

The American Sportswoman: Dispelling Victorian Myths

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The concluding decade of the nineteenth century has generally been viewed as a time period when women's involvement in sport and physical activity reached new proportions. Membership in athletic clubs in large cities was proliferating, where women found opportunity for such diverse activities as archery, bowling, fencing, tennis, golf, rowing, and cycling. For college coeds, sport was emerging as a major component in the physical education curriculum, replacing the former emphasis on calisthenics and gymnastics exercises. With the revival of the modern Olympic Games women quickly sought their place on the winner's platform if only as unofficial competitors in golf and tennis in the 1900 Paris Games. Basketball achieved almost immediate and widespread popularity after its introduction by Senda Berenson to the Smith College students. And bicycling, credited with major contributions to the development of women's sport, particularly dress reform, reached its zenith in the 1890s.

A good bit of attention has focused on these changing opportunities for women in sport as the Victorian era came to a close. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, however, major changes occurred in all aspects of the lives of women which led to significant alteration and expansion of what had previously been considered their proper sphere of activity. The term "New Woman" appeared in the literature of the nineties describing the active, independent woman of culture and increasingly challenged the ideal of "True Woman," the dependent, submissive, and home-centered woman of mid-century.

Surely, many factors contributed to the changes occurring in the lives of women as the nineteenth century came to a close. It seems, though, that the circumstances creating whatever athletic freedom the female had achieved were those that had also promoted progress in other important phases of her life: physiological freedom from the interminable responsibilities of pregnancy and child care; educational opportunities, in which, incidentally, many women learned the sports skills they practiced later; expanding employment opportunities that opened new vistas for women; and continued progress toward legal equality. Urbanization and industrialization have been cited specifically as major reasons for the change in women's sphere of activity and in the image of feminine propriety. The feminist movement was strong at the end of the century and was of particular significance in promoting a rising consciousness among women. Many women were questioning old standards and rejecting them and trying to define new ideas and life styles more adequate to their altered cultural environment and new personal aspirations. To truly understand the many changing facets of women's lives, including sport involvement, at the end of the nineteenth century, we must look also to women themselves as a major source for change.