

# The 1920s: A Defining Decade for Florida's Sportswomen

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This study focuses on the factors that contributed to the development of womens sport in Florida. Questions relevant to the historical development of womens' sport in Florida during the 1920s were considered in an attempt to show how and why sport during that decade provided the foundation for womens<sup>1</sup> sport. Central to the study are the following questions: What events during the 1920s provided the basis for future sport participation among women in Florida? How did the tourist industry make an impact upon womens' sport? What distinctions were made regarding the sports participation of affluent women and women who were not as financially sound? What brought about the interest in sports such as tennis, golf, swimming, and basketball? What effect did the sports attire of the day have on women's sports participation? And, What role did newspapers play in advancing the sportswoman?

Evidence was gathered from selected Florida newspapers such as *The Miami Herald*, *Miami Daily Metropolis*, *The Palm Beach Post*, *The Tampa Tribune*, and *The Florida Times Union*. These newspapers reflected sporting pursuits of women in diverse parts of the state. Furthermore, sporting events in surrounding cities were often

printed in these Florida newspapers. In addition, city histories, country club constitutions, biographies of land and railroad developers, and fashion sources such as *Vogue* were consulted. Newspaper advertisements and society columns were analysed to gain insight into sports attire.

Sandwiched between post-war recovery and the Great Depression, were the Florida land boom, growth of the tourist industry to include less prosperous visitors, industrial development, and expansion of the transportation network. The sanguine social climate resulted largely from a prosperous economy brought about by futuristic developers who successfully marketed the advantages of vacationing not only during the winter months but at other times. Hoteliers and others who benefitted from the tourist industry sought to maintain the interest of their wealthy winter visitors and enticed them to return season after season. Lavish balls, elegant dinners, tennis, and golf were especially important to those who sought the atmosphere of posh hotels. Meanwhile, public recreational facilities were made available to those with less disposable incomes. The transportation network which included road, railroad, and steamship travel expanded during the 1920s. Economic and social prosperity essentially augmented the development of womens' sport during the 1920s.

Railroad pioneers Henry Plant on the west coast and Henry Flagler on the east coast of Florida advanced transportation and both precipitated the development of golf. Country clubs throughout the state sponsored golf tournaments for men and women. Mixed foursomes as well as special women's competition were held. Promoters brought Olympic swimmers to the state for competitive events and exhibitions. A sporting atmosphere was created in the Sunshine state especially by those interested in promoting tourism.

The Florida boom years created an exciting environment especially in south Florida and along the west coast. Expansion abounded in Miami, Tampa, and St. Petersburg. Press coverage of tournaments in a variety of sports, swimming exhibitions, and recreational sports highlighted sportswomen and thereby kept the sportswoman in the news. Society columnists added to the acceptance of women's sports by their positive descriptions of sportswomen and their activities in country club settings. Newspapers also printed stories of champion athletes, often women swimmers representative of the middle class were featured. This study helps to explain why the second decade of the twentieth century was an important era in the development of womens'<sup>1</sup> sport in the state of Florida. While the Great Depression hastened the curtailment of many aspects of life, the tradition of womens' sports participation established in the 1920s survived.