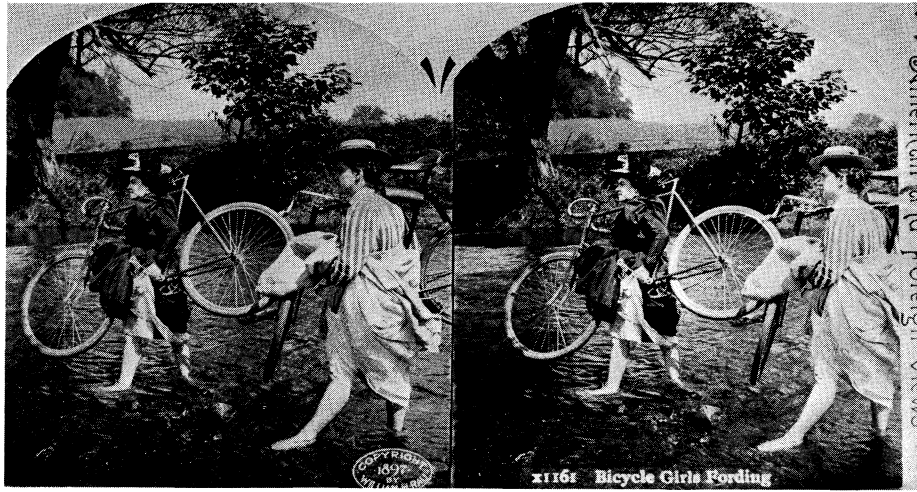


Woman's Place in Nineteenth Century Canadian Sport

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John Hudson,¹ former national track coach, was asked to name Canadian athletes most likely to succeed in winning Olympic medals in Munich in 1972. The first five potential medalists he mentioned were women. In both swimming and skiing, Canada recently had world champions in Elaine Tanner and Nancy Green, and the next Canadian champions to win international recognition in these respective sports again promise to be female. Today, the Canadian woman athlete has proved her pre-eminence in sporting competition, and the nation's pride in her achievements is reflected in public approval and encouragement. In the past, however, just as women encountered opposition to their demands for political rights through female franchise, and economic rights through female employment, so they encountered opposition in the exercise of their social rights to compete in the sports and games of the community. An examination of the emerging emancipation of women in sport in Canada is a parallel comment and embellishment upon the emancipation of women within the whole framework of Canadian society. The history of female participation in sporting activities has had a slow, critical progression.

The gentlewomen of British North America in pre-Confederation years had rigidly prescribed roles to play at athletic contests. These roles had remained virtually unchanged from those adopted by the ladies of the court of Aquitaine who, under the codes of chivalry, inspired their knights to even greater feats of valour on the tourney fields. The passage of several centuries merely added the weight of tradition to the view that the participatory role of women in sport was a passive, rather than active, one.

Female attendance at horse races, regattas, cricket matches, and other such spectator sports was obviously encouraged, as most early nineteenth century newspaper reports of these events carried verbose tributes to the ladies present, often to the exclusion of any mention of the results of the contests themselves. On reading these old newspapers, one receives the distinct impression that the whole success of the organized sports meeting depended entirely upon the number of ladies who could be encouraged to decorate the scene with their gay ensembles. Even at the mid-century, this societal attitude was still prevalent, as evidenced in the words of a *Montreal Gazette* journalist reporting on the forthcoming Montreal Snow Shoe Club Races:

Very many of our lady friends, we doubt not, will be on the grounds, and, as in the knightly tournament of by-gone days, incite the friendly combatants to put forth still greater exertions to win their smiles and applause.²

Attempts by the gentlewoman of the town to indulge more actively in even mild physical exercise invariably met with censure, cloaked in concern for her frailty and delicate constitution. The ladies of Kingston, in 1811, discovered the fashionable pleasures of swinging, much to the distress of many a Kingston male, one of whom was driven to voice his concern in the *Kingston Gazette* on April 28, 1812. This gentleman, besides deploring the immodesty and indecorum of these swinging ladies, condemned as physically deleterious 'an exercise which though allowably beneficial to the health when practised in a proper place, loses that merit when a delicate girl mounts a lofty and dangerous swing just after leaving a warm tea room and at that hour of all others when the chilly dew is more prejudicial to even a strong constitution.'

There were a few recreational activities in which women were accepted as participants, though convention dictated that their participatory role be that of passenger rather than instigator of the activity. Carrioling was the favourite recreation of the fashionable elite during the winter, with many a young lady aspiring to be known as the season's most attractive 'Miss Muffin', the colloquial name given to the lady companion who sat beside the dashing owner of the vehicle. Indeed, the officers of the garrisons and the gentlemen of society took great care and pains in the purchase and decoration of their expensive carriages, motivated perhaps by the hope that such care would ensure them a winter of companionable 'Muffinage.' For the more venturesome ladies, ice-boating offered an exhilarating experience, but, again, they enjoyed the sport as mere passengers bundled up in furs which successfully hid any emotion or enthusiasm which might have been deemed improper.

Charges of impropriety were difficult to avoid, as some ladies of Quebec who engaged in innocent snowshoe treks were to discover:

Small parties of ladies have lately taken to the exercise of snow-shoeing, and, accompanied with a protective male friend, may be seen occasionally striding (Oh! What a term!) along the plains or over the ice — in nice secluded localities, be it always understood. This same snow-shoe practice is in itself splendid exercise, but not, we do humbly opine, of a kind exactly fitted to ladies, even as matter of healthful amusement, nor, as yet, on the whole, affording the most advantageous display of the graces on their part. And their pretty ancles (sic) and delicate feet are so liable to twists and sprains from falls, and to be swollen by the rude pressure of the deer-skin tie, that we hold it scarcely to merit laudatory mention as a favourite exercise for the 'gentle fair'.³

This criticism must have seemed unjustified to the ladies concerned, in that French women of Lower Canada had long used the snowshoe to enable them to proceed with their daily errands in the winter,⁴ and the English women of the province had followed their example. It would seem, then, that it was the recreational or sporting nature of the exercise rather than the exercise itself, which rendered it unsuitable and thus disturbed the complainant's sense of propriety.

Horseback riding, like snowshoeing, served a utilitarian purpose in that it provided an important method of transportation on the poorly made early roads of the provinces. In the pioneer settlements where the horse and canoe provided the inhabitants with vital means of communication with the urban centres, women, of necessity, were as proficient riders and canoeists as were the men, an eyewitness of the time reporting that country girls rode skilfully even without a saddle.⁵ This sport, however, was conventionally permissible for pleasurable relaxation for ladies where snowshoeing was not. The incongruity may be explained by the fact that riding had been a well established British tradition since the days when ladies on horseback had joined their knights at falconry and the hunt, while the sport of snowshoeing had no such heraldic associations.

One of the earliest references to fox hunting in British North America reported the presence of both lady and gentlement followers at a winter hunt arranged by William Jarvis on the ice of the bay at York.⁶ References through the years establish that ladies not merely followed the hunt, but rode with the pack. Such sporting involvement, far from being censured, met with society's approval, as the ladies of the Montreal Hunt were commended for their 'dashing riding' which caused them to finish well up in the field at the club's outing on September 30, 1866.⁷

Croquet was another activity deemed suitable for lady competitors, croquet parties being 'all the rage' in leisured society by the 1860's. On the estate of the Lawson family of Hamilton, a guest described one of the 'very fashionable' games played there with officers from the nearby garrison serving as willing partners for the ladies who enjoyed 'a sense of exhilaration at being out in the air . . .'.⁸ This guest also experienced her first square dance which was held in the rural community adjacent to the estate, and found the 'tremendous speed' of the dance quite breathtaking.⁹

Dancing was popular in both rural and urban localities, the round and square dances favoured in the country finding counterparts in the more sophisticated minuets, mazurkas, reels, quadrilles, and later, waltzes, of the towns. Entries in the diary of Mrs. Monck,¹⁰ sister-in-law of the Governor General and wife of the Colonel of the 17th Regiment, contain constant reference to balls conducted by both garrison officers and the elite of town society. Dancing academies were in evidence throughout all the townships of the provinces, Halifax reportedly having such an establishment as early as 1752.¹¹ Though dancing met with opposition from the Calvinists and critics who deplored the frivolous nature of the activity, it remained the most universally popular of all recreations available to women.

By the latter half of the century, it was becoming apparent that there was a slight but definite favourable change in the attitude of society towards women's participation in physical activities and especially in competitive sport. Through no coincidence, this changing attitude occurred at a time when the structure of British North American society itself was experiencing dramatic change under such influences as advanced technology and social reform.

The greatest technological revolution of the time was wrought by the steam engine in its application to improved transportation and communication. As a direct result of these improvements, sport within communities experienced unprecedented popular support. Steam boats made excursion trips possible for inter-town sporting competition, luring both teams and supporters with offers of return trips to matches for the price of a single fare. Such generosity was tinged with self-interest, as the *Novascotian* pointed out on March 5, 1855: 'The steamboat Company ought to be very much obliged to the curlers for increasing the travel across the Ferry.' Whatever the material motives, greater community involvement in sporting competition was the result. Railway companies also offered the half price return excursion ticket to sporting travellers, the increasing number of inter-city matches played showing a close relationship to the expanding distance of laid track.

Whereas technology produced an upswing in inter-city, inter-provincial, and international sporting competition from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, it was the whimsical vagaries of fashion which allowed women to play an increasing part in the expansion of sporting activity. There had been rare occasions when that most restrictive article of fashionable female clothing, the crinoline, had actually been a benefit to women who suddenly found themselves immersed in water which, a few seconds earlier, they had been sailing upon:

A lady in Saint John, New Brunswick, was recently saved from drowning by the much abused crinoline. She fell overboard and instead of going plump to the bottom, her expansive skirts acted as a life preserver, and she floated down the stream sitting like a duck upon the water.¹²

The crinoline was perhaps as much responsible as social pressure for the designation of croquet and dancing as acceptable female amusements. Encased in hoops with layer upon layer of petticoats, the gentlewoman found there were few, if any, alternate activities in which she might indulge with decorum. Mrs. Monck dared not try skating for fear, she said, of falling and breaking an arm or a leg. A fall in a crinoline would probably have wounded her dignity more than her person.

Prior to the 1850's, some inventive women had discovered for themselves the freedom afforded by trousers or pantaloons. So garbed, they were able to enjoy a wider range of exercises than those of their sex who wore conventional dress, but they failed to create a vogue for their unconventional attire. During the fifties, it was Amelia Bloomer, with the publicity she generated for her 'bifurcated bags', who popularized a costume which allowed freedom of movement without loss of either

dignity or modesty. Significantly, the reported participation of women in such sports as horse riding, snowshoeing, foot racing, rowing, and especially skating, increased greatly after 1860.

At this time, designs of the bicycle were being improved, and in 1885, with the advent of the 'safety bicycle,' cycling became the rage across the country. With cycle clubs to be found in all major towns and cities, women, indebted to Mrs. Bloomer, took up the sport as eagerly as did the men, in some centres even forming independent clubs.¹³ By 1900, most recreational cycle clubs had long lists of female members who dressed for their sport in trouserettes that were 'ample and full below the knee,' where they met gaiters 'so long that no stocking is shown,' a figure fitting bodice, sailor hat, white veil and grey gloves completing the costume.¹⁴

Not all women adopted a mode of dress that, to a large section of the community, particularly fathers and husbands, appeared unfeminine. Tennis, which by the 1880's had become a popular sport amongst ladies from British Columbia to the Maritimes,¹⁵ was socially acceptable as a decorous game for modestly attired females, although the modest attire certainly restricted play. Rather than urging drastic reform of dress, a typical male attitude recommended that females abandon the game for one more in keeping with the masculine ideal of ladylike recreation:

There are signs of a croquet revival. Lawn tennis is not altogether doomed, but young ladies are beginning to see that it is a game for men. If played by girls it should be played without corsets. Against a fellow in flannels, a girl in stays and a dress weighted with the cumbersome protruberances which are now in fashion, has no chance. . . . At croquet the fair player may wear what she pleases, strike picturesque attitudes, go through the game without hurry, and hold sweet confidential chats between hits.¹⁶

This gentleman pleaded for a return to a golden age, where men performed on the tourney fields of sport under the approving and admiring gaze of ladies, but alas, he pleaded in vain. Too many women were beginning to regard themselves as more than sweet, picturesque objects.

Despite being continually urged throughout the nineteenth century, to remain ladylike, decorative, and static, by 1900 women had experienced independence from the dictates of fashion and prescribed activities. No longer choosing to be encased and hobbled in sweeping skirts, no longer restricted to gentle games deemed by over-protective males as suitable to the delicate female constitution, no longer rebuked by society for seeking pleasure in physical exercise, the woman of the new century bicycled towards the goal of individual freedom, and emancipation from cultural taboos.

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NOTES

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- 2 *Montreal Gazette*, February 23, 1861.
- 3 *Montreal Gazette*, March 12, 1842.
- 4 Isabel Foulche-Delbos, 'The Women of New France,' *Canadian Historical Review*, XXI (June, 1940), 133.
- 5 Cited in T. Radcliffe (ed.), *Authentic Letters From Upper Canada* (Toronto: Macmillan Company of Canada Ltd., 1953), p. 180.
- 6 *Upper Canada Gazette*, February 14, 1801.
- 7 *Montreal Gazette*, October 1, 1866.
- 8 Isabella Moore, cited in Luella Creighton, *The Elegant Canadians* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1967), p. 155.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 50.
- 10 Frances E. Monck, *My Canadian Leaves* (Reprinted, Toronto: University Press, 1963), *passim*.
- 11 *Halifax Gazette*, April 25, 1752.
- 12 *Morning Chronicle*, Quebec, September 20, 1858.
- 13 *Winnipeg Free Press* reported the founding of such a club on July 17, 1896. The Imperial Bicycle Club of Petrolia, founded in 1893, had so many female members by 1894 that they formed their own branch (Charles Whipp and Edward Phelps, *Petrolia, 1866-1966* (Petrolia: Advertiser-Topic and the Petrolia Centennial Committee, 1966), pp. 52-53).
- 14 J.A. Krout, *Annals of American Sport* (New Haven: Yale University Press, Pageant of America Series, 1929), XV, 176.
- 15 A.E. Cox, *A History of Sports in Canada, 1868-1900* (Unpublished Doctoral thesis, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, 1969), pp. 175-176.
- 16 *Reporter*, Fredericton, July 9, 1884.

