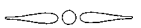
CHAPTER 2

GRASS-ROOTS GROWTH AND SEXUAL SENSATION IN THE FLAPPER ERA



In 1927 American tennis sensation Helen Wills won the first of her eight women's singles championships at England's prestigious Wimbledon tennis tournament. That year marked the beginning of Wills's absolute reign in the world of tennis. Combining "manlike strokes" with "feminine grace," she began a streak of uninterrupted victories that lasted until 1933.[1]

The young star from Berkeley had begun her tennis career on the private courts of northern California. As the daughter of a physician father and doting mother, she received all the educational and athletic benefits of an upper-middle-class upbringing. Yet, when she burst upon the national scene in 1923, winning the first of her seven U.S. singles titles at Forest Hills, New York, she won instant popularity as a "commoner" who had broken into the snobbish upper-class world of championship tennis. Her fresh face, girlish beauty, and trademark plain white visor enhanced her reputation as a simple yet poised and graceful young champion. Within a few short years she achieved the status of a national hero, revered by the public as "the American girl" or simply "our Helen."

Wills's success and popularity in the late 1920s capped a decade of tremendous growth in women's sports. While stars of tennis, golf, and swimming gained national celebrity status, in communities across the country ordinary female athletes took to the playing fields with less fanfare but an equal amount of enthu-

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siasm.[2] As interest and participation levels rose, so too did women's skill level. When Helen Wills racked up victory after victory against female challengers, the caliber of her play so impressed observers that some suggested she should begin entering men's tournaments. Wills seemed uninterested in pursuing this option and stated that men were still the superior tennis players. However, she did acknowledge the possibility that some day the best women might defeat top-ranked male tennis players.[3]

In a decade of extraordinary progress for women athletes, Wills's prediction did not seem farfetched. After all, in 1924 a twenty-year-old backstroker from Chicago, Sybil Bauer, shocked the sportsworld by breaking the world (men's) record in the backstroke. Two years later teenage phenomenon Gertrude Ederle, an Olympic medal winner from New York, gained international renown by becoming only the sixth person to swim the English Channel—two hours faster than the five men who preceded her.[4]

The energy and skill of female athletes held Americans in thrall. Most striking was the sportswoman's expressed love of competition and her dedication to victory. In 1920 French tennis star Suzanne Lenglen, who reigned supreme in European tennis and would soon tour the United States to take on the best American women, informed the readers of *Collier's* magazine that serious female players "are out to win. No mercy is shown." In sport, she added, "There is no such thing as 'ladies first.' "[5] Helen Wills apparently heeded Lenglen's advice, using her steely resolve and legendary powers of concentration to cut down opponents "without even a pretense of mercy."[6]

A fascinated public observed the phenomenon with one part admiration and one part consternation. When figures like Wills, Lenglen, or Ederle pursued and achieved athletic excellence, they incorporated masculine qualities of strength, speed, and agility into a new standard of womanhood. Feminists heralded female athletic success as an advance for all women. But traditionalists looked on in anxious wonder, suspecting that the changes might also signal a loss of masculine privilege and superiority. If women were no longer a fragile, timid group in need of protection, men

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could not be assured of their own role as powerful protectors, and consequently relations between the sexes would have to be reconsidered.

The resulting unease found expression in media reactions to Helen Wills as she extended her remarkable string of victories. Her performance began to strike some observers as more disturbing than pleasing. Reporters who had earlier lauded the "American girl's" charm, now described Wills's winning streak as a product of cold, relentless play; she was a "heartless crusher of lesser talents" and a "killer type of fighter" whose "austere and inexorable" style had "all the warmth and animation of a deceased codfish."[7]

Whether praised or panned, Wills and other women athletes occupied a central place in a popular discourse preoccupied with assessing the meaning and relative power of womanhood and manhood. As athletic opportunities spread rapidly at the grass-roots level and women made new inroads into national and international sport, the female athlete exceeded the bounds of "moderation" proposed by cautious experts, earning a reputation for physical excellence and sexual appeal—qualities that stirred not only excitement but fierce debate. Sport in the 1920s became an important site, symbolic as well as actual, for reflecting on and negotiating contemporary gender relations. Observers witnessed increasing numbers of fun-loving women competing against each other and, indirectly, against men as well. Frequently they interpreted the spectacle not only in athletic terms but as part of a larger contest between modern women and men struggling over resources and power.

The popularity of sport in the 1920s reflected far-reaching changes in American society. With the expansion of corporate capitalism, enterprising businesses realized that leisure could be commercialized on a larger scale and sold to working- and middle-class consumers in the form of recreational equipment, sportswear, and public entertainment. As the economy shifted toward mass-marketed consumer products and commercial entertainment aimed at a broadly based middle-class clientele, more

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and more Americans began to look for personal fulfillment through consumption and leisure.[8]

Athletics in particular captured the imagination of this newly prosperous, fun-seeking public. Professional baseball and boxing, amateur track and field, swimming, golf, tennis, college football, and auto and horse racing thrived in the 1920s. Athletic attendance surpassed all previous totals, as sport, along with the movies, attracted mass audiences from diverse class and ethnic backgrounds.[9]

While the popularity of big-time sport helped produce a national sporting culture, sports organized at the community level contributed to the forging of ethnic, racial, or local identities that resisted the development of a "mass" consumer society or a homogeneous American "melting pot." The years before and during World War I were marked by rapid industrialization, urbanization, immigration, and accompanying labor, ethnic, and racial conflict. In the postwar period a quieter process of ethnic and racial community consolidation ensued. Urban immigrant communities—whether African Americans from the rural south or newly arrived Mexican or European immigrants—continued the work of establishing businesses, churches, welfare groups, social clubs, and recreation centers. These institutions facilitated the transition to American city life and strengthened community identity.

As part of this process, neighborhood recreation agencies, churches, and businesses sponsored athletic activities for adults and youth.[10] These community-based activities were supplemented by recreational sports sponsored by reformers, educators, municipal officials, and industrial leaders. Under their guidance burgeoning school and work athletic programs, city park programs, and semipublic recreation agencies like YMCAs offered a wide range of youth and adult sports to local community members. Women's sports, while never the main attraction, flowered in all these settings.[11]

The transformations in population, consumption, and leisure made the 1920s a "golden age" of sport. While more and more Americans participated in neighborhood sporting events, national athletic celebrities like New York Yankee slugger Babe Ruth,

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boxer Jack Dempsey, golfer Bobby Jones, and football halfback Red Grange captured the hearts of star-struck fans. Restless under the increasingly bureaucratic, impersonal nature of economic and political life, audiences responded to heroic figures like Ruth, with his immense appetite for life and relentless pursuit of pleasure, profit, and individual glory.[12]

These conditions also opened the door to women athletes of the 1920s. They benefited not only from the new interest in sport but from the wider set of cultural changes that gave birth to the flapper era. It was in this period that middle-class women shed the vestiges of Victorian reserve to explore new social behaviors in the cafés, clubs, and dancehalls that made up urban nightlife.[13] Particularly important were the changes in sexual morals and manners that accompanied the expansion of consumer culture. Middle-class Americans of the post–World War I era joined working-class youth in a pleasure-filled world of commercial recreation and nightlife, in the process making a decisive break with the sexual values of an earlier era.

Victorians had viewed male sexuality as an almost bestial force in need of constant containment less it overwhelm the delicate sensibilities of "good" women, who were thought either to lack sexual impulses or to feel them only in relation to maternal instincts. By contrast, modern sexual doctrine recognized both female and male sexual desire as a positive life force and necessary ingredient for marital happiness. The positive view of female sexuality encouraged women's broader participation in the realm of public leisure, an arena traditionally associated with the bawdiness of vaudeville theater and the illicit sexuality of taverns, dance clubs, and gambling joints. In the altered atmosphere of the late teens and twenties, both female eroticism and female public leisure gained a measure of respectability, even as they provoked heated cultural debates. Eagerly consuming the latest fashions in dance, music, and clothing, young women joined with men to create modern forms of public courtship and heterosexual companionship that placed a high value on sexual intimacy.

While the slim, boyish, and flirtatious women known as flappers symbolized women's dramatic break with tradition, women athletes shared many of the flapper's characteristics. The female

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athlete resembled the flapper in her boyish athleticism, independence, and willful, adventurous spirit. Frequently applauded for their physical beauty and modern charm, each also presented an image of youthful sexual appeal. Both athletes and flappers flourished in an age when commercial entertainment boomed, when female fashions allowed for freer movement and greater exposure, when dance styles as well as sports were becoming more physically demanding, and when the greater acceptance of female sexuality had broken men's exclusive hold on public physicality, leisure, and sport.[14]

Behind the image of the flapper and celebrity athletes like Helen Wills and Gertrude Ederle stood the masses of ordinary women who turned to sport, as well as dance, for a pleasurable form of physical activity. Young black and white women of small or average means for the first time found significant opportunities to engage in athletic activities, from basketball and baseball to tennis and track and field.

A well-established pattern of racial segregation and exclusion set the parameters for African American women's athletic participation. Although in the earliest years of men's professional baseball and football a few African Americans had been permitted to play, as league governance structures were formalized, so too were strict policies of racial exclusion. Even in sports like horseracing, boxing, and cycling, which had a history of African American participation and success, explicit and de facto exclusionary policies had effectively ended most mixed-race athletic competition by the 1920s.

Excluded on the basis of race from segregated national competitions and organized white sports, African American athletes, whether female or male, most often pursued sport in the community setting—in church leagues, YWCAs and YMCAs, settlement-house recreation programs, and independent African American clubs. In the teens and early twenties the black press reported a smattering of women's contests, but in the middle and later years of the decade, such events seemed to catch fire in both Northern and Southern black communities.

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Women's track and field gained an immediate following, in part because it seemed to hold the greatest possibility for affirming black athletic excellence through head-to-head competition with white athletes. In 1919 Thomas Anderson of the *New York News* described track as "the gateway to the field of open competition between white and colored teams in all branches of amateur sport."[15] Unlike baseball and football, in which little interracial competition occurred, Northern track meets often pitted black and white athletes against one another in face-to-face competition with at least the semblance of fairness and equal opportunity. In addition it was a relatively inexpensive sport that didn't require the organizing and financing of large teams or leagues. African American newspapers frequently reported the success of local "race girls" in playground, press, and school meets from around the country.[16] In 1923, the *St. Louis Argus* heralded young women of the Philadelphia Meadowbrook Club for making "track history for the race . . . in an unusual manner" by shattering a record in the quarter-mile relay.[17]

Even more popular than track, the sport of basketball sprouted in black communities throughout the country. In Chicago the Roamer Girls thrilled local sports fans by remaining undefeated for six seasons. The team, made up of local talent from Chicago's South Side neighborhood, was coached by Sol Butler, a celebrated war hero who won track-and-field honors at the post–World War I Inter-Allied Games in Europe and then came home to star in Chicago's African American men's basketball league and coach in the women's. The Roamer Girls did not lack for challengers, vying in league competition against the Lincoln Settlement, Olivet Sunday School, and Joan of Arc teams. They took on occasional "Nordic" or "lily" (white) opponents as well.[18] Chicago's claim to basketball excellence was matched on the east coast by the Blue Belts and the Mysterious Five, vaunted women's teams from the New York City–New Jersey area.[19]

By the late 1920s colleges, industrial training schools, and normal schools throughout the southern and mid-Atlantic states also regularly reported game scores to the black press. They arranged to play against nearby schools, traveling clubs, and local Y or community teams. Several regions created more formal inter-

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scholastic leagues, such as the Georgia-Carolina College League and the Inter-State Athletic Association of Kansas and Missouri girls' teams.[20]

Along with basketball, baseball and tennis gained a foothold in black communities. The small number of women's baseball teams precluded the development of league play. Instead independent promoters organized barnstorming teams like Madame J. H. Caldwell's Chicago Bloomer Girls. Little evidence about Madame Caldwell survives, leaving no clues to the origin of her title or the source of her baseball expertise and enthusiasm. The record does show, however, that she promoted her team aggressively, using boldness, wit, and perseverance to drum up both players and fans. In 1920 she submitted a notice to the *Chicago Defender* that read, "Wanted—Ladies to Play Ball." Caldwell stated that her team would meet all challengers, white or black, male or female, and issued a provocative summons that asked: "Our women are voting now, so why not be able to play a real game of baseball?"

Apparently Caldwell received no shortage of responses. Within a single two-week period, her Bloomer Girls played a Sunday school team from Grace Presbyterian, a local boys' team, and the "Hebrew Maidens" from Chicago's Hebrew Institute. In a three-game series against a Chicago boys' team, she created excitement by substituting a white pitcher and catcher for her usual black battery. The admission charge of twenty-five cents helped raise money for travel to Michigan and other nearby states, where the Bloomer Girls took on opponents of both genders and different ages and races.[21]

While women's baseball attracted attention as a novelty event, tennis had a more genteel reputation and was popular among the small black middle class. Private clubs like Chicago's Prairie Tennis Club hosted citywide tournaments and developed local talent for the national African American women's championship established in 1917 by the Amateur Tennis Association (ATA).[22] Though nurtured in "society circles," African American tennis appears to have welcomed talented players from any background. Ora Washington of Philadelphia and Isadore Channels of Chicago, the dominant women players in ATA tennis, moved

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back and forth between the summer tennis circuit and winter basketball teams situated in a more working-class milieu.

Women's sport, like men's, helped to develop cohesive black communities in the wake of the wartime and post–World War I northern and urban migrations. Athletic contests became community social events that could enhance racial pride and neighborhood identity.[23] Women's basketball games, for instance, often played to packed audiences in local churches or recreation centers. Sometimes curtain raisers for men's games, other times the main features following younger girls' or boys' openers, women's games drew hundreds of spectators, or even thousands in gymnasiums like the Manhattan Casino—an arena known for its freezing temperatures and seating capacity of more than three-thousand.[24] Dances and live music frequently followed the games. For ten cents, a quarter, or free of charge, community members enjoyed a long evening's entertainment.

As black communities developed their own commercial institutions, entertainment forms, and newspapers, women's athletics came to occupy a subordinate but well-accepted position among black sport followers.[25] The African American press never granted women's sport the coverage or respect that it devoted to male athletics. Yet prominent papers like the *Chicago Defender*, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the *Philadelphia Tribune*, and the *Baltimore Afro-American* did report regularly on women's events, with a respectful tone that only rarely hinted of condescension.[26] Once a team gained name recognition and community support, editors dropped gender signifiers like "Girls" or "Lassies," assuming that readers were familiar with the team.

By reporting on women's sport the press contributed to its growing popularity, helping top female athletes to become well-known personalities. In a 1927 *Chicago Defender* reader poll to name the city's most popular black athlete, women were five of the seventeen vote getters. Leading the roster were tennis player Mrs. C. O. Seames and basketball wizard Virginia Willis.[27] Mrs. Seames was a fixture in Chicago's tennis and society circles. Having played and taught tennis since the turn of the century, "Mother" Seames managed to maintain her popularity even after her tennis talents were surpassed by those of younger

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champions.[28] Virginia Willis, who brought her skillful ball-handling and sharpshooting abilities to the Roamer Girls and Olivet teams, was celebrated by the black press for her ability to "do more with a basketball than a Baptist preacher can do with a chicken bone."[29] Popular figures like Seames and Willis formed the top layer of a much broader base of African American women whose athletic efforts received a generally warm reception in black communities of the 1920s.

The lighthearted, celebratory tone of some press reports should not obscure the deeper and more political ramifications of sport in black communities. Segregation and discrimination forced African Americans to develop their own sporting institutions; interracial competition was the exception in a sports world that was every bit as segregated as other public arenas. However, when black athletes did challenge white opponents, athletic competition became an important symbol of early-twentieth-century racial problems and progress.

Members of the press and community looked to athletes to prove that when given the chance in fair competition, African Americans could equal or surpass white achievements. When a 1914 University of Michigan student named Phyllis Wheatley Waters led her otherwise white freshman team over the junior basketball team, the *Indianapolis Freeman* commended her for "measuring arms day by day with the scions of America's noblest families and holding her own with the best of them." Similarly, a 1926 *Pittsburgh Courier* headline announced, "Race Girl Is Star in Press Meet." The article reported that a black high school student, Ernestine Gloster, won five medals at a predominantly white track meet sponsored by another local newspaper. In commending efforts like Waters's and Gloster's, the press suggested that African American athletes could solve the race problem through "sheer merit."[30]

More often the symbolic importance remained understated, expressed in the routine signifiers of sports-page accounts of "Race Girls" versus a "Nordic team." Despite the casual tone, remarks such as, "The sable passers, however, feel that they will

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be able to cope with these 'lily' ball tossers," suggest that interracial competition heightened the stakes and expressed aspirations that went beyond those involved in a single athletic encounter.[31] Although interracial matches were far from the norm, their very rareness amplified the significance of sporting events that brought black and white athletes into direct competition.

In the few instances when African American women competed internationally or in white-dominated sports like endurance swimming, the political implications of their endeavor became more obvious. The *Pittsburgh Courier* rallied behind long-distance swimmer Ellen Ray as she trained for a 1927 Hudson River swim, a formidable event in which the solitary athlete competed against the elements and the clock. While Ray solicited advice from "anyone who would like to see a colored woman bring fame and honor to her race and sex in the world of sports," the *Courier* reporter expressed his general "faith in the athletic ability of the colored womanhood of America."[32]

Even though they rarely received attention in the white press, these events accomplished at the local level what national figures like black heavyweight boxing champion Jack Johnson achieved at the national level when he defeated successive "white hopes." In an era marked by racial tension and racist violence, athletes dramatized profound social struggles in a structured, contained arena. When black and white women went head to head in physical competition at a track meet or a basketball game, crowds gathered to watch an athletic battle that symbolized the larger possibility of a black challenge to white power.

Overshadowed in large metropolitan areas by coverage of local and national men's sports, white women involved in grass-roots athletic activities garnered less media attention.[33] Nevertheless the growth of popular sports did provide young white women with a realm of physical freedom and social possibility. The years when they could participate in athletics occupied a short interlude between childhood restrictions and adult family and financial obligations. Athletically inclined adolescents and young working women grasped the opportunity to develop their physical capa-

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bilities, cultivate new social bonds among peers, and explore more physical and energetic models of womanhood.

White working-class women, like black women, took up sports through a variety of community-based athletic activities funded by local businesses, neighborhood clubs, and municipal and social welfare agencies. Commercial sponsors often generated interest by promoting events as novelties or glamour exhibitions, touting them as spectacles of fantastic skill and youthful beauty. Recreation and social service agencies disapproved of these ventures and committed resources to developing noncommercial forms of sport free from promotional hype. They designed urban recreation programs as a "constructive leisure" alternative, hoping to substitute "wholesome" athletics for the coarser atmosphere of the dancehall and sporting extravaganza.[34]

Another opportunity developed through industrial sports. Healthy corporate profits and management fears of labor unrest led industries of the 1920s to offer employee recreation as one strategy for obtaining an efficient and faithful work force. New "industrial relations" experts were concerned not only with employees' work lives but also with their off-hours pursuits. By 1920, 75 percent of the labor force worked less than a fifty-four-hour week, and almost 50 percent of American workers put in less than forty-eight hours per week, compared to a mere 8 percent of the labor force ten years earlier.[35] Corporate executives hoped that by filling employees' leisure hours with sporting activities, industrial recreation programs would inspire company loyalty and inhibit union organizing. Carnegie Steel's welfare director, A. H. Wyman, explained that industrial sports improved worker efficiency and fostered "a stronger feeling of loyalty to their bosses."[36] He was echoed by a Pittsburgh steel company executive who believed that recreation trained workers to cooperate with the company "in non-controversial subjects, so that these leaders are likely to be anchors to windward when outside leaders attempt to gather a following."[37]

In the 1920s businesses across the country constructed recreation facilities and sponsored teams that competed in intramural company events, in local industrial and municipal leagues, and occasionally in national competition.[38] Bowling, baseball, and

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basketball were the most common activities, but some industries sponsored football and track teams as well. Heavy manufacturing industries typically geared their offerings to male laborers. But financial enterprises like banks, insurance companies, and business schools, with their high percentages of female employees, were ardent backers of women's sports, especially basketball and bowling.[39]

The Travelers Insurance Company of Hartford, Connecticut, sponsored a women's basketball team that met a variety of challengers from across New England. In 1922, for example, the Travelers squad matched up against alumnae teams from regional colleges, industrial teams like the Winsted Nutmegs and the Connecticut state-champion American Thread team, and other financial enterprises like Aetna Life and Chase National Bank of New York.[40] In New Jersey the Prudential Insurance Company Athletic Association of Newark reported in 1930 that it had recently completed its ninth season of year-round sports for women. With an air of self-satisfaction, the author noted that since "nary a physical blot has been charged against an enviable competitive record," the Prudential girls had definitively refuted the charge that sports were detrimental to women.[41]

Financial and industrial centers of the Midwest and West offered women similar opportunities, including a full slate of bowling, swimming, track, tennis, golf, basketball, and riflery at the Western Electric Hawthorne Plant in Illinois.[42] By 1925 Chicago hosted a city basketball championship that attracted the best local teams sponsored by urban and suburban area businesses.[43] In the West, Dallas was a hotbed of women's industrial sports. Basketball teams from the area dominated AAU national tournaments of the late 1920s and early 1930s. The Employers' Casualty Company of Dallas boasted national championships—led by future Olympian Babe Didrikson—in both basketball and track and field.

Industrial and municipal athletic programs offered rural and urban communities a lively, inexpensive form of entertainment. More important, they furnished teenage girls and young working women a recreational outlet and a chance to develop skills and achieve public recognition. Although by 1930 the percentage of

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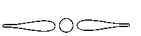
married workers had climbed to just under 30 percent of women in the labor force, the great majority of female wageworkers continued to be young, single women for whom paid work was an interlude between school and marriage.[44] Monotony and drudgery characterized most jobs. Young workers looked forward to the end of their shift, when they could join their peers in a satisfying, expressive realm of leisure.

Yet many young working women continued to ignore organized sports, preferring the dancehall and nickelodeon, where immediate pleasures went hand in hand with the search for boyfriends and future husbands. Industrial recreation specialists frequently complained about the low number of "working-girls" who came out for employee or municipal athletics.[45] Even fewer married or older working women participated. They had household responsibilities that prevented them from engaging in public leisure, as did full-time housewives, whose worlds were circumscribed by their labor in the home.[46] However, for the athletically minded single working woman, organized sports provided a novel outlet for her energies and abilities as well as a public arena in which to engage them. Such athletes, along with dancehall girls and flappers, formed part of a generation of women fashioning a new model of womanhood characterized by public activity and a sense of unleashed energy and physicality.



The rapid growth of female participation in community athletics improved women's skills, stimulated interest in women's sport, and spawned greater opportunities for elite competition. Given the chance to excel, American athletes became a new force in national and international women's sport, competing in established golf and tennis championships and crossing barriers into competitive swimming, skating, and track and field. Top-notch female competitors often gained celebrity status and, from this position, became prototypes of a new, more explicitly sexual style of womanhood.

The escalating demand for women's sports pressed the previously all-male AAU into sponsoring national championships for women. The organization introduced a national swim meet in

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1916, a track championship in 1924, and a basketball tournament in 1926. Although unable to match the draw of men's championships, these national meets attracted significant fan interest and media attention. Encouraged by local advertisers and news media, hundreds, and often thousands, of spectators gathered at poolsides, tracks, and basketball arenas to watch women from around the country compete for national titles. The tournament atmosphere combined high-intensity performances by women at the top of their sports with a relaxed, lighthearted atmosphere. Photographs frequently captured athletes hugging, laughing, and lounging about together in the hours before or after competition. A more solemn, ceremonial note was struck by closing rituals in which champions received medals, ribbons, and flowers to commemorate their accomplishments.

National competitions paved the way for American women's increased presence in international sporting events. The United States sent its first women's teams to the Olympic Games in 1920. A few individuals had entered women's tennis, golf, and archery exhibitions in the 1900 and 1904 games, but their participation was not encouraged or well publicized. In 1920 American women competed for medals in Olympic skating and swimming events. Theresa Weld of the Boston Skating Club was a medalist in figure skating. The *New York Times* described Weld (later Theresa Weld Blanchard, winner of nine national women's skating titles and numerous pairs championships) as a stylistic innovator who introduced running steps into skating and who offered brilliant exhibitions "that surpassed even the best performances of the men contestants."[47] Weld's Olympic accomplishment was overshadowed by the stellar performance of the women's swimming team. Led by Ethelda Bleibtrey and Aileen Riggin, U.S. women took four of five gold medals in swimming and diving events. Following their success in 1920, American swimmers continued to dominate at the 1924 and 1928 Olympic Games.[48]

Olympic swimmers built on the accomplishments of earlier stars like Annette Kellermann. In the decade before 1920, Kellermann had helped popularize swimming with her speed and her sleek, streamlined bathing suits—sleeveless, skirtless, form-fitting suits that replaced the bulky, full-length, bloomered cos-

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tumes of an earlier generation. Spurred on by her success, women began to organize swimming clubs for competitive racing. The most prominent club, the Women's Swimming Association of New York, was founded in 1917 and proceeded to take the swimming world by storm in the 1920s, dominating national championship meets and supplying the majority of the U.S. Olympic swimming team's female members. Another strong club developed under the auspices of the Illinois Women's Athletic Club, and together the two associations trained thousands of swimmers at all levels, including the stars Ethelda Bleibtrey, Helen Wainright, Aileen Riggin, Sybil Bauer, and Gertrude Ederle.[49]

These swimmers burst onto the scene as fresh-faced teenagers, attracting public notice with their amazing ability and girlish charm. The diminutive Riggin won her first Olympic medal in 1920 at the age of thirteen and continued to compete successfully in swimming and diving for more than a decade. In 1922, at the age of sixteen, Helen Wainright captured the AAU all-around swimming title and was celebrated as the "greatest all-around aquatic contestant of her sex the world has ever known."[50] Within two years, however, her star was eclipsed by that of Gertrude Ederle. At seventeen this American-born daughter of a German butcher already held five national titles and ten world records.

As the numbers and accomplishments of women swimmers, skaters, golfers, and tennis players mounted, leading white athletes became overnight sensations, second only to movie stars in national fame.[51] Magazines conveyed their importance with full-length articles and advertisements featuring women athletes. Images of sleek, sophisticated tennis players, dashing automobile drivers, and wholesome, pigtailed basketball players helped sell products from automobiles to breakfast cereals. The media showed special enthusiasm for women in tennis, golf, and swimming, sports with predominantly middle- and upper-class constituencies. A few stars, like Ederle, were second-generation immigrants with working-class roots. But the majority honed their skills at the pools, tennis courts, and golf courses of exclusive athletic associations and country clubs.

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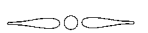
These athletes did much more than establish women's place in sport. They helped fashion a new ideal of womanhood by modeling an athletic, energetic femininity with an undertone of explicit, joyful sexuality. In their own public comments, except for predictable responses to questions about current boyfriends and future marriage plans, athletes said little about sexual matters. Yet they seemed to possess a self-awareness as "modern" women pioneering not only athletic achievements but new styles of femininity. Helen Wills wrote in 1932 that, "The feminine mind in sports reflects the general trend of feminine thinking of the day. The ideas and, along with them, the inhibitions imposed upon us by previous generations are being dispelled."[52]

At least some of these inhibitions were sexual. Athletes were clearly perceived and portrayed as attractive, erotic women. Mythological allusions to athletes as goddesses and attractive young "nymphs" combined with a chorus of adjectives like "charming" and "alluring" to alert readers to the sexual attractiveness—and, possibly, the erotic power—of modern female athletes. Swimmers received lavish praise, especially during Olympic years when journalists reported on the "graceful" and "statuesque" young "mermaids" and "Junos" who represented America's Olympic hopes.[53] But day in and day out tennis stars received the greatest media attention, becoming icons of modern athletic womanhood. Three great players of the decade, Molla Mallory, Suzanne Lenglen, and Helen Wills, best exemplify the physicality and implicit sexuality of modern femininity.



While hard work and wholesome life-styles won praise for some athletes, the press heralded Molla Bjurstedt Mallory for her ability to combine a busy nightlife with athletic success. As Molla Bjurstedt, the budding Norwegian athlete emigrated to the United States in 1915 and began to establish herself as a world-class tennis player.[54] She earned celebrity status with her controversial victory over the world's best player, Lenglen (who near the end of the match suddenly claimed an injury and withdrew, apparently to avoid defeat), during the French star's 1921 trip to America. Competing under her married name, Mallory remained

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among the top female tennis players even as her career ebbed over the decade. Although she never became the media sensation Wills and Lenglen did, she gained a reputation as an exemplar of modernity by sporting a new brand of femininity that combined vigorous physical activity with an active, devil-may-care nightlife. Mallory was reportedly "a lady who can stay up most of the night, smoke cigarettes *ad libitum*, take apparently not the slightest care of her health and yet tirelessly win her way into fame."[55] She disdained rigorous training, explaining to one reporter that "too serious training took more out of a girl nervously than she gained physically."[56]

Local boosters and the national media regularly idealized athletes like Mallory as representatives of vibrant, sexually attractive womanhood. Mallory's ability to combine indulgence with excellence was offered to the public as proof that athletic interest need not interfere with a style of femininity identified with popular nightlife and sex appeal. The ideal woman was encouraged to channel her spirited temper and exuberant energy into interacting with men at cafés, nightclubs, and dancehalls as well as into outdoor sports and recreations.[57]

Suzanne Lenglen enjoyed similar pleasures at her home base on the French Riviera. She endured exhaustive training sessions as a youngster, but in later years preferred drinking, smoking, and dancing to practice. She admitted to sipping alcoholic tonics during matches to prevent fatigue. Though Lenglen toured the United States just twice, she was second only to Wills as a darling of the American press and public. From 1919 to 1927 she ruled the tennis world, tantalizing crowds with her short, gauzy outfits, her personal élan, and her marvelously original, fluid, dancelike style of movement.[58]

Lenglen represented the modern era's reinterpretation of feminine beauty and body type. Earlier associations between beauty and female purity, spirituality, and inner character faded before modern notions that linked beauty to the active, ornamented, external body.[59] Where the Victorian female body was frail, pale, fully covered, and staid, Lenglen's much-worshipped body was tan, lithe, and in constant motion. The crowds that gathered in the thousands to view Lenglen play lauded her great beauty, even

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though her face was often described as plain or homely. They saw beauty in the way she melded quickness, agility, powerful strokes, and aggressive play with a leaping, pirouetting, apparently effortless style.[60]

As athletes like Lenglen flaunted women's physical freedom, they helped to shape new dress styles and beauty standards based on a more sexualized female body—one appreciated for its sensual physicality and celebrated for its external beauty.[61] Beyond demonstrating the new styles in action, star athletes also took time (and money) to issue advice to admiring followers. Mary K. Browne, Lenglen's opponent in her later professional matches, advised readers on the connections between contemporary fashions, physical fitness, and the modern woman's attractively slim body. In "Fit to Win," Browne noted that fashions of the period featured straight lines; lightweight, loose-fitting garments; slim figures; and "boyish" cuts in clothing and hairstyles. She explained that the new look required exercise: "The slim girl is twice the girl her grandmother was, and half the weight. Keeping fit to-day is more than a necessity to athletic prowess: it is a duty all who seek success in anything must observe."[62] Though Browne did not reveal how exercise led to success outside sport, she implied that by dutifully exercising women could fit themselves for the new fashions, thus opening the door to social as well as athletic success.

Like Browne, Lenglen instructed women on how athletics could help them achieve and display the new "fit" femininity. She wrote popular articles on training methods and tennis techniques.[63] She also tutored through example, playing in makeup, sleeveless blouses or sweaters, her patented bandeau—brightly colored silk cloth woven into a headwrap—and short skirts or silk dancers' gowns that revealed the outlines of her body in the sunlight. The observation of Lenglen's dramatic manner of play and dress gave her followers a lesson in modern styles of uninhibited femininity.

Journalists responded to these qualities by depicting Lenglen in sexual and romantic terms. *Literary Digest* described the "Decidedly Unconquerable" Suzanne as the "best-loved young nymph" of the tennis courts. Her goddesslike gracefulness was

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said to be accompanied by an aggressive attack that struck opponents like "an arrow from the bow."[64] Though she never married and formed her closest relationships with family members and female companions, Lenglen's appeal lay precisely in the way she fused athletic ability with heterosexual allure. With her unusual dress and dancelike movement, she pioneered an ideal of the female body as physical and actively erotic.

By contrast, Lenglen's nemesis in the mid-twenties, Helen Wills, struck observers as a wholesome, girlish athlete who combined old-fashioned female virtues with a new style of athletic, assertive womanhood. Wills replaced Lenglen as the dominant force in women's tennis, remaining virtually unbeatable for much of her career. At her peak the "American Girl" appeared almost daily in the newspapers and twice on the cover of *Time* magazine.

Although she played the game powerfully, frequently practicing against highly skilled male players and sometimes defeating them, Wills's long pigtails, schoolgirl costume, and mild temperament reassured observers that an innocent, modest model of womanhood might win out against the more outrageous, excessive, and worldly flapper. Her sweet face, classical body, and graceful beauty not only became the subject of artists and poets but elicited millions of letters from adoring fans. (In later years Wills's icy "poker face" and unswerving determination struck the press as disturbingly masculine. But in her 1920s heyday, she offered a nonthreatening portrait of refined, well-bred, and charming womanhood that blended modern athleticism with aspects of conventional femininity.[65]) Wills's distinctive traits made her a revealing exception to the trend toward a more sexual athletic ideal. Yet the very fact that she was celebrated for upholding "traditional" virtues—in other words for her lack of overt sexuality—suggests the pervasiveness of the more eroticized image of the modern female athlete.

Athletes like Mallory, Lenglen, and Wills announced women's dynamic entrance into traditionally male realms and their rejection of outmoded, restrictive definitions of femininity. Ironically, even though working-class and African American athletes were integral to these dramatic changes, the new feminine norms they helped to create often failed to include them. The mainstream

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press focused on glamour sports and national competitions, ignoring community-based sport and the skilled white and African American athletes who competed in ethnic and working-class settings. The best-known modern athletes typically came from white, well-to-do families and competed in sports that were considered acceptably feminine. Women athletes who did not fit this description received little recognition at the national level. Or, worse, journalists and sports experts referred to them obliquely through unfavorable comparisons of rough, "masculine" athletic types and the charming, feminine stars of popular glamour sports. Celebrities like Wills, Lenglen, and Mallory impressed the public as both cause and symbol of the active, exciting New Woman, while the impact and accomplishments of athletic standouts like Isadore Channels, Ora Washington, and Virginia Willis remained invisible to the dominant culture.

Remembered as a decade of good times in which men and women cast off Victorian formality and became pals, the 1920s were also marked by a new wariness and, at times, a barely suppressed hostility in gender relations. Many wondered when the changes would stop. What lines would demarcate male and female spheres of activity? What boundaries, if any, would remain to differentiate masculinity and femininity? As Americans looked uneasily at sport to understand the dimensions of change, their keen interest in women's athletics made it an important symbolic as well as actual arena of competition.

The assertive, dynamic female athlete of the 1920s posed a clear challenge to men. No longer contained within the narrow confines of a small number of college athletic programs, young women from all social ranks and geographic locations took up community-based sports, the best among them rising to national and international prominence. With unaccustomed boldness, female athletes invaded what had previously been men's exclusive space, claiming "masculine" strength, speed, and power as a right of womanhood.

Consequently both supporters and critics viewed women's athletic achievements as victories in a larger contest between men

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and women. When Gertrude Ederle swam the English Channel in world-record time, reporters hailed her success as "a battle won for feminism." To former suffrage leader Carrie Chapman Catt, Ederle illustrated the link between political and physical emancipation, proving that "woman's freedom would go hand in hand with her bodily strength." Another observer presented Ederle as "champion extraordinairy [*sic*] of her sex, and its unanswerable refutation of the masculinist dogma that woman is, in the sense of physical power and efficiency, inferior to man."[66]

An air of jocular sexual rivalry accompanied the media's celebrations of women athletes. Grantland Rice explained that the "alert and aggressive" American girl athlete "is not only getting a finely molded body . . . she is also getting the virility of will to battle against odds." The result was "a new type—a most attractive addition [who] can meet the male upon even terms."[67] Journalists repeatedly alerted readers to the possibility that women would equal or surpass men's athletic feats. Speculating on the coming generations of female athletic success, Rice wondered, "Who will be the weaker sex?" and "Will the men be left behind?"[68]

A tone of hostility and ridicule pervaded less sympathetic media accounts. When Northwestern University swimmer Sybil Bauer broke the men's world record in the backstroke, an editorial in the *Nation* looked toward a future of mixed-sex competition, asking, "Shall a girl suddenly precipitate herself into a contest of men—and then, conceivably, thrash them?"[69] Similarly, after Ederle's English Channel feat, the press nervously joked that in the future Channel swimming would have "its liveliest interest centered in the gallant and somewhat pathetic efforts of masculine swimmers to equal the feminine record."[70]

Male athletic leaders took steps to insure that men would never be in that position by squelching the few attempts women made to compete directly with men. When Sybil Bauer requested the chance to swim against men in Olympic backstroke competition, Olympic officials quickly turned her down.[71] By the same token, when a teenage baseball player named Margaret Gisolo reached the championship round of the 1928 American Legion

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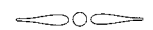
Junior Baseball Tournament, her presence sparked a flurry of criticism, media interest, and official reaction. Gisolo had been accepted by her teammates, local league officials, and hometown fans from the coal-mining town of Blanford, Indiana. But as the team rose through the levels of tournament play, her presence infuriated opponents, made even angrier by losing to a girl. Their vociferous protests attracted national media attention from the *New York Times* and Movietone News. Since league policies did not specify "boys only," Gisolo was allowed to compete in 1928. Immediately afterward, however, American Legion Baseball directors changed the rules to exclude girls explicitly.[72]

These were exceptional cases; women rarely competed directly against men or broke male records. Yet the media persisted in making a leap from athletic competition among women to an antagonistic battle of the sexes that threatened men's reign in sport and, by implication, in society. When observers reported on female-only athletic contests, they frequently transposed the event into a competition between men and women. In "Man's Athletic Crown in Danger," a critic mockingly remarked: "Sundry members of the so-called weaker sex, having obtained the vote and many other things upon which they had set their dear fluttering little hearts, are now out for bigger game." They aimed at "the vaunted superiority of their brothers" in sport: "Not content with competing among themselves . . . many women are actually trying to lower the marks made . . . by men. What is more ominous, from the masculine viewpoint, these women are coming perilously near to achieving this latest desire."[73] The possibility that "the so-called weaker sex" desired not only to excel in sport but to overturn male physical dominance posed a most serious threat to men's "vaunted superiority."



To many observers, women's athletic achievements signaled the dawn of a new era. The popularity of sport in the 1920s spanned class, racial, and regional divisions so that a wide array of female athletes came to embody the vibrancy and sexual appeal of modern womanhood. The female athlete seemed to epitomize the

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"new American girl," but her spark could just as easily kindle cultural fears about women's unceasing demands—their "latest desires"—whether they be economic, political, or sexual.

Women's unapologetic athleticism gave a physical dimension to questions about the proper spheres, qualities, and relative power of women and men. Poised on the edge between the appealing and the threatening aspects of the modern woman's relationship to men, female athletes captivated an intrigued but ambivalent American public struggling to make sense out of contemporary gender arrangements. Media accounts convey a sense of wonder along with the impression of a topsy-turvy world in which the existing social order could be reversed.[74]

Fearing any erosion of patriarchal privilege and resenting female intrusions into a formerly male terrain, men often viewed women's athletic gains as their own loss of a clearly masculine preserve. When defenders of women's sport argued that athletics would not masculinize women, they implicitly raised an alarming flip side—that sport could cease to masculinize men. If not in "manly games," where would men learn masculinity, prove their manhood, and sport their virility? Symbolically, women's sport stood for female advancement and shrinking male hegemony.

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