

Olympic Black Women by Martha Ward Plowden (Gretna, Louisiana: Pelican Publishing Company, 1996). Reviewed by Angela Schneider, The University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, Canada.

As a woman and as an Olympian, I was immediately drawn to this book assuming great things from the title. But in fact, the problems with this book start with the title. This is not the story of black women in the Olympics, but rather a list of the achievements of black American women. The book starts with the briefest of introductions to the history of the Olympic Games and then proceeds to a series of extremely short biographical notes on selected athletes. The book also contains sites of the modern Olympic Games and a glossary and reading list. This is clearly not a book intended for an academic audience or even sophisticated lay reader. The introductory sections provide only the barest outlines and are sometimes misleading as well.

The bulk of the book consists of short biographical notes on selected black American women Olympians. The notes are little more than lists of birth dates and places, and athletic achievements. The reader is always left wanting more. For instance, some of these women lived lives of tremendous personal courage. The story of Gail Devers and her fight against Graves disease are well known, but Plowden offers little more than the bare facts. In the section on Wilma Rudolph we are told that she was the first African-American woman to win three gold medals in track in a single Olympics and we are tantalised with the information that she was unable to walk properly until she was eight years old. But very little is added to round out that story into a tale of courage, personal strength and inspiration.

It is difficult to see the precise target of this book. There is some value in bringing together accounts of these exceptional women in one place, but the reader is left lamenting what could have been. This book could have been a series of stories of athletes who defied racism, sexism and poverty to reach the pinnacle of athletic achievement and become heroines and role models. But there is really scant detail and character in any of the entries to satisfy our curiosity or inspire our emulation. Nor does the prose inspire.

The book could have been an interesting and significant contribution to our understanding of the intersection of racism and sexism in the Olympic Movement, but these themes are never touched, much less examined. There is nothing on the concentration of black women (and men) in track and field and their relative scarcity in swimming and gymnastics or other sports. There is nothing on the role of the remarkable Tuskegee Institute on the development of black women's athletics.

The omissions of people and of entries are also surprising. There is nothing on the first two black women to compete in 1932 and 1936. There ought to be a story here. If racism was one of the dominant themes in the 1936 games for men it must also have been so for women. What happened? Nor is there any mention of Anita DeFrantz, the black American female member of the IOC.

The value of this book lies in its bringing together in one place a number of mini-accounts of prominent black American women athletes. Its failing is that it could have fulfilled that important function and also have been so much more. We have far too little information available on women in the Olympic Games, so when

the rare opportunity arises for publication on this topic, it seems almost tragic not to complete an adequate survey for even the lay reader.