

Mark Dyreson  
Pennsylvania State University

## ***Icons of Liberty or Objects of Desire?*** **American Images of Women Athletes** **in the 1920s and 1930s**

In 1924 the best female golfer in the United States told the readers of *Woman's Home Companion* that "American women, the first quarter of the twentieth century, have won two rights: the right of exercising the suffrage and the right of participation in sport." Glenna Collett did not have a clear opinion concerning which of these rights was more important. "The second of these seems to me at least as important as the first for the happiness and welfare of women themselves, and of the world at large," announced Collett, declaring sport as perhaps a more significant right than suffrage. At first reading, such a claim seems patently absurd, a classic example of 1920s media "ballyhoo" uttered by an athlete dazzled by the public acclaim accorded to her golfing prowess. Yet a year later in 1925, the editors of the *Women Citizen* made the same claim. The *Women Citizen* cannot be ignored as the organ of bedazzled golfers or a voice of factions opposed to women's political rights. The magazine had begun life in 1917 as periodical for the National American Woman Suffrage Association and became after the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment the official publication of the League of Women Voters. *Women Citizen* declared that "nothing in the world more strikingly marks the great gap between the girl of today and her grandmother than that girl's place in the world of sport. Neither her vote, nor her skimpy dress, nor her plainness of speech, is more expressive." One of the leading voices of the women's power at the ballot box concurred with an American golfing champion that the right to play sports was a crucial change in women's lives, perhaps even more significant than the right to vote.

The idea that right to participate in sport was of equal or perhaps greater value than the most fundamental democratic right raises important questions about gender, politics, and sport in American culture during the 1920s and 1930s. Indeed, it would merit serious scrutiny of uttered by opponents of women's suffrage. The fact that supporters of women's voting rights would ever utter such a thought is startling. Such proclamations were far from rare. In fact, the regularity with which such claims occurred in the American press in the two decades after women won the right to vote indicates that the idea was more than simply a minor concern or a clever method for promoting women's sport.

At the very same time, a far different view of women in sport flourished in the American media. Instead of perceiving of sport as an arena for the exercise of women's rights, this view promoted exercising women as an erotic industry. As Paul Gallico admitted, women athletes were used by newspapers and magazines for their sex appeal rather than their athletic prowess. Gallico, who from his post at the center of American sportswriting during much of the 1920s and 1930s had unique insights into the creation of the culture of ballyhoo, insisted that editors and publishers used pictures of female athletes in order to titillate male readers from the respectable middle classes rather than to laud women's accomplishments. Gallico expressed no regrets, and more than little pride, for his role in the marketing of women athletes as sexual commodities.

The emergence in the public culture of the 1920s and 1930s of accomplished female athletes in high profile competitions created a debate about women's roles in American society in the wake of shifting political, legal and cultural conceptions of womanhood. Without professional baseball league, prize fighting bouts, or big-time intercollegiate football programs - the major male arenas for capturing public imagination - woman athletes came into public view in swimming and diving, golf, tennis, and especially at the Olympic Games. In fact, in the absence of professional team sports leagues or the intercollegiate equivalents veneered with the gilt of amateurism, women Olympians were the most important sporting heroines in the United States.

What does this strange dialectic of women athletes as torchbearers for women's rights and sexual objects for consumer culture reveal about the United States in the 1920s and 1930s? That questions has a great deal of significance for historians. This topic raises important questions about the political and social confusions over women's roles and rights in modern American culture.

"Icons of Liberty or Objects of Desire" tackles those questions. The paper is based on primary sources from American magazines and newspapers. I make several arguments in the paper. The Olympics were the most important public forum for women's sports during this period and media accounts of American women Olympians reveal many of the controversies and confusions surrounding potential changes in gender roles in the wake of the Nineteenth Amendment. Indeed, as women contributed increasing numbers of victories to American Olympic teams and, at least until 1936, allowed the nation to continue to claim global athletic superiority, women athletes garnered increasing respect.