

# “Girls sports run by girls”: The Women’s Amateur Athletic Federation of Canada 1925–41

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During the 1920s and early 1930s, Canadian girls and women competed in sports in record numbers. They attracted large audiences and enjoyed regular, if patronizing, coverage in the mass media. They entered international competition and won many championships. Their “invasion” of sports was not without conflict, however. Despite the “new day” for women promised by suffrage and other advances during the war, the dominant expectation was still that a woman’s proper role was supporting her husband and caring for her children. Both women and men feared that sports disqualified or distracted her from these responsibilities. Some sportswomen sought to mediate these pressures by creating their own organizations. The most ambitious was the Women’s Amateur Athletic Federation, formed in 1926.

Despite the draining controversies the ambition of women in sports often aroused and the hurdles of “distance and (lack of) dollars”, the WAAFers (as they were usually called) achieved a considerable measure of success. By the 1930s, they had branches in every region of Canada and regulated eligibility and play in seven sports. They won new opportunities for Canadian women in international competition, entering teams in both the International Olympic Committee’s Games and the World Games of la Federation Sportive Feminine Internationale. They initiated training programs for coaches and leaders and started the first system of national sports awards. While maintaining control over most of their own activities, they contributed in significant ways to the deliberations of its male counterpart, the Amateur Athletic Union of Canada, thereby adding to WAAF’s legitimacy. They regularly defended the top female athletes in the mass media against charges that they were “unfeminine”.

In each of these ways, the WAAFers validated the idea that women could participate and excel in demanding sports, and added significantly to the available opportunities.