

LOOKING BACK

A glimpse of women's sport in the early century

BY LISA TIMPF

"DOWN THE HILL AND AROUND THE bend come the happy girls, with their cheeks glowing, and their eyes sparkling with fun. Here comes Margaret F. Sullivan! One would think that she was born on a Flexible Flyer...Alas! What is that tree doing in the way?

She shouts to it in vain; it moves not. Result — the tree gets a bad bump and must have the gardener fix it when the spring comes. Trees are so foolish."

This description of coasting in winter, which appears in Mount St. Vincent's yearbook *Folio Montana* early in the century captures some of the themes of sport and recreational physical activity for girls and women in the early twentieth century. The image of "glowing cheeks" echoes the belief of the times that physical activity (in moderation) could provide women with a healthy glow and rosy complexion.

The "fun" aspect was emphasized in women's sport. So much so, in fact, that winning was often downplayed in importance.

Sportsmanship was a recurrent theme of sport involvement for women. A description of Miss Ward, a coach at Halifax Ladies' College, noted:

We want to thank her for the sportsmanship she has instilled in us, an ability to love the playing of the game without recognizing the winning. No girl passes through a year of H.L.C. games without having her ideals of 'the game' heightened in some way."

The Mount St. Vincent college yearbook makes reference to the school motto, "Keep good humour still, whate'er you lose". Women were, in fact, repeatedly warned not to let winning become the all-encompassing motive for athletic participation. This is an attitude which is currently being re-emphasized in sport for children, because of a concern that youth sport has become too winning-oriented.

Players' techniques of the early 1900's were much more rudimentary than they are today. This factor, combined with confining clothing, poor equipment, and restrictive rules, led to some low-scoring games of basketball, such as the matchup between women from a New Brunswick Normal School and a team from University of New Brunswick, in 1906: "The Normalites won out, 5 to 1. The games was a little on the rough side, as evidenced by the fact that one of the Normal students had two teeth knocked out..."

Early in the century, there was a desire to preserve the "chaste" image of women by screening their abbreviated sport costumes, particularly in the case of basketball, from the vulgar gaze of men. A notice of a ladies' basketball game to take place between the Edelsteins and the

Jewels in 1907 was accompanied by the note, "Only ladies admitted".

Social activities were frequently held in conjunction with team athletic events for women.

A field hockey game between Halifax Ladies College and Edgehill, a girls private school in Windsor, Nova Scotia, involved some socializing both before and after the game:

"...after cocoa had been served in the library we got our things and took taxis to the Wanderer's fields ... After the game we had dinner at the College, then we danced after which the Edgehill girls left."

A women's hockey game between Wolfville and Halifax also involved a social element, for "The visiting team was entertained by the Wolfville team at a course diner at Acadian Villa Hotel, after the game."

Women's ice hockey was an activity which appears to have been more active early in the century than it is at present. In the 1920's, women's teams from Moncton, Charlottetown, Stewiacke, Windsor, Halifax, New Glasgow, Sydney, Amherst, and Springhill were all mentioned in newspaper accounts.

The New Glasgow team of the early 1920's was particularly well-travelled. The ladies sported "a regular costume with red toque, white sweaters, and bloomers". Their win over a Halifax team is explained in a Halifax newspaper's account which noted:

The New Glasgow ladies team were far superior to the home players, as might be expected, as they have been travelling all over the province playing games and are regularly organized.

The games were often well attended: New Glasgow's matches drew crowds of 600 (versus Moncton), 1,000 (against Charlottetown), and 1,500 (vs. Glace Bay), according to newspaper accounts.

Ice hockey was one of the few examples of a sport in which women could engage in bodily contact as part of the game. And engage in it they did:

"Deet' Balcom, Halifax winger, drew down the house with her rugged playing, several times knocking her opponents spinning with hard checks", states a newspaper account of one game.

Perhaps because ice hockey involved body contact, sportsmanship was not

always the primary consideration when competitive feeling were aroused. A description of a ladies' hockey game in 1910 may have been dramatized by the press, but nonetheless indicates that assertiveness did come out at times even in women's sport:

The ladies hockey game...was a keen contest, and...the ladies showed a knowledge of the game, combined with a proficiency which stamped them as excellent players. There were a few of them who indulged in tripping; there were a couple who were inclined to 'mix it up', while most of them were ready to assert their rights when the occasion arose...the play waxed warmer, and two of the players came in collision, and looked so savagely at one another that the referee was right on hand to prevent any trouble.

Women's field hockey, contrasted with ice hockey, was a more genteel sport, although it also brought its share of bumps and bruises. The game got an early start at Halifax Ladies College, as the 1909 version of the school yearbook noted:

In the autumn a hockey team was formed, and with great delight we would often assemble on the field off Young Avenue.

Although for a space of almost ten years the game was not played at the College, it was revived and by the 1920's had become one of the focal points of school sport. It even inspired some poetic efforts, such as the following excerpt from a poem printed in the school's yearbook:

*Sing a song of centre half
Has she work to do?
With the ball everywhere
And the forwards too
Wing, centre, out again
Than perhaps a roll
Next a hit from a forward's stick
And then for us—a goal.*

A trophy was awarded for annual home-and-home competition between HLC and Edgehill. That these competitions were eagerly anticipated by the players is suggested by the description of pre-game feelings in the HLC yearbook:

The day was at last approaching when we were to play our first match against Edgehill and when the girls who showed the greatest hockey ability made up the team. They were determined to put up the best fight they possibly could and had high hopes of bringing the cup back into the

school again. Groups of excited girls boarded the train for Windsor...

At Mount Saint Vincent, women participated in field hockey in addition to tennis and basketball. In 1919, it was noted that,

During November, ground hockey was played by girls who are fond of brisk weather and quick action. Needless to say we had our share of bruises. When the snow came, however, all turned to sensible walking on the road."

The game received an introduction at Acadia University through the efforts of a Mr. Russel, who was said to be keenly interested in promoting women's athletics. In the student newspaper, the *Athenaeum*, it says, "He hopes to be able to add field hockey and archery to the list of sports for next year." Russel appears to have been successful in introducing the game to the gym classes at least, for "as long as the weather permitted field hockey and soccer were substituted for indoor work, and proved very interesting".

Weather and field conditions were a preoccupation for those who engaged in field hockey. One season at HLC was summed up thus: "On the whole the season was good for the weather was not very bad". A scribe from the same school unwittingly predicted the future in wishing for an indoor game of field hockey:

We have all heard of ice hockey indoors and out but somehow those participating in ground hockey find themselves outdoors—and usually in the mud! Oh for an indoor field!...the Windsor match was won by Edgehill. We certainly should congratulate them on their superior skills in arising from the mud puddles.

Another match the same year was described by saying: "The match, which was won by Edgehill, resulted in a scramble for the ball in pools of exceedingly black and plastic mud."

An emphasis on social interaction and fair play for the female athlete of the early twentieth century did not entirely prevent the collection of bumps and bruises. There were also the vagaries of weather to contend with.

Written images of the Nova Scotian sportswoman of the early century indicate that these were taken in good spirit, and that women participated within their own frameworks of values and attitudes toward sport.

