing acceptance of women in exercise or sport. Women who did enter sports at this time were pioneers paving the way for future sportswomen. The foundation had been laid for women's sport; now expansion and development could occur. The Victorian women dared to challenge the odds against them and risked the dangers of acquiring unfeminine behavior, developing nervous diseases, committing racial

genocide, and possible permanent damaging of their biological functions because they viewed sport as exciting and interesting. While the stereotype of Victorian society was narrow and limiting, in reality, life was multi-faceted, and women mirrored this as they hurdled the barriers and took an active role in the rapid development of sport during the Victorian Era.