

“Strong And Thick-Set Heroines:” The Other Side Of Women’s Sports, 1750-1900

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In the 18th century, running competitions - for females as well as for males - were associated with county fairs, wakes, and similar festivities. Additionally, there were occasional challenge matches. A woman’s three-heat race was held near Canteberry in 1790, about the same time that the “charms” of scantily dressed competitors were displayed in smock races at Brighton. There were also female boxers. “The Hibernian Heroine” entertained crowds at James Figg’s London Theater. In 1768, “Bruising Peg,” dressed in white stockings and Holland drawers, outclassed her opponent to the delight of several hundred Spectators.

During the last decades of the 19th century, a resurgence of female sport occurred. In broad outline, this movement took two forms. One was the emergence of the “lady blue” and Charles Dana Gibson’s “athletic girl.” These young women played tennis, golf, and field hockey, rode to hounds, cycled - and in America, played the newly invented game of basketball. Their activities were recorded in school yearbooks, the *Fortnightly Review*, *Cosmopolitan*, and elite sporting magazines like *Outing*. At about the same time, another group emerged. This included female wrestlers like Sadie Morgan and Rozella Lillis, boxers like Hattie Stewart and Anna Lewis, rowers, bag punchers, trick shooters, weight-lifters, and pedestrians. Their exploits were recorded in publications like *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, *Spirit of the Times*, and above all Richard Kyle Fox’s *National Police Gazette*.

Six-day “Go As You Please” (mixed walking and running) matches rapidly rose to prominence in 1876, thanks to the largesse of Sir John Dugdale Astley. As men were toiling away for the lucrative prizes, a number of women joined the fray. The *New York Times*, *Boston Globe*, and other newspapers

gave to several of them a considerable amount of attention. One of the early favourites was Madame Ada Anderson, who successfully completed walking 2,700 quarter miles in 2,700 quarter hours at Brooklyn's Mozart Gardens on January 13, 1879. Shortly thereafter, Exilda La Chapelle accomplished the same task at Chicago's Foley Theater. Across the United States between 1878 and the early 1880s, women of varying degrees of ability and fame competed for prizes of \$5 to \$1,000.

Elsa von Blumen and Louise Armaindo were acknowledged as competent competitive cyclists in the 1880s, riding the difficult to handle "ordinary" or "high-wheeler" bicycle for cash prizes and occasionally competing against men. Female roller-skaters, rowers, and swimmers also attracted audiences. Few, if any, events created more notoriety than did women in boxing or baseball. To improve the circulation of the *National Police Gazette* and enhance his personal stature as a patron of "sporting life," Fox sponsored a number of women boxers. Hattie Stewart was said to have a right cross similar to that of John L. Sullivan. Libby Kelly and more than a score of other female pugilists appeared at Harry Hill's New York Exchange and at theatres throughout the east between the 1870s and 1900.

The reports given to such events by the press were far more favourable than one might expect, given our beliefs about women in sports prior to the last three decades. Certainly, their activities were sometimes sensationalized. They were usually portrayed as hovering somewhere between athletic competition and entertainment (It should be remembered that professional rowing, boxing, and pedestrianism for males were also reported with an aura of entertainment.) When it came to baseball, however, most newspapers reacted to contests between women most unfavourably. Specialized periodicals like *The Sporting Life* and the *Sporting News* (both of which catered to baseball) were virulent in their attacks against females playing "the national game."

This paper explores: (a) the range of women's participation in "the other side of sport" between 1860 and 1900, (b) the larger cultural contexts in which this took place; (c) the nature of the press coverage given to such events.