

# JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

## Book Notes #153

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By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence  
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### ‘Americans & Their Games’ (Part IV-B) *Freedom’s Faultlines: Sports and the Quest for Women’s Rights in the Twentieth Century Pre-Title IX*



Concluding last week’s **Book Note** on “Sports and the Quest for Women’s Rights” during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, I remarked that as the 19<sup>th</sup> century turned into the 20<sup>th</sup> “something changed”.

What?

How?

Stifled by the *Cult of True Womanhood* and the *Myth of Female Frailty*, during the 19<sup>th</sup> century women's participation in sports was limited to decorous games of croquet. Benefiting from the crusading work of Catharine Beecher, this began to expand as women did calisthenics during physical education classes in the newly emerging women's schools. A further step forward resulted from a change in women's fashion from floor length dresses to the new "Bloomers" trouser-like garment freeing women to take full advantage of the bicycling craze that swept the country. It inspired Susan B. Anthony to famously say that a woman on a bicycle was "the picture of untrammelled womanhood". [1] At century's end, women's team sports took their first tentative steps when Sendra Berenson Abbott adapted the new game of basketball to the needs of her Smith College students. On the other side of the continent, the first intercollegiate women's basketball game was contested on April 4, 1896 when Stanford beat UC Berkeley 2-1. [2]

Using the metaphor of *The Profound & The Familiar* developed in Part One of this series, [3] let's briefly examine the forces percolating in American culture empowering those first sporting steps into the future. At *The Familiar* level – popular and commercial culture – increasing urbanization and several technological innovations challenged (perhaps unintentionally and unwittingly) society's conventions. At *The Profound* level – religious, socio-political, and interpersonal values – *First Phase Feminism's* drive for women's right to vote unseated the *Cult of True Womanhood's* submissiveness as a prime womanly virtue.

From that cultural stew, what changed was the emergence of the *New Woman*.



The *New Woman* directly challenged and refuted older notions of a woman's proper place as the *Home* and her proper role as man's handmaid. In an interview conducted by Nellie Bly for the *New York World* on February 15, 1896, Susan B. Anthony famously answered Bly's question "What do you think the new woman will be?" "*She'll be free,*" said Miss Anthony. "*Then she'll be whatever her best judgment wants to be. We can no more imagine what the true woman will be than we can what the true man will be.*" [4]

How did the *New Woman* free herself? [5]

She left *Home*.

The simplest definition of the phrase *New Woman* is Merriam-Webster's "a woman especially of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century actively resisting traditional controls and seeking to fill a complete role in the world." [6]

What caused women to resist 'traditional controls' and to seek a fuller life in the world beyond the *Home*?

At the ***Profound Level***, First Wave Feminism's success in creating educational opportunities made women aware of opportunities outside of the *Home* and prepared them, to borrow a phrase, to seize the opportunity as teachers and professional women working in journalism and offices. This combined with increasing urbanization brought women into the city as independent actors freed from the constraints of *Home* and small town America's narrow conventions.



In the city, the *New Woman* was free to pursue her own interests. This led to changing notions of acceptable careers and personal aspirations, clothing and fashion, artistic and political involvement, and personal relations and sexuality. A particularly poignant example of the divide between the *New Woman* and her mother's world is that between Anna Maria Jarvis and her mother Ann Reeves Jarvis. Ann Reeves Jarvis was the living embodiment of the *Cult of Domesticity*, but her daughter went to college and then to the city to pursue a career. Perhaps motivated by a twinge of guilt, perhaps out of simple respect for her mother's different view of the world, Anna Maria

Jarvis created Mother's Day in 1908 to honor her mother and all the mothers to whose world view she and other New Women had said 'goodbye to all that'. [7]

These shifting attitudes and values were reinforced at the ***Familiar Level*** by innovations in technology and popular culture. The telegraph and railroad knitted society together into networks of possibility, one of which was Benjamin Keith's creation of a chain of theaters featuring variety acts – *vaudeville* – and the birth of celebrity culture.



Celebrities such as Trixie Friganza, the great comedic star of the era who was also an active suffragist, provided women with new role models. Recorded music and the invention of the movies added impetus to this celebrity driven culture. By the 1920s *flapper* culture emerged as women emulated movie stars such as Clara Bow – the “It Girl”, and Louise Brooks – the “ultimate Flapper”. According to [History.com](https://www.history.com) “The classic image of a flapper is that of a stylish young party girl. Flappers smoked in public, drank alcohol, danced at jazz clubs and practiced sexual freedom that shocked the Victorian morality of their parents.” [8]



In the fine arts, Edna St. Vincent Millay’s “popularity as a poet had at least as much to do with her person: she was known for her riveting readings and performances, her progressive political stances, frank portrayal of both hetero and homosexuality, and, above all, her embodiment and description of new kinds of female experience and expression. ‘Edna St. Vincent Millay,’ notes her biographer Nancy Milford, ‘became the herald of the New Woman.’” [9]



On the ***Profound Level***, just as in World War II, during World War I women were called to leave *Home* to do men’s work while the men were at war. And, just as after World War II, when the men returned the women were sent back *Home*. Their experience, however, had changed them. *Home* would never again be their sole satisfaction. At the same time, First Wave Feminism’s drive for women’s rights and the example of strong, independent women provided by Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucy Stone, the Grimke sisters, Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, Margaret Sanger, Lucy Burns, and Alice Paul forever changed the image of American woman from housebound handmaid to free and independent person. It culminated with the heroic work of Alice Paul and other suffragists, who, first with the women’s protest parade in Washington, D.C. in March, 1913 and then the “Silent Sentinels” outside the White House gates, convinced President Woodrow Wilson to support the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment granting women the vote. It was enacted in 1920.

While all of this was happening, in the world of sports Suzanne Lenglen changed the image of women athletes. Lenglen was French, but her example was international. She prepared the way for the first wave of great women athletes in the 1920s.

What did Lenglen do?

She was the greatest women's tennis player of the amateur era. Like Babe Ruth, she transcended her sport. She became the first woman athlete to be a celebrity in the larger culture. She was ranked #1 in the world from 1921-1926; she won six Wimbledon singles championships and was undefeated in doubles. She was a consummate competitor. Ernest Hemingway indirectly complimented her in *The Sun Also Rises* when he said of one of the main characters, Robert Cohn, "He probably loved to win as much as Lenglen ..." [10]



But it was not only her excellence as a player that changed the path for women athletes. It was her refusal to accept the clothing restrictions of the era. Lenglen refused to wear the ankle length dresses confining other players. Instead she wore sleeveless blouses, did away with the layers of undergarments typical of the era, and wore loose flowing, calf-length skirts that gave her enhanced mobility freeing her innate athleticism. One can trace the

path of female freedom by evolving standards of clothing. Suzanne Lenglen freed women from restrictive clothing empowering them to compete to their full ability. [11]

Along with Lenglen the first wave of great women athletes appeared during the 1920s. First appearing in the Olympics in 1924 at the age of 11, Sonja Heinie was not American, but the Norwegian figure skater won the gold medal in 1928, 1932, and 1936. Like Lenglen, she became a celebrity outside of her sport starring in movies during the 1930s and 1940s such as *Thin Ice* (1937) and *Sun Valley Serenade* (1941). [12] American Gertrude Ederle competed in the 1924 Olympics and in 1926 was the first woman to swim the English Channel. She became an American icon. I can remember my mother, who was a champion high school swimmer in the 1930s, constantly mentioning her. [13] The greatest, or at least the most famous, female athlete of the era, however, was another tennis player – Helen Wills Moody.



Combining power and control, at the 1924 Summer Olympics in Paris, Moody won two gold medals. She won 31 Grand Slam championships, including eight at Wimbledon. Because of her intensity on the court, she became known as “Little Miss Poker Face”. Like Lenglen, she wore short-sleeved blouses, short skirts, for the era, ending at the top of her knees, and, unlike Lenglen, she refused to wear hose or stockings, instead opting for anklet socks. Although she

herself was anything but a “flapper”, her bare legs were part of the decade’s signal that times had changed. When she died at 92 in 1998, the ***New York Times*** opined that she was “arguably the most dominant tennis player of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the first American-born woman to achieve international celebrity as an athlete...” [14]

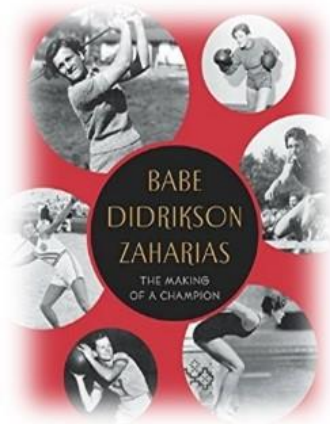
Despite the success of a handful of elite women athletes, most women were still constrained by a philosophy of physical education for high school girls that sought to combine physical activities with an adherence to the *Cult of Domesticity*. It descended from Catharine Beecher’s pioneering efforts. Women physical educators of the 1930s through the 1960s adhered to five tenets designed to protect young girls and women from sports damaging them physically and undermining traditional roles. First, these educators opposed excessive competition and violent athletics. Although *New Women* themselves, these teachers still accepted some version of the Myth of Female Frailty. They were dismayed, secondly, by the exploitation and sexualization of girls in commercial sport, which to their mind violated the precept of female purity as a woman’s highest virtue.

Third, they opposed sports that favored the highly skilled at the expense of all. They feared that if competitive sports dominated women’s sport, just as in men’s sports, students with no particular athletic aptitude would be shunted aside in favor of the few with elite potential. As we shall see, this is exactly what happened. As an extension of that belief, fourth, they argued vehemently against highly competitive sports including the Olympics. And, lastly, this led them to advocate for “Play for play’s sake” and “a sport for every girl & a girl for every sport.” [15]

This 1930s era conundrum about how to advance competitive athletic opportunities for those with elite potential while maintaining a healthy involvement in sports for all students still bedevils 21<sup>st</sup> century educators. It would be hard to argue that the fears of those 1930s era physical educators have not been realized. Today most high schools and youth athletic programs serve those with elite potential at the expense of the involvement of all students.

With high school and amateur sports dominated by educators who accepted the above philosophy, women's sports at the high school and intercollegiate level in the era between 1930 and 1972 was essentially intramural. There were tennis leagues, intramural basketball leagues, and swimming sessions, but it was all low-key. The only exception, interestingly enough, was the state of Iowa, where six-on-six basketball was wildly popular. [16]

With schools and colleges dominated by an intramurals, competitive sports moved out of the school system into sandlot leagues and semi-professional leagues with employer sponsored teams. I am just old enough to remember the last gasps of that culture in the late-1950s and early-1960s with the Bartlesville, Oklahoma men's Phillips 66ers basketball teams. Sponsored by the Phillips Petroleum Company, they were an AAU powerhouse. [17] The greatest women's athlete of the era, however, played for the Employers' Casualty Insurance Co. Golden Cyclones in the Industrial League.



She was Babe Didrickson Zaharias, the original of the photoshopped character Katharine Hepburn played in the *Pat & Mike* movies. Born in Beaumont, TX, Didrickson (Zaharias was her married name) dropped out of high school and went to work. Her athletic career began as an amateur on the teams her employer, Employers' Casualty Insurance Co., sponsored in an AAU Industrial League. They were called Golden Cyclones. Like Jim Thorpe, it can be argued that she is the greatest female athlete of all time. She is ranked one of the 50 greatest athletes of all time – male or female. She got her nickname "Babe" because since childhood she had been called "Baby", but after she hit five home runs in one baseball game she became the "Babe" *ala* Babe Ruth. [18]

She won two gold medals and a silver in track & field at 1932 Los Angeles Olympics in the 80m hurdles, javelin, and high jump. She is the only athlete, male or female, to win Olympic medals in running, throwing, and jumping events. In 1934, she pitched in three major league spring training games, including two scoreless innings for the New Orleans Pelicans against the Cleveland Indians. Taking up golf in the late-1930s in order to earn a living from her athletic skills, she won the U.S. Amateur in 1946 and the British Amateur in 1947. She was a founding member of the Ladies Professional Golf Association. She died in 1956 at 45 of colon cancer. [19]



Zaharias wasn't the only woman playing sports during the 1930s and 1940s. When World War II broke out, Philip K. Wrigley, owner of the Chicago Cubs, founded the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League. It played between 1943 and 1954. It was the subject of a highly successful Tom Hanks film – *A League of Their Own* (1992). The league consisted of ten teams spread across the Midwest. The most successful was the Rockford Peaches.

Although the caliber of play was high and very popular with spectators – at its peak in 1948, it attracted over 900,000 fans – it echoed the old protectionist attitude towards women. The power of the Cult of True Womanhood could still be felt as the players were required to wear skirts, short though they might be, and lived in team sponsored housing so they could be chaperoned. Like their World War I mothers and World War II colleagues – Rosie the Riveter and other women working in offices and factories during the war years – when the men came back, the women were sent home. [20]



With a revived Cult of Domesticity during the 1950s – think of popular culture television shows like *Father Knows Best*, *Make Room for Daddy*, and *Ozzie and Harriett* – women's sports only flourished in figure skating, tennis, and the Tennessee State "Tigerbelles", whose track and field teams spawned Olympic champions. In figure skating, in 1953 Tenley Albright was the first American woman to win the world championships. In 1956, she won the gold medal in the Olympics. After her figure skating career ended, she earned an M.D. at Harvard in 1961 and became a successful surgeon. [21]



Albright aside, during the 1950s women's sports flourished in America's historically black colleges and universities. Born in Harlem after her parents moved north to New York during "The Great Migration", Althea Gibson dropped out of school at 13. Her athletic abilities, however, captured the attention of neighbors who got her tennis lessons at the Cosmopolitan Tennis Club. Her ability caught the attention of other sponsors. By 1946 she was a member of the United States Lawn Tennis Association and was playing in United States Tennis Association's Indoor Championships. Although she dropped out of school at 13, after her amateur success in the late-1940s, Gibson



attended Florida A&M University on a full-athletic scholarship. During the 1950s, in addition to the French Open, Althea Gibson won both the Wimbledon and U.S. Open championships. She was the first African American woman to do so. [22]



Ed Temple's Tennessee State *Tigerbelles*, however, just might be the greatest sports story of the 1950s you never heard of. As Richard Williams documents in *The Guardian*, Temple's "sprint queens" won 23 Olympic medals, including gold medals by Madeline Manning, Barbara Jones, Martha Hudson, Wilma Rudolph and Wyomia Tyus. Rudolph and Tyus won three each. Rudolph, who overcame childhood polio, won three gold medals in the 1960 Rome Olympics. *Sports Illustrated* classified her as the greatest figure in Tennessee sports in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. [23]

As the Eisenhower, "happy days" 1950s ended, the world once again turned.



Other than the work of Eleanor Roosevelt, Frances Perkins, Pauli Murray and a few others, after the passage of the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment overt feminist activity subsided during the period from 1920 until the early 1960s. Then in 1963 Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique* describing 'the malady that cannot be named'. Friedan described the ennui and restlessness college educated women and others who had experienced work outside of the *Home* felt as the 1950s revived the Cult of Domesticity. Friedan's book sparked the beginning of Second Wave Feminism and its assertion of a woman's right to full participation in American society. In 1966, Friedan was a co-founder of the National Organization of Women. By decade's end, the New York Radical Women's coalition and others had revived the quest for women's rights. Led by Robin Morgan, Carol Hanisch, Shulamith Firestone, and Cathie Sarachild, in January, 1968 the New York Radical Women's coalition buried "traditional womanhood" in a mock funeral in Arlington National Cemetery; in September they protested the Miss America pageant, unfurling a "Women's Liberation" banner during the closing ceremonies; and in November they held a women's liberation convention in Chicago.



During the 1960s women's sports languished. Its highlights included Diane Crump riding in the Kentucky Derby in 1970, Peggy Fleming winning the gold medal in figure skating at the 1968 Olympics, and Katharine Switzer becoming the first registered woman runner to complete the Boston Marathon. Switzer did that in 1967 despite being attacked by race

manager Jock Semple who realized that entrant #261 – K. Switzer – was a woman! Horrified, Semple tried to pull her number off only to be thwarted by other male runners. Also running in the marathon that day was Bobbi Gibb, the first woman across the finish line. She, unfortunately, ran unofficially without a number. As the '60s ended and the '70s began, the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (AIAW) was formed. It sought to find a middle path between “a sport for every girl, and a girl for every sport” and the gathering support to encourage competitive women's athletics. The AIAW would be swamped by 1972's passage of Title IX.

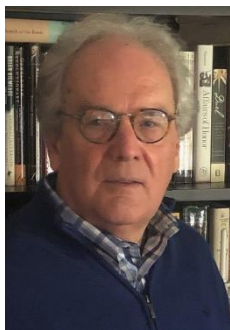
Obscured by the decade's social turbulence, during the 1960s five major conferences or meetings about girls and sports were held. They were the National Institutes on Girls' Sports. They met between 1963 and 1969. Their goal was undoing the 1930s' era philosophy of girls physical education that opposed women's elite extramural sports and competition. In the process, they wanted to readjust perceptions about women's physical capabilities and fitness for athletic competition. In short, they wanted to bury the myth of female frailty and jettison the notion that women were unfit for serious competition.

They were driven by two motivating forces. First, undoing the old notions of women's weakness and unsuitability for competitive sports. And, two, they wanted to improve American performance in the Olympics. Despite some individual success (see Wilma Rudolph), during the Cold War American women continually finished second to the East German and Russian Olympians in overall medal competitions. The new women's movement in sports wanted to win; in order to do that, girls and women's participation in school and college sports had to be championed. [24]

This was a major philosophical revolution. Largely unnoted at the time, combined with 1972's passage of Title IX, this shift in attitude created an entirely new world for American women's sports.

Next week – Title IX and sports and the quest for women's rights.

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### End Notes

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