

is integral to the “Golden Age” of athletics in America. The impact of the United States Naval Academy winning the Olympic gold medal in the men’s eight oared shell over the British is a turning point in world of rowing. impacting Americanism, nationalism, and classism.

The identification and definition of the term “breakthrough kinesis” is first used in this paper. The term is used in reference to its universal application across sports in general and specifically to the change of the physical stroke from English to American style of rowing. This unique style change, stemming from American scientific advancements, launched for the first time the American crews past their English and European competitors, yielding social consequences paralleling those of cricket as chronicled in C. L. R. James’ Beyond a Boundary. The paper focuses on the above two themes centered in the historical framework of the 1880s to 1920s. It explores the evolution of both strokes, class and nationalism as they relate to of international rowing, the U. S. Naval Academy, and the 1920 Antwerp Olympic Games.

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## **Gertrude Ederle and a Reconsideration of the 1926 English Channel Swim**

The English Channel swim was arguably the greatest test of combined physical endurance and mental toughness in the contemporary western world. Before 1926, more than two hundred individuals made at least one thousand attempts to swim across the Channel. Only five people succeeded, all of them were men. The summer of 1926 saw a renewed rush to the Channel swim. Between July and September of that year, more than twenty swimmers, representing at least eight countries, made numerous attempts to conquer the Channel. No one succeeded until the arrival of a nineteen-year old American woman, Gertrude Ederle of New York.

On August 6, 1926, Ederle, donned a revolutionary two-piece bathing suit, waded into the water at Cape Gris-Nez, France in the early morning. Against all the odds, including the turbulent waters and a five-to-one betting ratio in London, she landed on the English shore fourteen and a half hours later. Not only did she become the first woman to conquer the English Channel, she also

obliterated the previous record by nearly two hours. Ederle received a hero's welcome when she returned to New York, with two million New Yorkers lining the route of the biggest ticker-tape parade in the city's history. Mayor James Walker equated her crossing to those of Moses, Caesar, and George Washington. President Calvin Coolidge called her "America's best girl," and Charles Tobias and Al Sherman immortalized the heroine with their song "Trudy." News of her success pushed the stories of the screen icon Rudolph Valentino's funeral and Jack Dempsey's training for his fight with Gene Tunney off many front pages. In at least one poll, Americans voted her the top athlete of 1926, ahead of the baseball player Babe Ruth.

In an era when women were believed incapable of enduring strenuous physical activities and women's sports in the United States were suppressed by the "anti-Olympics and anti-varsity competition" movement led by women physical educators and sports leaders, Ederle's accomplishment helped to change perceptions of female athletes and inspired countless women and girls to take up swimming and various other sports. For some, Ederle's Channel swim was the greatest sports story in the world, certainly in the sense of challenging the Victorian misconception of female frailty, but the whole story of women challenging that misconception by means of swimming the Channel was certainly broader than her accomplishment.

In the summer of 1926, a total of eight women made sixteen attempts to swim the English Channel. Although only two succeeded, the display of their exceptional skills, endurance, and determination received wide media attention and public applause. In the shadow of the sudden glory of Ederle, however, the accomplishments of the other seven women were lost in the text of sport history. This paper examines the English Channel swim of 1926 with a focus on the accomplishments of all eight women swimmers. It reconsiders the historical contribution of Gertrude Ederle in the context of women as a group challenging the cultural norms of the male-dominated society and gives due credit to other women swimmers and their supporters who, collectively, successfully challenged the misconception of female frailty. The primary sources for this paper are articles found in major American newspapers and magazines during the summer of 1926 and a personal interview with Gertrude Ederle in August 2001.

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