

The Emergence of Women in the Sporting Culture: Chicago, 1880-1940

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The presentation will describe and analyze three distinct periods of development in the sporting practices of women. In the years that followed the Civil War women's participation in sports often offended Victorian sensibilities and contemporary standards of morality. Female pedestrians, baseball players, boxers, and cyclists were classed with actresses, i.e. akin to the prostitutes who displayed their bodies for immoral purposes.

By the turn-of-the-century women assumed a more active role as co-participants in sporting ventures. Particular sports, such as archery, croquet, cycling, and golf became more acceptable and allowed for greater interaction between the sexes. Power sports remained a bastion of masculinity, and any female participation in such matters seemed to threaten the male psyche and the traditional social hierarchy. Nevertheless, high school girls and college women began to organize leagues for competitive play.

By 1910 women assumed active responsibility for their own leisure. Women competed in track and field activities in the parks, playgrounds, and industrial recreation programs, as well as in interscholastic basketball and softball. They organized their own bowling association with money prizes and a national tournament. Within a dozen years they clamored for inclusion in Olympic power sports.

As employers and reformers repressed other areas of work and leisure women found greater freedom of expression in sport during the ensuing years. They reassessed their relationships with the

male hierarchy, and divided over philosophical issues; but women no longer served as objects for male amusements. By the advent of World War II they had established the roots of their own sporting culture.