

# American Women in Sport History: In Search of Significance

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Historians of women have had two tasks. The first was to “uncover women’s buried past and place the female experience on the map of history.” That has been accomplished to the extent that such historians are now attending to the second task, that of redrawing the historical map. The papers in this session under review did, in this commentator’s mind, added detail to that map but they were less inclined to help redraw the map, to broaden our understanding of the human experience.

Considered together, the four papers in this session reconfirmed the consensus about the twentieth century sportswoman: in the organized, institutionalized, male domain of sport, this woman gradually overcame, or ignored, or challenged exclusionary attitudes and behaviors and became more active as time passed. The 1890’s set the stage by establishing altered modes of thinking and acting; the “sportswoman” supplanted the Victorian, pedestaled “hot house” woman. Active participation precipitated the gradual acceptance of less bulky and lengthy clothing, itself a *sine qua non* for activists like Eleanora Sears. Thereafter, participation in sport for women became more common, albeit neither universal nor unquestioned. Despite societal assumptions that women could not or should not compete at high levels, the contemporaries, Eleanor Egg and Mildred “Babe” Didrikson, achieved distinction for their records, themselves testaments to the skill and stamina of women.. Wilma Rudolph and Billie Jean King broke other barriers, and the latter even became a symbol of feminists who sought *the* ultimate freedom in the 1960’s and 1970’s.

In order to attend to the second task, that of redrawing the historical map, these and other historians will have to include inferences and questions along with descriptions of experiences and consider the argument of E. P. Thompson that history is the “discipline of context.” In doing so historians of women’s sport – and other sport historians as well – must see sport as a part of a larger whole, that of human experience. Attending to the literature about women specifically and the human experience generally will aid this process. It will, as well, enable historians of women’s sport to exert both their independence from and their possible contributions to that literature.

What needs to be done, further, is to avoid unproven assumptions as the underpinnings for research and to seek sport in the lives of women *on their own terms*. In this session, Drs. Jable and Remley, in particular, began to treat the sport of women on their own terms. Dr. Jable explained the probable effect of Eleanor Egg’s personality in the making of her as a local heroine, the meaning of sport for her, and the exciting exploits of this track and field star at a time when such activities were supposedly less than common. Dr. Remley spoke about the “New Woman” whose expanded sporting opportunities paralleled changes in other facets

of life in the 1890's. These papers set the "right" course for future work. Discovering that women of all kinds, classes, and backgrounds conceived of as sport will undoubtedly expand our understanding of women's sport and of historic sport more generally. This quest, of course, remains the primary objective of social historians who focus upon sport. Once we have discovered what sport was and what it meant, we shall come closer to understanding the past of human life.