

Some Unacclaimed Champions of Kentucky Sportswomen

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Sports records of women historically have not received the same notoriety or acclaim as those of men. Throughout the annals of sports reporting, the bulk of sports information has been about male performers or sportsmen. The absence, of reporting, however, must not be construed as the absence of events. There are unacclaimed champions among sportswomen. There are record setters, trend setters, or pace setters—all champions in their own way – who have gone unreported, unnoticed or unknown. Three Kentucky women neatly fit this pattern of the unacclaimed. One was a performer, one was a coach and one was an enabler. They represent three different time spans, three different sports, and three different claims to fame. Their achievements were noted in their time, but their permanent niche among sportswomen of Kentucky has perhaps gone unclaimed.

On September 7, 1967, Pauline Huffman of Lexington, Kentucky, rolled a 300 game in the Ladies Major League at Eastland Bowling Lanes. A perfect game in bowling is not such great news in this day and age. Yet, the feat of this petite fifty three year old grandmother in 1967 has to go in the record books because it was the first sanctioned 300 game bowled by man or woman in the city of Lexington.

There was a touch of bittersweet within her own league however. The year-end banquet and awards occasion should have been a time of triumph for her. It was not. League officers had agreed that a person could only receive one award (and that meant prize money). They voted to give her a prize for high series rather than for high game. Personality conflicts and league politics had diminished and tarnished a significant bowling event in the city of Lexington.

Even so, there are more trophies in her home than there is room to display them. Her most treasured trophy is the WIBC diamond ring. It is a lovely ring, the record of a champion, because a 300 game is more than a lovely memory. Another trophy is a mink stole.

Audrey Whitlock Peterson coached the Woodburn, Kentucky High School girls basketball team to the state championships in 1931 and 1932. To win a state high school basketball championship in this day and age is no big deal and occasionally teams even win championships back to back. It happens somewhere every year. But when circumstances surrounding Mrs. Peterson's accomplishments are understood more thoroughly, it becomes apparent that she is, indeed, one of those unacclaimed champions of Kentucky sportswomen. Audrey Peterson brought the Woodburn High School team to the state tournament five years in a row. In 1932 with the state championship win, her coaching record was 130 wins and 5 losses; a 96 percent win record. Further, in her entire coaching career she never coached against another woman. From 1926 to 1932, all of her opposing coaches were men.

Although her husband, Frank Peterson, was an avid supporter and made it a point to attend all of the girls games, he was in no way an assistant coach or a coach figure in the background. Interviews with two of Peterson's players now in their seventies also attest to this. Audrey Peterson coached the team, trained the team, and made all decisions on strategy and substitutions.

Audrey Peterson's record is a remarkable one, but it, too had a bittersweet ending. The 1932 state championship won by Woodburn High School was the last state tournament played by girls until forty three years later. Over the tearful protests of Audrey Peterson, the Kentucky High School Athletic Association voted to eliminate the girls' state tournament. It was not reinstated until 1975. Although this was one of the few battles Audrey Peterson lost, her record is clearly that of a champion of Kentucky sportswomen.

Lucille Parker Wright Markey has affectionately been called the grand dame of American racing. As the owner of Calumet Farm, home of eight Kentucky Derby winners, and as the principal donor to an outstanding cancer hospital, she has garnered a spot in the listing of unacclaimed champions of Kentucky sportswomen. Lucille Parker Wright Markey was neither performer nor coach. Her role was that of an enabler. It was her firm but gentle leadership that helped Calumet Farm maintain its image as the "colossus" of the horse industry, even during a lean decade in the sixties when others would have been willing to "throw in the towel".

Mrs. Markey's administrative capacities were evident in the way she delegated authority and responsibility. She was never one to second-guess, criticize or interfere. If anything, she was always there with a word of encouragement. Coming from the old school that believed in hiring the best equipped people to do the jobs, she was strong, fair-minded and went strictly by the rules. Every operation of the farm was first class and above board.

The University of Kentucky awarded her an honorary doctorate. The Kentucky Derby Festival Committee honored her with its silver horseshoe award and the medical community of Lexington honored her by naming the Cancer Center after her. But Lucille Wright Markey honored the sport of thoroughbred racing with her skill in the successful operation of one of racing's great nerve centers and with her integrity as a lady who played by the rules. She joins that list of unacclaimed champions of Kentucky sportswomen.

These three champions of Kentucky sportswomen achieved the dream that lies in the heart of every competitor. For high school basketball coaches everywhere, it is the state championship. Mrs. Peterson achieved that. For bowlers all over the world, it is that 300 game. Mrs. Huffman achieved that. It is the Kentucky Derby for thoroughbred breeders from Flamingo Park to Saratoga and Mrs. Markey achieved that. From three different worlds, from three different times, and from three different arenas, these women no longer remain unacclaimed champions. Let their records speak: Pauline Huffman, Audrey Peterson, and Lucille Markey are champions in every sense of the word.