

# Social Perceptions of Four Prominent Female Athletes During the 20th Century in the United States

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The social perceptions of four prominent female athletes were analyzed in relation to the assumption advanced about femininity during certain points in time in United States history. The time periods that were examined included the years 1900-1919, 1920-1944, 1945-1969, 1970-1981; and the sportswomen selected to represent those time periods were Eleonora Randolph Sears, Mildred "Babe"

Didrikson Zaharias, Wilma Rudolph, and Billie Jean King, respectively. The sportswomen were selected on the basis of a survey of sport historians who had expressed an interest in women's sports.

Case studies were written about each sportswoman, and the case study included information about the demographic background and sport related achievements of each subject selected for study. The social perceptions of the four sportswomen included everything mentioned about each in *The New York Times* articles that were identified under her name or sport subject heading in *The New York Times Index* that included information about, or highlighted the topics discussed in the case study. Sport records were discussed only when descriptive accounts of the contests were provided other than the source of contests.

The social perceptions were classified as physical, psychological, and sociological, and were analyzed in relation to the assumptions that were made about desirable femininity during the time periods studied.

Assumptions about femininity were identified in the *Journal of Health, Physical Education, and Recreation* during the years 1900-1981 in relation to the hypotheses that were advanced for the limited role and participation of women in sport for those years. The hypotheses were identified in the articles that were written about women's sports programs and were located in the cumulative index of *the Journal* for each year.

Assumptions about femininity were classified as physical, psychological, and sociological, and were elucidated in terms of some topics that have always been of concern to those involved in planning sport programs for women. Those topics included the appropriate social role of woman as wife and mother, appropriate dress standards, desirable behavioral patterns for femininity, woman's assumed limitations in strength and endurance as well as her anatomical structure, and hypotheses made about the emotional stability of woman and her needs for achievement.

The assumptions were then analyzed in relation to the social perceptions of the four sportswomen. This writer found that each of the sportswomen was in dissonance with the concept of femininity for the time period in which they were examined. In addition, it seemed as though each sportswoman either provided the impetus for, or was symbolic of some change in women's sports and/or society.

It was also discerned that while some assumptions about femininity changed during the Twentieth Century, others remained the same but related to women's role and participation in sports in different ways in accord with changes in social and political tenor in American society.