

*Their Day in the Sun: Women of the 1932 Olympics* by Doris H. Pieroth (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996). Reviewed by Wayne Wilson, Amateur Athletic Foundation of Los Angeles, Los Angeles, California, U.S.A.

The 1932 United States Olympic Team included thirty-seven women. Pieroth portrays them as pioneers whose willingness to defy social convention by pursuing athletic careers turned them into “bona fide athletic stars” and created a positive momentum for the future development of women’s sport. Further, writes Doris Pieroth, “the 1932 Olympic Games were pivotal for the future of women in the Olympic Games and for women athletes in general.” The Los Angeles Games, she contends, provided a stage on which, backed by “impressive media coverage,” leading women athletes became “familiar, popular figures.”

At the outset, Pieroth eschews any intention to examine “inequality, sexuality or repression,” although she does acknowledge that “inequality may be implicit” in the story. Rather, the book is a descriptive history of the American women’s Olympic summer. Relying on personal interviews with the Olympians and their families, oral histories, autobiographies, and newspaper accounts of the day, Pieroth tells the story of the women’s team’s “day in the sun,” a phrase borrowed from a 1968 nostalgia letter written by Eleanor Holm to fellow swimmer and teammate Helene Madison.

The book’s structure is chronological. The opening chapter presents a brief historical overview of women’s sport in early 20th century America. The following chapters provide biographical background on leading swimmers, divers, and track and field athletes as well as accounts of the Olympic trials in each sport. Chapter 6 paints a portrait of Los Angeles as it prepared for the Games, the arrival of sporting delegations in the city and the women’s housing at the Chapman Park Hotel several miles from the men’s Olympic Village in Baldwin Hills. The final chapters chronicle the swimming and track competitions. Pieroth concludes with a well-researched epilogue that traces the post-1932 lives of the American women who competed at Los Angeles.

Throughout the narrative, Pieroth attempts, with varying degrees of success, to provide historical perspective. The early history of women’s participation in the Olympic Games is thinly drawn and incomplete, omitting any reference to women’s involvement in archery, figure skating, gymnastics or yachting prior to 1932. Pieroth correlates the inclusion of women’s track and field events on the 1928 program to Pierre de Coubertin’s departure as IOC president in 1925. The text, however, makes no mention of Alice Milliat’s efforts to place women’s track and field on the Olympic program. Likewise, there is no reference to the success of Milliat and others in staging international women’s athletics competitions during the second and third decades of this century, nor of the International Amateur Athletics Federation’s and the IOC’s self-serving desire to draw women’s track and field away from the administrative control of other organizations. Given the prominence of track and field later in the story, a fuller recounting of the three-way relationship among the IOC, IAAF and the Fédération Sportive Féminine Internationale would have been entirely appropriate here.

Other opportunities to provide a more textured history are undertreated, at best.

The impact of the Great Depression on the 1932 Games is mentioned, but not developed. Chapter 6, "Prelude to the Games, Los Angeles Style," fails to provide appropriate detail about the organizing committee or its leaders, or about the politics behind the public funding of the Games.

Pieroth is more successful in conveying the ambivalence with which the general public, sport and physical education leaders, and, in particular, the press viewed female participation in competitive sport. Quoting from sportswriters who attended the Games, she demonstrates that the press, while generally admiring of the women Olympians, was unable to overcome either its patronizing attitude or its preoccupation with the sexual attributes of the women competitors.

*Their Day in the Sun* does a creditable job of creating a sense of time and place through frequent references to the symbiotic relationship between the Hollywood movie industry and the Olympians assembled in Los Angeles. It is clear that members of the Hollywood community and the athletes relished the opportunity to spend time in each other's worlds. It is also clear that some of the athletes were quick to realize that Hollywood offered an opportunity to capitalize on their athletic success. Unfortunately, the discussion of the show business and sport connection never rises above the level of cursory description.

Pieroth devotes virtually no space to a general discussion of race and sport in the 1930s, but she does, in a fashion, address the case of Olympic team members Tidye Pickett and Louise Stokes, two African-American sprinters. Pickett and Stokes, competing in a pool of six other qualifiers, sought berths on the 4 x 100-meter sprint relay team, were not selected by coach George Vreeland. The selection of an all-white team has prompted some writers to charge that the selection was the result of racial favoritism. Pieroth, however, is more judicious. She notes that Pickett failed to finish among the top six in 100-meter race at the Olympic trials in Evanston, Illinois. Stokes had tied for the fourth fastest time at Evanston. Pieroth argues that the "prevailing racial attitudes" of 1932 may have given rise to "discrimination, however subtle" that led to the exclusion of the Pickett and Stokes from the relay. A final answer to the question, she concludes, is "unlikely."

The issue of historical context aside, the real strength of *Their Day in the Sun* is in the detailed account of the activities and impressions of the American women at the 1932 Games. From this account a number of interesting character sketches emerge, none more vivid than that of Mildred "Babe" Didrikson. Didrikson is portrayed as an enormously talented athlete whose arrogance, thirst for the limelight and lack of respect for other athletes engendered resentment among her teammates. Pieroth faithfully reports the animosity that Didrikson left in her wake and makes a point of dispelling some of the Didrikson legend. She labels as myth, for example, the often repeated assertion that sexist rules and officials prevented Didrikson, the winner of five events at the AAU national championships in Evanston, from competing in more than three Olympic events. Pieroth notes that Didrikson qualified in only three Olympic events at Evanston -- the discus, high jump and hurdles. Her two other victories were in non-Olympic events.

In *Their Day in the Sun* Pieroth has elected to tell the "athletes' story," as she puts it, without examining in any detail the larger social milieu in which "stories" took place. Authors, of course, are entitled to establish the parameters of their work. However, the decision to confine the book to description without real analysis, the

lack of a more rigorous historical introduction and the absence of any reference to the current status of women in the Olympic Movement rob the athletes' story of much of its richness and significance. It also must be noted that Pieroth marshals little evidence to support her claim that the 1932 Games were pivotal in the development of women's sport. That claim, while plausible, remains largely undocumented. Finally, the impact of the story is diminished by its almost entirely American perspective.

Still, there is something to be said for a book, unadorned by theoretical framework and unencumbered by the vocabulary of post-modern academic discourse, that accurately reflects a moment in time. *Their Day in the Sun* succeeds on its own terms. Pieroth has woven together the voices of athletes and journalists to create a narrative with an echo of authenticity.