

# The Debut of Margaret Abbott

PAULA WELCH

University of Florida

Margaret Abbott, a turn of the century socialite from Chicago, was the first American woman Olympic champion. Miss Abbott, accompanied by her mother Mary Abbott, made her Olympic debut at the ladies singles golf championship during the Paris Olympics in 1900.

Golf was introduced to Chicagoans by Charles Blair Macdonald, a Scottish-American. The game soon became the rage among wealthy citizens. In 1896 members of Chicago's high society were so enamored with the sport that intense rivalry divided the clubs at Wheaton and Onwentsia. The competition was so vehement that families were split and members of the opposing clubs were not on speaking terms. By 1900 the fierce rivalry had subsided because club allegences were spread among 22 clubs within 30 miles of Chicago. Margaret Abbott was a member of the Chicago Golf Club located in Wheaton, Illinois, 24 miles west of Chicago. Golfing privileges were extended to females if males of their immediate families were members of the Chicago Golf Club. Women without family ties to the club were also eligible to play if they paid a higher fee than those who had family ties.

Margaret Abbott, like other prominent women, pursued her interests and pastimes seemingly unencumbered by the constraints placed upon female members of society. Abbot grew up in Chicago while Bertha Palmer, wife of millionaire Potter Palmer, was becoming the leading public lady of her day. Mrs. Palmer, like two other Chicagoans, Frances Willard and Jane Addams, worked to make life better for others. Other well-known socialites of Abbott's era included Phillip Armour, George Pullman, and Marshall Field.

In 1897 Margaret Abbott became interested in golf and a year later was recognized by a writer for *The Chicago Tribune* as having "acquired the same fierce driving ability and accuracy in putting that characterizes the play of her instructor, Edward Frost." Miss Abbott played in several Chicago area tournaments during the summer of 1898.

Although the Paris Exposition lured many upper class Chicagoans to the French city, it had long been a favorite destination of Chicago socialites. The large number of tourists from Chicago prompted writers of the social columns to refer to them as the Chicago colony in Paris. Margaret Abbott and her mother were in Paris early in October 1899. The trip abroad was planned so that Miss Abbott could study art. Her participation in the Olympic Games was coincidental with her prearranged trip to study art. On October 4, 1900 Margaret Abbott defeated nine other contestants in the championship round of the ladies singles international golf championship.



**Virginia Evans    Paula Welch**