

Historica Canada Education Portal

Women in Sport

Overview

This study guide is based on viewing the Footprint videos about [Bobbie Rosenfeld](#), [Barbara Ann Scott](#), [Carling Bassett](#), [Marlene Stewart-Streit](#), and [Marilyn Bell](#). These athletes represent 100 years of major achievement by Canadian women in international competition. Their stories also provide an opportunity to examine the history of changing attitudes towards the participation of women in Canadian sport, and the social forces that shape these attitudes.

Aims

To develop an appreciation for the often under-reported accomplishments of women in the history of Canadian sport; to encourage an understanding of the social and political contexts in which those accomplishments took place; and, to critically examine the complex and changing attitudes towards the participation of women in Canadian sports.

Background

When the Canadian women's hockey team took home the gold medal,

defeating the United States in a hotly contested final at the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City, Canadians from coast-to-coast celebrated their victory. The amount of attention given to a women's team in a traditionally male sport seemed unprecedented in Canadian history. Canada's women hockey players quickly joined the ranks of the most recognized and celebrated female athletes in Canadian sports history.

Because many of us know very little about the history of women in Canadian sports, it might come as a surprise to learn that almost one hundred years ago, an age in which many assume that stereotypical attitudes towards women dominated mainstream society, women were active and frequent participants in Canadian sporting life, often in sports which even today are primarily played by men. The first women's hockey game in Canada was played in Ottawa, in February 1891. Ladies hockey clubs existed across Quebec at the turn of the century. And while most of us know about the gold medal triumph of Canada's women's team at Salt Lake City, far fewer know about the Edmonton Grads, Canada's women's world basketball champions, whose success made basketball a hugely popular women's sport in Canada in the 1920s. In 1930, the Sunnyside Ladies Softball League drew bigger crowds, larger box office receipts, and more extensive media coverage than any other baseball or softball league in Canada.

It is during this period that Russian émigré Fanny "Bobbie" Rosenfeld established herself as perhaps the most accomplished Canadian female athlete of all time. Known as Bobbie because of her bobbed hair, by 1921 Rosenfeld was the top-ranked female sprinter in Canada. In 1925 she was ranked number one in 220 yards, long jump, shot-put and discus and so perhaps it's not surprising that Rosenfeld won Canada's first Olympic track and field medal — a silver — in 1928. She also won the Toronto Grass Court Tennis Championship, and played competitive basketball,

softball, and hockey, her favourite sport. As a star centre for the North Toronto AAA hockey club, and then as captain of the Patterson Pats, Rosenfeld dominated Ontario women's hockey in the late 1920s. Perhaps surprisingly, women's hockey of the era was full contact, and very rough. Players regularly suffered cuts and serious injuries, just like the men of their time.

As women's participation in a broad range of sports in the 1920s exploded, objections to the kind of no-holds-barred athleticism displayed by Rosenfeld and her contemporaries emerged. In an editorial at the time, the Toronto Daily Star wrote: "If ladies hockey is to be made a success, body-checking must be eliminated. ... The fans like to see the ladies perform, but they do not want to see any roughness creep into the contests." These fears that rough and athletic behaviour were "unladylike" and "inappropriate" became more pronounced in the 1930's. A Saturday Night magazine article argued that women who "develop masculine attributes" are likely to produce "weak sons". Physical educators also produced "evidence" that women were unfit for athletics. At the 1936 Olympics in Berlin Montreal Star sports editor Elmer Ferguson wrote that he was disgusted by the "violent, face-straining, dirtying, body bouncing, sweaty, graceless, struggling ..." of women athletes. Ferguson argued that women should only participate in what he considered graceful, feminine events, "free from grime." Figure skating, diving, swimming, and tennis were the sort of sports generally considered more appropriate for women of the time.

This sort of criticism of female athletes would intensify in the post-war era. During the Second World War, women were needed to replace men in the labour force, producing goods for the war effort and filling the jobs left by men who were fighting overseas. After the war, millions of men returned home and with this, an increased emphasis on women's

"femininity" and domestic responsibilities was used as a means of encouraging women to leave the labour force.

This focus on traditional gender roles was reflected in the remarkable post-war emphasis placed on the femininity of female athletics during the late 1940's. The sports in which women were encouraged to excel tended to be the so-called "beauty producing" sports. These were the grime-free endeavours Elmer Ferguson identified, which reflected more traditionally feminine values, like prettiness, daintiness, grace, and not too much visible sweat. Media coverage of athletes practicing those sports also tended to emphasize the athletes' "femininity," as opposed to their physical accomplishments.

Canadian figure skating icon Barbara Ann Scott is a good example of this tendency. Like Rosenfeld, Scott was among the most famous athletes of her generation. Twice world figure skating champion and twice the European champion, she won the gold medal at the 1948 Winter Games in St. Moritz and was Canada's first Winter Olympic individual gold medallist. Media coverage of both Scott and her sport, however, reinforced a very specific image of femininity. A 1948 *Time* magazine description is typical. "Barbara Ann, with a peaches-and-cream complexion, saucer-size blue eyes and a rosebud mouth, is certainly pretty enough. Her light brown hair (golden now that she bleaches it) falls page-boy style on her shoulders. She weighs a trim, girlish 107 lbs ... She looks, in fact, like a doll which is to be looked at but not touched." The emphasis on Scott's feminine looks (and out and out comparison of her to a "doll") reinforces the dominant social expectations of women at the time. The prodigious achievements of champion golfer Marlene Stewart-Streit and marathon swimmer Marilyn Bell in the 1950s were also in sports considered feminine at the time.

The 1960s and 1970s saw the emergence of the "women's liberation" movement in North America, in which large groups of women began to challenge the limited roles and images offered to them by traditional society. At the same time, the women's movement began documenting and speaking publicly about formerly taboo subjects — female sexuality, images of women's bodies in media and popular culture, and sexual abuse. As society became more open, women's sexuality also became more openly used as a marketing tool. And so for the first time in North America, women's appearances increasingly were described in explicit, sexual terms. In short, women were treated openly as sexual objects, rather than as serious athletes.

The experience of Canadian teen-sensation tennis star Carling Bassett provides an interesting glimpse into the different social forces operating during this period. Ranked as high as eight on the Women's Tennis Association tour, Bassett was one of the most successful female tennis players in Canada's history. Media coverage of her achievements, however, tended to focus on everything but her tennis successes. Consider the title of a 6000 word *Sports Illustrated* profile of Bassett written in 1983, when Bassett was 15 years old: "Here's Carling, her daddy's darling." Drawing on the age-old archetype of "Daddy's little girl" Bassett's responsibility for her own success is continually undermined by a description of her as her father's "favourite project." Reflecting much of the media attention paid to the pretty, blonde Bassett in the prime of her career, more of the article is devoted to how she feels about boys ("Carling says she likes her men 'young.' She says, 'They look fresher.'") than the nuts and bolts of her tennis ability. In this way, portrayals of Bassett laid the groundwork for someone like Anna Kournikova today. Kournikova's sex-symbol status has trumped her relative underachievement as a professional and made her the most recognized figure in contemporary women's tennis.

In 1989, after several disappointing years on the tour, Bassett revealed some of the consequences of attempting to live up to a social image of femininity that has more to do with surface than substance. In response to the immense pressure on her to be pretty and perfect, Bassett became bulimic. "At 15, I wasn't heavy by any means," Bassett told a magazine, " (but) ... at 14, 15, 16, your body starts to mature ... you start feeling pressure." An older player on the tour taught Bassett how to put her fingers down her throat and instantly get rid of calories. Living up to the image demanded by a social context in which a woman's attractiveness to men is often considered more important than her achievements had a negative effect on Bassett's athletic success.

Rowing, which demands bulk and immense physical strength, is not the sort of "beauty producing" endeavour described by Elmer Ferguson in the 1930s. Rower Marnie McBean, with partner Kathleen Heddle and teammate Silken Laumann, dominated the sport in the 1990s, becoming the most decorated Canadian Olympians of all time. She argues that over the last 20 years much has changed for women athletes, "When I first started rowing, muscles were so uncool," McBean says. "Even when we were covered by the press, I would be described as blue-eyed, and maybe I might have a big smile. Silken was described as a Nordic Valkyrie with a 150-watt smile. Now we're 'aggressive' and 'dynamic' and 'powerful,' and we're 'muscular.' ... 10 years ago they thought we were dykes because we have muscles ... muscles were a sexuality issue for other people. Now it's a fitness issue."

Expectations of, and opportunities for, women athletes in Canada have transformed considerably in the last 20 years. When Kathleen Heddle began rowing in the mid-1980s, her rowing club had only begun accepting female members a few years earlier. Participation rates for

younger female athletes in sports previously considered inappropriate for women have skyrocketed since then. Still, gender and sexuality play a role in women's sport. For instance, the International Volleyball Federation (FIVB) requires female Beach Volleyball players to wear, skimpy, skin-tight bikinis at all competitions. While men wear loose fitting shorts and t-shirts, should female athletes wish to cover up with a t-shirt or tights in windy conditions, they must appeal to an all-male Control Committee (Robinson 2002, pp 50-53). Instituted over the objections of many of the sport's elite players, well-known Canadian sports journalist and former Olympic athlete Laura Robinson argues that this decision was an obvious ploy to increase the highly athletic sport's marketability to 18–35 year old men. In 2000, the Canadian Nordic Ski Team, needing money for training programs, produced a nude calendar that raised \$80,000. While the calendar is in no way pornographic (and, some team members argue, shows women with healthy body-images), it does provoke the question of why Canadian women athletes who compete in the Olympics are in a financial position in which they feel they must fundraise with a nude calendar.

Whatever the answers, it is clear from the history of these great female athletes that the relationship between female champions and Canadian attitudes towards women's roles in society remains complex and intimately connected.

Activities

1. Women Athletes and the Roaring 1920s

The 1920s were a period of intensive participation by women in Canadian sporting life. It was also a period, before the Great Depression, of great

economic activity and increasing freedom for women. Research and write a short essay about either a team or individual from the list below.

- Edmonton Grads
- Florence Harvey and the Ladies Canadian Ladies Golf Union
- The Women's Olympic Games of the 20's and 30's
- Velma Springstead
- Alexandrine Gibb and the Toronto Ladies Athletic Club
- Women's Amateur Athletic Federation
- Ethel Catherwood and the Canadian "Matchless Six"
- Women's Hockey in the 20's
- Sunnyside Women's Softball League

2. Fanny "Bobbie" Rosenfeld

The Jewish Women's Archive has an excellent on-line exhibit devoted to Rosenfeld, her life, achievements, and the history of the time. Using this archive as a primary resource, have your class develop a comprehensive wall display profile of Rosenfeld, including a timeline, archival photographs, and research material.

The archive can be accessed at:

<http://www.jwa.org/exhibits/wov/rosenfeld/>

Divide your class into small groups. Have each of the groups choose one of the athletes profiled by the Women and Sport Footprint Videos. Using links, newspaper and magazine articles, and books, develop similar wall-display projects for each of the eight athletes profiled.

3. The Post War Era

After the Second World War, opportunity for women across Canada to participate in organized competitive sport declined, much like their opportunities to participate in the paid labour force. As a class, research different aspects of life during the post-war period, particularly those affecting women of the time.

4. Physicality, Stereotyping, and Gender

In a large group, lead three brainstorming sessions.

Divide the class into small, gender-separate groups. Ask each group to make two lists. The first should list five to ten physical and mental attributes the group feels are generally considered most important for men. The second should list five to ten physical and mental attributes generally considered important for women.

Come together into a classroom group. Before collating the results of the small-group lists, lead a third brainstorming session that focuses on the physical and, to a lesser extent, mental, attributes the students consider necessary to be a good athlete. In this case, the definition of athlete can be quite broad – from the flexibility necessary for a golfer to the physical strength required by a weightlifter.

Using this third list as a comparison, document results to the small-group lists. Lead a class discussion. Which characteristics match? Does one group seem to be more “athletic” than the other? If so, is that necessarily true? Do different sports require different attributes? Do we tend to think of male dominated sports when considering the attributes necessary to make a good athlete?

Ask the group to consider that their small-group lists were based on “generally considered” characteristics. Is it possible that some of those “generally considered” opinions are in some ways linked to relatively narrow, stereotypical ideas about what male or female athletes are good at?

5. Different but Equal

In the 1920s, Bobbie Rosenfeld played full-contact hockey. Body checking was later eliminated in women’s hockey because of its roughness and potential to injure. International level women’s hockey today has maintained the ban on body checking.

Some analysts argue that because of its ban on physical hitting, women’s hockey is a much more exciting game than that played by men. They feel that the game is faster and has a much more exciting emphasis on skills like passing, stick-handling, and shooting.

Ask students to prepare for and against arguments and then moderate a debate on the following proposition: *Body-checking should be reinstated as a permissible part of International Women’s Hockey.*

6. Media Portrayals

In discussing her experience as a rower, Marnie McBean argues that much has changed for women athletes in the past 20 years. She believes that women athletes’ physical prowess and achievements now receive more and more positive attention than in previous decades.

Ask students to test this hypothesis.

Each student should select two modern athletes that they admire, one male and one female. They should locate three articles about each of these athletes with comparable word counts for each. Students should analyze these articles and determine if there is any discernible difference in how the achievements of the athletes are portrayed. Pay particular attention to the use of descriptive language. All conclusions should be supported by specific, quotable examples in the articles. Repeat the exercise with two athletes from the 1970's and compare with the results of modern athletes. Do students notice any difference between the decades?

Do students have more difficulty finding media coverage of female athletes?

As a class, analyze the sports section of a major daily newspaper every day for a week. Ascertain what percentage of coverage in the section is devoted to women's sports or women athletes. According to the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity, the average daily newspaper devotes 8.8% of its sports coverage to women's sports. This, however, is up from 2.8% in 1991. Lead a class discussion. Why would so little attention, historically, have been paid? And why would there be an almost 400% increase in 10 years?

Resources

Footprint Videos

[Bobbie Rosenfeld](#)

[Barbara Ann Scott](#)

[Carling Bassett](#)

[Marlene Stewart-Streit](#)

[Marilyn Bell](#)

The Canadian Encyclopedia

[Women and Sport](#)

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

[Women in Sports](#)

[Bobbie Rosenfeld](#)

[Barbara Ann Scott](#)

[Carling Bassett](#)

[Marlene Stewart-Streit](#)

[Marilyn Bell](#)

[Women and War](#)

[Women in the Labour Force](#)

[Canadian Women at the Winter Olympics](#)

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