

The Western Sporting Woman: An Overview

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The frontier experience forged the western woman into someone special: more direct, more independent and more self-reliant than she otherwise would have been. In California and Arizona, Washington and Oregon, Colorado and New Mexico, Montana and Wyoming, Idaho, Utah and Nevada, she was not only wife, mother, professional, or domestic, she was also skier, sharpshooter, cowgirl, gambler, mountain climber, madam, outlaw, ballplayer, cyclist and track athlete. This paper presented an overview of the western woman as a background to an examination of the factors which influenced her participation in selected sports in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Sources which address the lifestyle of the early western woman are unanimous in their conclusion that they were much more independent, self-directed, unconventional, adventurous, persistently stubborn and bold than their eastern sisters. Yet as invisible actors in social development, the western women were not all of one mind nor were they of one cultural background. The varied roles of Mexican, black and native American women differed noticeably from their white counterparts, yet a common theme of stubborn persistence by which barriers of all kinds were thrown back can be identified in all of their personal histories.

In sport, for each of the ethnic groups, participation occurred according to economic opportunity and social acceptance. Upper middle class women participated in educational institutions, private clubs and gymnasiums; while working class women participated in community and recreational programs which were sometimes segregated. In the earlier years, public recreation facilities were either closed to blacks and chicanas, or constructed separately in black and white neighborhoods, occasionally barrios, and rarely on reservations. Not surprisingly, chicanas were better known for their ethnic dances than for their athletic endeavors and Indian women received well earned recognition for their feats of endurance.

Sacajawea, who led the Lewis and Clark expedition to the Pacific Ocean, was just such a woman of endurance. Many western women were skilled with horses and guns and included outlaws such as Pearl Hart and Belle Starr as well as entertainers such as Mary Ann Whittaker, Eunice Winkler and Jaguarina. Climate, geography and circumstances frequently led women into non-traditional sports and pastimes such as mountain climbing, snow-shoeing and skiing.

Western women were obviously bold, daring and adventurous. Life in the west and the freedom afforded by it led women into physical activities undreamed of by the "weaker" sex in other parts of the country.