

Portrait of Olympic Athletes as Role Models, Mentors and Leaders: Olympics 1920-1936

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In 1931 Aileen Riggen, a 1920 gold medalist in diving, made this observation in her *New York Herald* syndicated column.

What happens to the girl champions who retire and drop out of competition? Do they drop their chosen sport entirely, or do they still stick to it and try to develop champions? . . . It is worthy of note that . . . they still cannot resist the lure of the sport they loved, and are trying to develop newcomers of promise to fill their places.

My primary purpose was to determine the role and impact of 4 “girl champions” as role models, mentors, and leaders in sport. A biographical sketch approach was used to explore the public sports lives of figure skater Theresa Weld Blanchard, swimmer Helene Madison, and track athletes Betty Robinson (Schwartz) and Helen Stephens. Within the context of their “public” lives, a secondary purpose sought insight into the social, cultural and personal factors which influenced not only their sporting lives, but their subsequent activities.

Theresa Weld Blanchard typified the “elite” female athlete of the first decades of the 20th century. She was a classic example of a “lady of leisure” in sport, by competing as an amateur, and in acceptance of her social responsibilities through leadership in a voluntary sport organization. She was a role model, mentor and champion leader in figure skating.

Helene Madison returned with three gold medals from the 1932 Olympics to “the greatest ticket-tape parade in Seattle’s history.” Soon thereafter she turned professional, and began a whirlwind affair with parties and public agreements. But, as Royal Brougham of the *Seattle Times* noted in retrospect, “The clock struck 12:00 and her fairy world of golden dreams collapsed.” She couldn’t find a job, became a practical nurse, got divorced and spent years running a swimming school, developing the AAU women’s team, supported herself as a nurse, and was stricken down early in her 50s, broke and depressed. Her status as a role model was tarnished through the years, as was her mentor/coach role; but the thousands of well-wishers and contributors to a fund for her illness attested to her life as a public role model and mentor (though non-traditional), and a leader of young female swimmers.

Betty Robinson represents a “mainstream” athlete socially acceptable as a beautiful and successful athlete; remaining a happy well-adjusted wife, mother, grandmother, and a proponent of track for girls and women, working within the Olympic movement.

Helen Stephens recognized early that she was destined to live outside the mainstream of the sport world for women, so she created her own sport world as a professional sports-woman and supported herself through exhibitions and half-time entertainment, and by

coaching and competing on semi-professional basketball teams. As a single woman, her livelihood was from a 30-year civil service job. However, her life was devoted to sports. After retirement she returned to her first love as track coach at William Woods College. For the last six years she has worked in the Senior Olympic Program, herself capturing 50 medals.

The answer to the primary question is a simple “Yes.” The four Olympians, Theresa Weld Blanchard, Helen Madison, Betty Robinson Schwartz, and Helen Stephens, were/are role models, mentors and leaders for young athletes. All were lured back to the sport they loved, using volunteerism as the central vehicle in an attempt to “. . . develop newcomers of promise to fill their place.” These pioneer female athletes actively pursued others who might emulate them, and strove to provide sporting experiences for the next generation of females. Their involvement was in spite of their conflicts between the pursuit of athletics and traditionally acceptable parameters of femininity, their struggles with the labels of “tomboy” and “unfeminine,” and their difficulties with public demands and private dilemmas.

The answers to the secondary questions are far more complex and less definite. The observations here are limited to new insights:

1. “Femininity” within sport may be based on personal attributes of the athlete as much as the sport itself. Femininity seems a significant factor for female athletes to be acceptable for emulation.

2. Beauty was a prerequisite to become the glorified hero for the athletes, and in maintaining a commercial profit from their athletic fame. The media references to female appearance was most often based on the attitude of “now the champions are beautiful women and only beautiful women are champions.”

Conclusions

The Olympic Athletes portrayed in this study were very visible, as local and national heroes, and not anomalies among women in sport. The cities from which these athletes emerged provided ample amateur opportunities for them to develop their talents, as well as considerable community support. However, having achieved the pinnacle of the sporting experience, the women found a dearth of sporting opportunities. Even so, the Olympians stayed close to their sport in modeling, mentoring and leadership roles (mostly volunteer) throughout their lives. Thus, they in turn influenced the continued expansion of sporting opportunities for the next generation of young athletes, and inspired Olympic hopefuls in Sport.