

# The Life and Times of CAAWS

by Sheila Robertson

*L'auteure trace l'histoire de CAAWS (Association canadienne pour l'avancement des femmes dans les sports et l'activité physique), une association fondée en 1981 pour adresser les*

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*problèmes de sous-représentations des femmes dans tous les domaines sportifs. Cet article donne aux lectrices un aperçu des objectifs et du travail de CAAWS.*

The roots of the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity (CAAWS) reach deep, far deeper than most people realize. They go back to the late 19th century when Canadian women first began to invade the male preserve that was sport. They go back to 1925 when Alexandrine Gibb founded the Women's Amateur Athletic Federation, and for the first time gave women in sport an official voice. They go back through every decade of this century, each one distinguished by magnificent performances by dozens of Canadian women.

We must not forget:

Speed skaters Lela Brooks with six world records in the 1920s; Jean Wilson, an Olympic star dead in 1933 at the age of 23; world champion Sylvia Burka, who dominated the sport in the 1970s; and recently-retired multiple world champion and double Olympic silver medallist Nathalie Lambert.

Track stars Bobbie Rosenfeld, Canadian woman athlete of the half century and winner of Olympic gold and silver in 1928; her teammates Ethel Smith, Olympic gold and bronze, and Ethel Catherwood, "The Saskatoon Lily," world record holder and Olympic champion high jumper; Canada's favourite high jumper Debbie Brill; and 1992 Olympic medallist and triple Commonwealth middle distance champion Angela Chalmers.

Golfer Ada Mackenzie, founder of the Toronto Ladies' Golf and Tennis Club in 1924.

The incredible Edmonton Grads basketball team, credited with 502 wins and a mere 20 losses as they dominated the game from 1915 to 1940.

Badminton player Dorothy Walton, the first Canadian winner of the prestigious All England championship in 1939 and chosen one of the six best women athletes of the half century.

Figure skaters Barbara Ann Scott, winner of two world championships and an Olympic title in the 1940s; Karen Magnussen, the star of the 1970s, with gold, silver, and bronze from three world championships to go with her Olympic silver; the feisty world champion Isabelle Brasseur, skating through pain to an Olympic bronze medal in 1994.

Marathon swimmers Marilyn Bell, the first person to swim Lake Ontario, in 1954, and the youngest person to swim the English Channel one year later; Cindy Nicholas, who in 1976 was the women's world marathon swimming champion; and Vicky Keith, who has swum across each of the Great Lakes.

Alpine skiers Lucile Wheeler, in the 1950s, with Olympic bronze and, at the world championships, two gold and a silver; in 1960, Anne Heggveit, Olympic gold and double world championship gold; Nancy Greene, gold and silver at the 1968 Olympic Games and twice World Cup champion; world champions Betsy Clifford in 1970 and Kate Pace in 1993; and Olympic champions Kathy Kreiner in 1976 and Kerrin Lee-Gartner in 1992.

"Mighty Mouse" Elaine Tanner, with two Olympic silver medals and a bronze, described by her coach Howard Firby as "a water-born creature... touched with genius," who at the 1968 Games, carried the unrelenting hopes of a nation on her shoulders; backstroker Nancy Garapick, a world record holder in 1975 at the age of 13 and double Olympic medallist at 16.

Wheelchair racers Hilda May Torok Binns, winner in the '60s and '70s of 13 international gold medals, six silvers, and five bronzes, and today's star, Chantal Petitclerc; blind discus and shotput world champion Ljilijana Ljubisic; swimmer Joanne Mucz, winner of five Paralympic gold medals; skiing sensation Lana Spreeman who has won ten Paralympic medals; and Canada's world champion wheelchair basketball players.

World champion archers Dorothy Lidstone in 1969 and Lucille Lessard in 1974.

Today there's biathlon double Olympic champion Myriam Bédard; rowers Silken Laumann, Marnie McBean, Colleen Miller, and Wendy Wiebe; track star Charmaine Crooks; synchronized swimmer Sylvie Fréchette; kayaker Caroline Brunet; cyclists Tanya Dubnicoff, Alison Sydor, and Linda Jackson; springboard diver Annie Pelletier; trap shooter Susan Natrass; swimmer Marianne Limpert; table tennis player Lijuan Geng; the Sandra Peterson rink, world curling champi-

ons for two years running; the women's national ice hockey team, winner of three world championships in a row; and Olympic medallist Susan Auch, Canada's premier long track speed skater...

### The other side of the picture

What has all this success to do with CAAWS, an organization dedicated to improving opportunities for girls and women? Don't the victories indicate that all is well in the world of Canadian sport? In fact, the successes are misleading; they blind most Canadians to the truth—the roots of CAAWS lie in the consistent under-representation of women in all facets of sport that has left women mute and frustrated. That all these women, and so many more, have succeeded, borders on the miraculous because Canada's sport system, as far as equity is concerned, has long left much to be desired.

Girls' and women's sport has traditionally been characterized by low levels of participation; absence from leadership positions in administration and coaching, at all levels and in every area; inequitable delivery systems; minimal research; and scant, often demeaning, coverage in the media.

Change for women in sport began slowly, and progress can be marked by several milestones—the Fitness and Amateur Sport Act of 1961 (Bill C-131); the report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in 1970; the National Conference on Women in Sport in 1974; the launching of Sport Canada's Women's Program in 1980; the Female Athlete Conference in 1981 and the establishment by Sport Canada of a Women in Sport program; the Constitution Act of 1982; the establishment in 1986 by Sport Canada of a formal policy on Women in Sport; the Minister's Task Force Report in 1992; and the landmark decision of the Canadian Sport Council to include gender equity quotas in their operating principles.

Although the provision of the Fitness and Amateur

Sport Act were expressed in general terms and made no specific references to women, its purpose was clear: to make sport and fitness opportunities available to all Canadians. The passage of the Act was significant because it officially committed the federal government, for the first time, to the promotion and development of amateur sport.

Established in 1967 to inquire into the status of women, the Royal Commission revealed that fewer girls than boys participated in sports in Canadian schools. Its report included two recommendations addressing the issue of female participation in sports programs.

Recommendation 77 called for the provinces and territories to review their policies to ensure that school programs provide girls and boys with equal opportunities to participate. It also urged the establishment of policies and practices to motivate



"Founding Mothers of CAAWS," 1981

Photo: Courtesy of CAAWS

and encourage girls to be active in sport.

Recommendation 78 suggested research to find out why fewer girls than boys were participating in school sport programs and to develop a strategy for change.

Early in 1974, with the leadership of Marion Lay, the federal government's Fitness and Amateur Sport Branch (FASB) sponsored a National Conference on Women and Sport. Athletes, coaches, educators, administrators, and researchers gathered to explore the issues raised by the recommendations of the Royal Commission. The conference, which today is pinpointed as the beginning of the women's movement in sport and fitness, produced action proposals and the strategies for change. What was missing, however, was the means to monitor the process and implement the recommendations.

A study completed in March 1980 provided a push. Study author Pam Lewis confirmed that women were indeed under-represented in leadership in sport at the national level. Commenting at the time, Susan Vail, Manager of the Women's Program said that the simple fact was that men's athletic needs—locally, provincially,

nationally, and internationally—had generally been met, while women's needs had not.

That same year, a Female Athlete Conference, sponsored by FASB and organized by Anne Popma, was held at Simon Fraser University to evaluate issues relevant to women in sport and examine the structural inequities of Canada's sport system. Participants, who included such stellar athletes as Karen Magnussen, Susan Natrass, Carol Bishop, and Beverly Boys, proposed explicit strategies to break down barriers and change the structure of sport. The conference also served as the catalyst for the establishment later that year of Sport Canada's Women's Program to develop and promote the involvement of women in sport and fitness activities, and for the founding of CAAWS.

More change came with the enactment of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in the Constitution Act of 1982. The Charter prohibits discrimination on the basis of gender and provides the fundamental freedom of

equality; in other words, rights and freedoms are guaranteed equally to females and males.

The next milestone came in 1986 when Sport Canada, through the leadership of Director General Abby Hoffman and Program Manager Diane Palmason, formally established a policy on Women in Sport that made equality of opportunity for women at all levels of the sport system an official goal. The policy represented the first government step to change the sport system. A two-pronged, action-oriented approach, supported by initiatives through both the Women's Program and Sport Canada's financial support and program sources, was agreed upon. Sport Canada developed a strategy of implementation for a number of activities including policy program development, an integrated sport infrastructure; leadership development; high performance competition; participation development; equitable resource al-

location; liaison; research; education; promotion; advocacy; and monitoring and evaluation. The ability of the policy to effect change was, however, limited by a very small budget. As well, there was no accountability framework to ensure that national sport organizations would implement the policy and make a commitment to gender equity.

As one of the targeted issues in the 1992 Task Force Report (Best, Blackhurst, and Makosky), women were encouraged to expect that their desire for change was well on its way to being fulfilled. According to the report,

... the pace of involving and advancing girls and women across the sport continuum, and in all levels of sport organizations, must be significantly accelerated in order to display fair and equitable treatment of 50 per cent or more of the Canadian population. (151)

A change in government in 1994 and fiscal slashing have put the onus on CAAWS to keep the Task Force recommendations front and centre.



*Speed skater, Jean Wilson*

*Photo: Canada's Sports Hall of Fame*

### CAAWS through the years

Formally launched in 1981, CAAWS was founded to advocate for progressive change within Canada's sport system, leading to the enhanced presence of girls and women at all levels and in all areas—as athletes, participants, leaders, coaches, and trainers. The founders,<sup>1</sup> many of whom remain active advocates today, were leaders in national, provincial, and community sport and physical activity groups. The current leadership of CAAWS reflects a similar cross-section.<sup>2</sup>

Meeting at McMaster University in Hamilton in March 1981, 37 delegates from across the country, including educators, administrators, athletes, researchers, technical experts, public servants, and women's group representatives, discuss the pros and cons of setting up a national association to address the special concerns of girls and women in the world of sport. Increasingly, women in sport were recogniz-

ing that change would only take place when women began to speak about the issues with one voice.

The delegates emerged from the meeting with a plan of action that included setting up an interim planning committee of Mary Keyes, Director of McMaster's School of Physical Education and Athletics (the first woman to hold such a position in Canada); Rose Mercier of the Canadian Amateur Swimming Association; former Olympic athletes Marion Lay and Abby Hoffman; Kathy Lane McDonald of the Ontario Diving Association; Susan Vail, manager of Sport Canada's Women's Program; Dorothy Richardson of the National Action Committee;

Nancy Theberge of the University of Waterloo; Shirley Marden of the Canadian Figure Skating Association, Ontario Council; and Lise Blanchard of the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women. Four members of the committee were given responsibilities in the areas of research, leadership, advocacy, and communications. The remaining six were to write position papers and devise a structure for the organization.

Within two years, CAAWS was working to meet several objectives: to make funds available for women's sport and recreation programs and to eliminate discriminatory cutbacks; to be a national focus for action to improve the status of girls and women in sport by lobbying legislators and private sector decision makers; to see that funds were not reallocated to "more important women's issues;" to have facilities and equipment available for women's programs; to establish sport as an area of concern to the women's movement and bring women in sport into the mainstream of the movement; to develop information, publications, and resources as effective vehicles for the promotion of girls and women and sport.

In 1987, CAAWS declared itself a feminist organization and adopted five important position statements:

CAAWS believes that systemic inequalities result in unfavourable resource allocation, programming, and leader-

ship development for girls and women in sport and physical activity.

CAAWS promotes actions that place and support women in decision-making positions in sport and physical activity.

CAAWS believes that the survival and advancement of women in sport and physical activity is dependent upon feminist empowerment and the feminist community.

CAAWS believes that any representation of girls and women in sport and physical activity should eliminate stereotypes and promote participation as a positive force in their lives.

CAAWS believes that feminist values must be validated

and entrenched in the management and delivery of sport and physical activity.

During this period, CAAWS functioned through operational funds received from the Secretary of State's Women's Program, choosing to accept only selected project funds from Sport Canada in order to avoid being co-opted by the sport system it was committed



*Archer, Lucille Lessard*

*Photo: Canada's Sports Hall of Fame*

to changing.

It was in 1989, when CAAWS was cut from the Secretary of State's Women's Program and left without operational funds, that the organization began to move towards an educational role. CAAWS began to position itself within the sport community as a leader and partner in developing plans and programs to implement the 1986 Sport Canada policy, which had been largely ignored by all but a few sport organizations. In 1991, CAAWS applied to Sport Canada for funding as a multi-sport organization.

### **The impact of CAAWS**

When Sport Canada realized that its Women in Sport policy was not being implemented, Abby Hoffman asked Marion Lay to become Manager of the Women's Program. Assured of a clear mandate to examine the situation and make recommendations to make the policy work, along with a reasonable budget, she accepted the challenge.

Lay tackled gender equity head-on, striving to create a climate that, along with ensuring a full range of opportunities and choices, assured equity for girls and women as participants, competitors, and leaders.

An interesting early step was the tour of three progressive countries under the auspices of the International Professional Development Program, a program to promote the study and practice of leadership and management within Canada's sport community. Working in partnership with the Canadian Sport and Fitness Administration Centre and the International Relations and Major Games Directorate of FASB, Lay and Rose Mercier led nine women from across Canada to England, Norway, and Sweden, gathering invaluable information and developing a bold plan of action to achieve gender equity in sport. The tour launched a new way of doing business based on the commitment that CAAWS would lead. The action plan formed the foundation of its operations.

Lay believed that it was the right time to breathe new life into CAAWS. She found the support and then the funding. She built a nation-wide network of women and men who believed in an equitable sport community. Now, only four years later, CAAWS is thriving, a respected and productive member of Canada's sporting community.

CAAWS' activities are wide-ranging. Operating with a strong base of volunteers and a small team of staff, CAAWS commissions and publishes issue papers on topics of critical significance to gender equity. It holds workshops designed to introduce gender equity in clear and manageable stages. Because it believes that legislation is a primary tool in effecting progressive change, CAAWS works with Sport Canada to encourage policy development and implementation to improve the status of girls and women. It also works to increase media and public awareness of the importance of the issues it promotes. CAAWS shares news of important developments with its cross-country network through *Action*, its quarterly newsletter. CAAWS is partners in "On The Move," a grassroots initiative that encourages

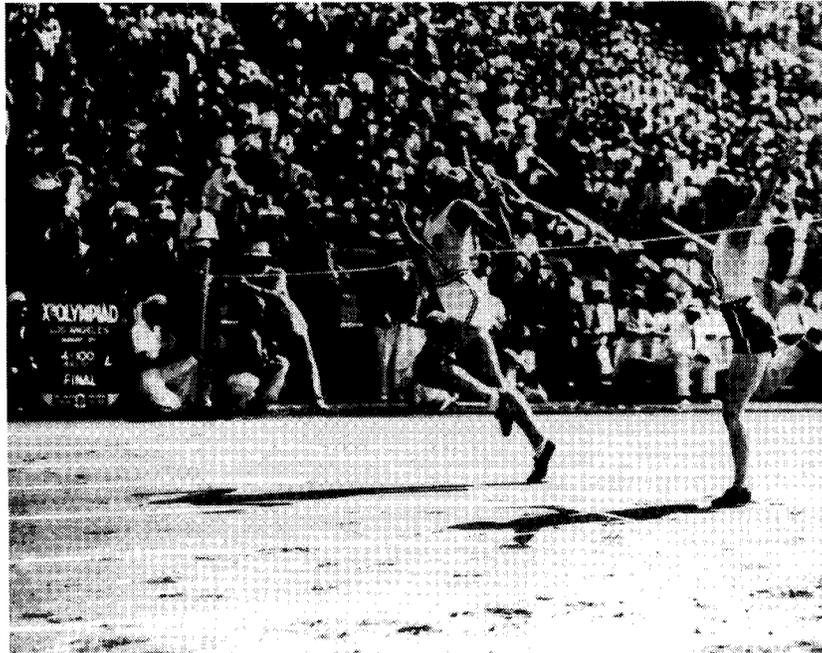
non-active teenage girls to participate in physical activity and sport and is running in communities across Canada. CAAWS celebrates outstanding achievement at our annual Breakthrough Awards gala.

For a small organization, CAAWS' achievements are large. Among the highlights:

CAAWS participated in the historic Women Sport and the Challenge of Change conference which drafted *The Brighton Declaration on Women in Sport*, endorsed on May 8, 1994, by 280 delegates from 82 countries, and subsequently endorsed by the federal government.

CAAWS was a key player in educating the sport community to understand and accept the benefits of gender equity, leading to the adoption of gender equity principles by the Canadian Sport Council.

CAAWS has for the first time created resources for use by sport organizations, and has published the *Gender Equity Handbook, Women in International Sport, Achieving Gender Equity*, a handbook for



Sprinter, Hilda Strike

Photo: Canada's Sports Hall of Fame

Canadian delegates to international federations, and issue papers dealing with such topics as *Harassment in Sport, The Law, Sport and Gender Equity in Canada, Self-esteem, Eating Disorders, Women and Tobacco*, and *Girls' Participation on Boys' Teams*.

CAAWS was a partner in the establishment of Promotion Plus, CAAWS' sister organization in British Columbia.

CAAWS contributed to the development in 1986 of Sport Canada's Policy on Women in Sport.

CAAWS wrote a policy development manual, *Resources For Research and Action—A Policy Handbook: Strategies For Effecting Change in Public Policy*, which was published by the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women.

CAAWS and the Coaching Association of Canada (CAC) worked cooperatively on the innovative Commonwealth Games Women in Coaching Program. CAAWS was also instrumental in making the 1994 Commonwealth Games in Victoria the first major international sporting event to

make a commitment to gender equity, to find an affirmative action program, and to adopt an harassment policy.

CAAWS and the Canadian Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance collaborated in the development of the Gender Equity School Initiatives project.

Driven by Betty Baxter, CAAWS, the CAC, the Canadian Interuniversity Athletic Union, Sport Canada, and the Canadian Colleges Athletic Association sponsored the National Coaching School for Women, designed to create new opportunities within the sport system for women coaches. The School is currently being re-designed, and CAAWS is a partner in that process.

#### CAAWS in the year 2000 and beyond

The CAAWS of the future will wear a different face. Maturing, growing, keeping pace with evolving demands, remaining true to its founding principles, CAAWS will continue to work in partnership to design a sport system that fully involves women, weaves equity into the governing structures, offers girls a complete range of opportunities and choices, and assures full and fair access to resources.

Recognizing that the time has come to diminish its dependence on government funding, CAAWS is developing a marketing strategy aimed at distributing its products, programs, and services much more widely. CAAWS is seeking to attract public sector contributions and private sector sponsorship, to encourage individual participation in the organization, and to expand the market for its products.

Accepting its place in women's movements, CAAWS continues to build new relationships in the spirit of spreading the word about how important sport and physical activity are to the mental and physical health and well-being of Canada's girls and women.

Looking to Canada's communities as the wellspring of sport and physical activity and to young women as the leaders of the future, CAAWS supports the growth of "On The Move" across the land.

Believing in the importance of women assuming leadership positions at all levels of sport, from the community to the international sport federations, CAAWS seeks ways to take the CAAWS-designed Women in Leadership workshops to more and more women, using the interactive model that has proven so successful.

Through its record of accomplishment and dedication, CAAWS is uniquely placed to make a difference. Fulfilling its mission is only a matter of time.

*Sheila Robertson of Robertson Communications, an Ottawa-based company specializing in writing and editorial services, has been working with Canada's sport community for close to 20 years. Her involvement began in the early 1970s when she was communications officer for Swim Canada. As founding editor of Champion magazine, she set editorial standards*

*that remain a model for the sport community today. Sheila currently works with numerous other national sport and government organizations.*

<sup>1</sup>The Founding Members of CAAWS are: Betty Baxter, Ottawa; Tom Bedecki, Ottawa; Wendy Bedingfield, Edmonton; Carole Bishop, Vancouver; Lyse Blanchard, Ottawa; Peggy Brown, Ottawa; Elizabeth Chard, Halifax; Monique Charlebois, Montreal; Patricia Corrnier, Whitehorse; Muriel Duckworth, Halifax; Laurel Goodacre, Red Deer, Alta.; Ann Hall, Edmonton; Cheryl Hassen, Ottawa; Jo Hauser, Ottawa; Abby Hoffman, Toronto; Reet Howell, Hamilton, Ont.; Mary Keyes, Hamilton, Ont.; Kathy Lane, Toronto; Pat Lawson, Saskatoon; Marion Lay, Victoria; Micheline LeGuillou, Montreal; Pam Lewis, Ottawa; Mary Lyons, Downsview, Ont.; Shirley Mardsen, Toronto; Suzanne Mason, Fredericton; Rose Mercier, Ottawa; Diane Palmason, Ottawa; Anne Popma, Burnaby, B.C.; Joan Rapsavage, Hamilton, Ont.; Jane Rattray, St. John's; Dorothy Richardson, Edmonton; Sandy Straw, Hamilton, Ont.; Nancy Theberge, Waterloo, Ont.; Susan Vail, Ottawa; Penny Werthner, Ottawa; Nancy Wood, Ottawa

<sup>2</sup>The 1995 CAAWS Board of Directors are: Sandy O'Brien Cousins, Edmonton; Cara Currie, Ponoka, Alberta; Judy Kent, Ottawa; Bryna Kopelow, Vancouver; Marion Lay, Vancouver; Christine LeBlanc, Moncton; Marg McGregor, Gloucester, Ontario; Lorrie Mickelson, Barrie, Ontario; Janet Rerecich, Toronto; Sue Scherer, North York, Ontario; Bobbie Steen, Vancouver; Penny Werthner, Calgary.

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