

Annette R. Hofmann
Muenster University

The Forgotten Women in American Sport History: The Female Turners

The Germans represented a unique and forceful current in the stream of immigration to the United States. Between 1850 and the turn of the century, over 3.5 million German newcomers entered the country. The 1990 census indicated that more than 20 percent of all Americans have German descendants, making it the largest group. Among these immigrants were between 40 to 50 percent females, who had to face a cultural barrier in the new country. Usually immigrant German women found a shelter in their home- and family-centered lives that helped them to face the worst experiences of cultural alienation. Support systems of female relatives — if they had any — served women, by enabling them to share the hard work and by alleviating the loneliness of life. Women who did not have close family members living in the vicinity had to build female communities among their neighbors for mutual support. Some of the many associations that the Germans brought with their cultural life to the American continent also offered a shelter for the German-speaking women, such as the turner societies which not only promoted physical education, but also offered outlets for German immigrants to continue

their cultural traditions. Thus they functioned especially in the mid- and late 19th century as mediators between German tradition and the American way of life and became enclaves of ethnicity.

From the beginning of the German-American turner movement in mid-nineteenth century women were involved in its associational life – *vereinsleben*. They offered a number of services to the turner societies, although females were not able to become ‘full’ members. In fact, they had to wait until the beginning of the twentieth century to gain membership in at least some societies. In the early 1990s there were still turner societies that would not accept women as full members.

Extensive works have been published by scholars on the ethnic history of the German Americans, but, although almost 50 percent of them were females, the ethnic experience of German-American women, has been neglected in research studies. Similarly the role of the female turners, or *lady turners* as they call themselves, has been neglected by sport historians, although the turners offered exercise classes for girls since the 1850s for women since the 1880s and the first Ladies Auxiliaries were founded in 1868. In the 20th century some female athletes with a turner background were successful on a national and international level: between 1931 and 1956, 80 percent of the individual titles in all-round AAU competitions or championships were won by *turnerinnen*, and in 1936 and 1948 American turner women participated in the Olympic Games. However, the number of top athletes dropped in the 1950s when the turner societies could no longer offer training on a high level. Still, in the following decades some societies could not have survived without their female members.

Horst Ueberhorst, is one of the few who did some research on the lady turners or “turnerinnen.” In his overview on the American turner movement, “Turner unterm Sternenbanner,” published in 1978, he dedicated one chapter to women. The content is not very elaborate, it devotes more about the development of women’s sport in the United States than on the female turners. More detailed work was done by Alida J. Moonen (1993) in her dissertation “The Missing Half: The Experience of Women of the Indiana Athenaeum Turnverein Women’s Auxiliary 1876-1919.” She explores the “seeming contradictions between the liberating physical and intellectual experiences these women had within in the context of their own organization and the continuing constraints involved in the patriarchal ethnic social group.” But not only have historians neglected the gender-related topic, the turners themselves did not take up the discussion very often in the turner publications or at official meetings.

This paper tries to fill this gap to some extend. It presents an overview of the participation of women in the German-American turner societies from the mid 19th century until the 1990s. It not only concentrates on their participation in physical activities at the turner societies, but also considers other aspects of the gender-related topic in turnerism, such as the founding of the Ladies’ Auxiliaries, which is not connected with the activity of *turnen*, but rather a part of the turners’ social life. Another aspect is women’s long struggle for “full” membership in the male dominated turner societies. The present study is primarily based on anniversary publications of the turner societies, annual reports, minutes and statistics of the *turnerbund*; it also includes results of Moonen’s research on

the Indianapolis' Lady Turners. The facts relating to the present situation of females in the turner societies relies on information gathered from various visits at turner societies and interviews with their members; in addition to the result of a survey done in 1997/97 on the present condition and the assimilation process of the formerly German turner societies in the United States.