

# Historica Canada Education Portal

## Bobbie Rosenfeld

### Overview

This lesson is based on viewing the Bobbie Rosenfeld biography from [The Canadians](#) series. Rosenfeld won several medals at the 1928 Amsterdam Olympics, the first time women were permitted to compete in track and field events. The lesson explores Rosenfeld's career and the level of acceptance for female athletes in the 1920's.

### Aims

In a variety of creative activities, students will assess and evaluate Rosenfeld's accomplishments while considering both the historic and contemporary role of women in competitive sport.

### Background

***"Miss Rosenfeld, who never had a coach, was that rarity, a natural athlete."***

***-Globe and Mail***

In 1925, the Patterson Athletic Club, sponsored by Toronto's Patterson

Candies, finished third in the Ontario Ladies Track and Field Championship. The Club managed First-place finishes in the discus, the 220-yards, the 120-yard low hurdles, and the long jump, and Second place in the 100-yards, and the javelin. All in all, an impressive showing by the "Pats," rendered the more so by the fact that the Club had but one entrant in the meet - Fanny "Bobbie" Rosenfeld.

The easiest way to describe Bobbie Rosenfeld's athleticism is to say that the only sport at which she did not excel was swimming. She was the consummate team player. She dominated every sport she tried, track and field, softball, basketball, lacrosse and, her favourite team sport, hockey.

This documentary is the life story of this funny and unusual woman who loved to perform for a large audience. No stage could provide her a bigger audience than the 1928 Amsterdam Olympics: the first year that women were allowed to participate in track and field events. Bobbie's Silver medal in the 100 metres, her selfless help for a teammate in the 800 metres (a distance for which she had not trained at all), and a Gold medal in the 4x100-metre relay are all only a small part of the story of this courageous athlete. She won the women's individual competition and led Canada to victory in the overall team competition.

Less than a year after the Amsterdam Olympics, Bobbie was stricken by arthritis so badly that she was bedridden for eight months and spent another year on crutches. Unbelievably, she was soon back and in 1931 she was the leading home run hitter in the Sunnyside softball league and scored the winning goal in her hockey team's playoffs.

But another bout of arthritis led to Rosenfeld's retirement from athletic competition and she had to be content with coaching. In 1937, she joined the staff of the *Globe and Mail* to write a column, *Sports Reel*, which ran

for more than twenty years.

In 1949 she was among the first inductees into Canada's Sports Hall of Fame and on her forty-fifth birthday, Bobbie Rosenfeld was named Canadian Woman Athlete of the Half-Century in a Canadian Press poll.

The *Natural Athlete* is a documentary celebration of Bobbie's life through the eyes and ears of a number of people who saw her perform, wished they had seen her perform, or modeled their own outstanding sporting careers on her incredible example.

Even after all this time, there is no serious challenger to Bobbie for the title: Female Athlete of the Twentieth Century.

## **Activities**

**Time Allowance:** 1 - 4 hours

### **Procedures:**

1. In 1933, a prominent Vancouver sports writer described female track and field athletes as "leathery-legged, flat-chested muscle molls...feebly participating in events...that were woeful to watch."

How did Bobbie Rosenfeld respond to such comments? Direct students to use the video to begin to develop their arguments.

Have students create a criticism vs. rebuttal organizer. On one side of the page students list five reasons why some people did not want women to continue playing sports and on the other side students summarize

Bobbie's responses.

Students then use this information, as well as some of their own insights, to write a letter to the editor responding to arguments against women's participation in organized sport. The whole class may wish to discuss whether any popular convictions of the 1920s and 1930s about women and sports can still be found today. Why or why not?

2. Ask students to work in pairs to design a poster aimed at encouraging young Canadian women to participate in sports. Each poster should make reference to the accomplishments of at least four outstanding Canadian women athletes, two of whom must have competed before 1950.

The class may wish to brainstorm a list of contemporary Canadian female athletes as an introduction to this activity.

3. Using the video as a source, ask students to choose three critical moments of Rosenfeld's life. For each of these moments students will create a series of tableaux. Examples of these critical events can include (but should not be limited to) going to a Canadian school for the first time, her 4x100 relay victory, her actions in the 800m race, her game-winning hockey goal, and her stint as a sportswriter when almost all sports journalists were men. To accompany these tableaux students will collaboratively write a short narrative for every scene. Students may pretend that the narratives are excerpts from Bobbie's journal. What might Bobbie have thought as she reflected on these events?

Groups take turns presenting their tableaux and narrated reflections in front of the class.

4. Students create a series of three postcards that Bobbie could have written to her sister from the 1928 Olympics. The text of each postcard should describe major events that Bobbie witnessed both in Europe and upon her return to Toronto. You may wish to review the video footage of these events contained in the documentary with your students. Each postcard should also describe some of Bobbie's perspectives and emotions about the major events in her life at this time.

Alternately, students can write a series of three postcards written by one of the Canadian Olympic team chaperones to his/her family back in Canada. This person should emphasize the developments surrounding the "Matchless Six" Canadian women's Olympic team. What perceptions of Bobbie Rosenfeld might this person have held?

5. In 1928, female athletes from Great Britain chose to boycott the Olympic Games to protest the limited number of events in which women were allowed to compete. Ask students to construct two mind maps on the subject of women competing in track and field events. One mind map should be from the perspective of a British female athlete who has decided to boycott the games. In the other mind map, students pretend that they are Bobbie Rosenfeld or any another member of the "Matchless Six" Canadian Olympic team. Following this exercise the class may prepare a debate on the idea of the boycott. Was boycotting the 1928 Olympics a good way of protesting women's exclusion from many events?

6. Direct students to work with a partner to create a "Rosenfeld" cereal box. Each box should contain at least ten biographical facts highlighted in the video, as well as emphasizing aspects of Bobbie's life that would appeal to Canadian consumers. What will their marketing strategy be? The boxes can be presented and evaluated by the class.

7. Using magazines and the internet, ask your students to research and produce a short report on a contemporary Canadian athlete. Students may want to make notes comparing how athletes of today stack up against Rosenfeld in four important areas. Points for comparison could include: titles won; sports played; endorsement contracts earned; personal challenges faced; and legacy. Following this exercise, ask students to respond to the following question "Does Canada's top female athlete of 1900-1950 deserve to be voted as only the sixth most important athlete of the century?" Students should use facts from their research to defend their position.

## **Resources**

[The Canadians: Bobbie Rosenfeld](#)

[Fanny "Bobbie" Rosenfeld - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[Women and Sport](#)

[Women in Sport](#)

[The History of Canadian Women in Sport - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

Cochran, Jean, et al. *Women in Canadian Life: Sports*. Toronto: Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1977.

Consentino, Frank. *Not Bad, Eh?: Great Moments in Canadian Sports History*. Burnstown, ON: GSPH Incorporated, 1990. 29-42.

McDonald, David. *For the Record: Canada's Greatest Women Athletes*. Rexdale, ON: Mesa Associates, 1981. 9-13.

Morrow, Don and Mary Keyes et al. *A Concise History of Sport in Canada*. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1989. 230-255, 291-292.

Merritt, Susan. *Her Story III: Women from Canada's Past*. 1999.

*Women of Valor: A resource guide for the 2000 women of valor poster*, The Jewish Women's Archive, Brookline, MA: 1999.

[Jewish Women's Archive](#)