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Women in the development of Canberra's sporting history

Occupation Historical Theme

Summary

The City of Canberra is home to elite sportswomen, such as champion basketballer, Lauren Jackson and influential administrators like Heather Reid, CEO of Capital Football. It is represented at a national level by teams like the Canberra Capitals in the Women's National Basketball League and the Canberra Darters in the Australian Netball League. But perhaps, more importantly, Canberra is home to the largest number of ordinary weekend warriors in all Australia. According to an Australian Bureau of Statistics report, published in 2012, 78.8 % of Canberra women regularly participate in Sport and Recreation, 9.7% more than the nearest 'rival' Tasmania at 69.1%. If we combine this record with the important role that Canberra has played as a developer of elite talent, through the Australian Institute of Sport, and the development of policy to promote and encourage women in sport through the Australian Sports Commission's Women's Sports Unit, then it most certainly is not overstating it to say that women have been very important in putting Canberra on the map of the sporting world.

Details

Canberra may have been officially named in 1913, but it wasn't until well into the 1920s that community services, like sporting clubs and facilities, were developed and made available for public use. The arrival of public servants and their families from Melbourne to accompany the Federal Legislature in 1927 put pressure on the Federal Capital Commission (FCC) to develop amenities that would turn the settlement into a community. The Social Services Association was established in 1926 to help the city planners gain feedback on what needs were most pressing for the small but growing community. Sports grounds and facilities were at the top of the list of needs and wants. Women, through a special Social Services Officer made sure their voices were heard on this matter.

In a town where men outnumbered women by 3 to 1 in the early days, it is not surprising that sports such as rugby, cricket and Australian Rules Football were organised quickly and enthusiastically. But even though they were small in number, the women of Canberra were determined to claim their right to play sport as well. On 15 November 1927, sixty women representing a wide variety of sports attended a meeting called by Miss D.M Hawkins, the Women's Social Service Officer, to discuss the formation of a Women's Sports Association. Areas of specific concern were raised, like access to the existing tennis courts, the progress of girls' hockey teams that were already competing, and the formation of cricket teams and basketball (what we would call netball) teams. But the primary purpose of the meeting was to gauge the interest in sport amongst Canberra women and then feed it back to the Federal Capital Commission. Given that Lady Butters, wife of the Chief Commissioner, was in the chair, there was no danger that the feedback wouldn't be heard.

Between them, Miss Hawkins and Lady Butters were quick and formidable workers. A series of further public meetings and consultations with the FCC ensued. By 5 March 1928, newspapers were reporting that a ground and many other facilities would be provided for women's sport:

The fair sex feel that they have been neglected in the development of sport in the capital, but the Federal Commission has expressed sympathy with their representations, and it is likely that a women's sports ground will be provided at Acton. The ground will be on the Acton flats, and it is proposed that facilities be provided for hockey, cricket, baseball, and swimming, and other sports. A ladies' swimming club, composed of residents of Beauchamp House and Gorman House, has been formed, and will take possession of the Acton swimming pool, which hitherto has been used for mixed bathing. A dressing shed will be built. It is the intention of the Commission to reserve this pool for the ladies' club. At present the Westlake Cricket Club is using a cricket pitch on Acton flats, but negotiations are in progress for the vacation of the pitch in order that it maybe used next season by ladies. A Croquet Club is to be formed, but play will be on a green at the Hotel Canberra.

Over the next two years, regular meetings were held by the Women's Sports Association to call for the formation of

basketball, cricket and hockey clubs, for access to tennis courts and bathing facilities. The establishment of a branch of the Y.W.C.A in Canberra in 1929 created more options and opportunities for the women of Canberra. So it was with a good deal of confidence that Miss D.M Hawkins, on the occasion of her migration to New Zealand to live, urged those in attendance to 'stick together' so that they can 'put Canberra on the map of the women's sporting world.'

Over eighty years later, Miss Hawkins would be proud of the legacy she created. The City of Canberra is home to elite sportswomen, such as champion basketballer, Lauren Jackson and influential administrators like Heather Reid, CEO of Capital Football. It is represented at a national level by teams like the Canberra Capitals in the Women's National Basketball League and the Canberra Darters in the Australian Netball League. But perhaps, more importantly, Canberra is home to the largest number of ordinary weekend warriors in all Australia. According to an Australian Bureau of Statistics report, published in 2012, 78.8 % of Canberra women regularly participate in Sport and Recreation, 9.7% more than the nearest 'rival' Tasmania at 69.1%. If we combine this record with the important role that Canberra has played as a developer of elite talent, through the Australian Institute of Sport, and the development of policy to promote and encourage women in sport through the Australian Sports Commission's Women's Sports Unit, then it most certainly is not overstating it to say that women have been very important in putting Canberra on the map of the sporting world, full stop!

The following paragraphs provide a quick sketch of the development of some women's sporting organisations in Canberra. They are not comprehensive histories: there are many of them to be found and where possible, details have been provided. Rather, the following is designed to highlight some of the issues as they rose and fell in the history of women's sport in Canberra.

Croquet

Women played croquet informally on the lawns of the Hotel Canberra from the time it opened in 1925. But when the Canberra Croquet club was established on March 1928, the hotel handed over the lawn to the club. The bulk of the members were wives of parliamentarians and high-ranking public servants. Lady Groom, wife of the Speaker of the House of Representatives was the first president.

Although the competition was important it's arguable that, especially in the early days, the social contact that came with membership was more important. Isolated in the home while their husbands were at work, the women saw the club as a social gathering as much as a sports club, with members being entertained at the home of the president on occasions, and bridge afternoons being a regular feature of the social calendar. Indeed, in the first club annual report, the secretary noted that 'if we can help towards making new arrivals feel that someone is willing to help them settle, then our club will have achieved something more valuable than training the finest croquet player who was ever born.'

This is not to say that the competition on the lawn wasn't fierce: there were some very handy players who achieved excellent results in the NSW Croquet Association pennant competition. But there can be no doubt that the competition was social as well, and the season opener was also highly anticipated, with special guests asked to take part. In 1973, for instance, Margaret Whitlam was invited and tried her hand at several games. The organising committee was delighted because there was more press coverage of the season than there had been for some time!

Importantly, the Canberra Croquet Club started as an all women affair and remained thus until 1974, when it was moved that men be allowed to play as invited guests. This was a pilot project, to some extent, to see how things might work if men were included. Like many amateur sporting associations in the 1970s, the club was looking to find new ways to increase membership and, therefore, funding. Permitting entry to men was one way of achieving this. In 1975, at an extraordinary meeting of the Canberra Croquet Club it was moved that the meeting vote consider accepting men as full time members. By 1977, the Canberra Croquet Club had male members.

In 2013 it remains a vibrant, active club with a healthy membership. In one form or another, the Canberra Croquet Club has been there to support the people of Canberra, almost from the start, and certainly from the moment when the public servants started moving in.

Bowling

Women have organised to play lawn bowls in Canberra for almost as long as their sisters at the Croquet Club, but unfortunately, they were not able to organise themselves on their own terms. The situation at the Canberra City Bowls Club was pretty much standard across any sporting organisation where women needed to participate as associates of a male club. At Canberra City, between 1930 and 1937 women had the status of a social group without office bearers. What this meant in real terms was limited times on the greens, combined with the expectation that they would raise funds and organise catering for the men during their competitions!

In 1937, under the guidance of Mrs Olive Toy, the women decided to form a club with elected officials. The City Ladies Associates Bowling Club entered competition with a strict membership cap imposed on them by their male counterparts, along with mandatory inclusion on the roster to provide afternoon tea for the men, to be paid for with funds from their on membership dues. Judging by comments in the club annual reports, in the early days, the attitude amongst the women should be one of grateful tugging at the forelock, for whatever crumbs might be thrown their way. 'We wish to express our appreciation to the menfolk for the use of the green and other privileges, and assure them that the ladies are ready to assist them in any way.' Some women recall, however, how lacking in substance the crumbs were. 'Mothers' Day seemed to be the only bowls day when mixed bowls was played without undue complaint from the men'.

As time went by, however, buried resentment came to the surface. At the AGM in 1950, a motion that a donation be made to

men's club, which was generally less efficient at raising funds than the women's, failed to find a seconder. There were constant rumblings amongst the women about the requirement to provide catering for the men, to the point where some women decided they could no longer be a member of the club. In 1968 they were relieved of some of their duties when the men resolved 'that we should discontinue the requirement of provision of afternoon teas except on special occasions', but as late as 1988, there was still a distinct lack of goodwill from many male members who complained that access to the bar by women members should be restricted because 'women were taking over the club'. The official history comments upon the way that these disputes were always resolved in an amicable fashion, but the reminiscences of women published in that same history indicate the extent to which the issue of women's subservient status in the club irritated the 'associates'. The work women did for the club was constantly undervalued and under-rewarded. It wasn't until 1974 that women members were awarded with medals, despite their forty years of financial and in-kind service.

Moving into the 1980s things changed, as equal opportunity legislation was enacted and women and women both needed to pull together to find resources and innovative ways to fund their operations.

Tennis

Many women associates of tennis clubs had similar problems as the bowlers did, in terms of access to courts. But the Ainslie Tennis Club, established in 1928, was a little different from some. Needless to say, providing refreshments for those working on the construction of the courts was left to the ladies, but is an unusual twist, it was agreed that there should be no refreshment without representation. In March 1928, a woman, Mrs Agnes Gillard, was elected to the committee of management. The courts were officially opened on Sunday April 21st 1928, with an initial membership of 32 men, 24 women and 23 juniors. Court maintenance was the responsibility of the male members, although official correspondence gave women nagging rights: 'it was the role of the ladies to remind their menfolk of the importance of the task'. The first team to enter competition was a mixed B grade team, in May 1928.

Male membership suffered during the years of the Second World War, a feature of amateur sport across the whole city. Competition tennis ceased and social tennis was restricted. In 1943 women members took over the running of the club and an all female executive and committee was elected with Agnes Gillard becoming the club's only female president. As was the case across the land, women enjoyed the management and leadership opportunities afforded to them as they picked up the duties of women in the armed forces.

The club won its first junior pennant in 1972 with a B1 girls team, who were the beneficiaries of the coaching of some excellent volunteers.

The Women's Sports Promotion Unit

The Women and Sports Promotion Unit was established as a function of the Australian Sports Commission in 1987 in recognition of the need to provide fairer sporting opportunities for women and girls. It was created in response to concerns raised by the Federal Government's Working Group on Women and Sport about the lack of women's participation in sport and recreation, and discrimination against those who did. The lack of women's opportunities for leadership within sporting organisations was also highlighted, along with the lack of media coverage of women's significant sporting achievements. Its role was to provide policy advice and guidance to the Federal Government and to the Australian Sports Commission. It was also created to publicise achievements. As the Minister for Sport at the time indicated, it was a policy unit that was long overdue. "Women are often the last to give themselves praise and put themselves first. Yet their sporting performances deserve recognition and accolades from the whole community.'

The first Chairperson of the unit was Margaret Pewtress, a sports woman and administrator of international repute. It benefited from the service of skilled public servants like Libby Darlison and Sue Baker-Finch, and from the consultancy services of women such as Heather Reid. Many of the programs and reports that still guide policy making in the area of women's sport had their gestation in the early days of the Woman Sports Promotion Unit.

A key plank in its communication strategy was the publication of its newsletter *Active*. Quarterly editions were released between 1988 and 1995 and they record the significant but under-reported achievements of Australia's elite sportswomen throughout that period. But just as importantly, it alerted people to the opportunities for participation available to everyday sportswomen, as well as advice on where to get funding support, and how to go about getting it.

The unit still exists in a different form and with changed priorities, although some of the issues remain the same; such as problems with media coverage of women's sports and leadership opportunities within mixed organisations. But it is hard to dispute the impact it has had on increasing women's participation. A survey conducted in the late 1980s reported that only 23% of Australian women regularly participated in some form of sporting activity. In 2012, that number has grown to 63.8%. From little things, big things grow.

Published resources

Site Exhibition

From Lady Denman to Katy Gallagher: A Century of Women's Contributions to Canberra, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2013,
<http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/ldkg>

Report

Sports and Physical Recreation: A Statistical Overview, Australia, 2012, Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012,
<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Products/037188C614B3F3E4CA257AD9000E2627?opendocument>

Newspaper Article

Sport for Women, 1927

Sports for Women, 1928

Bon Voyage, 1928

Canberra is a Sport-Loving Community, 1950

The Year in Sport, 1929

Book

Recollections of Women's Golf: GCGC 1926 to 1993, Royal Canberra Golf Club, 1996

Growing with the capital : a history of the Canberra City Bowling Club 1928-2005, Foskett, Alan, 2005

Fifty years at Souths : a short history of Canberra South Bowling Clubs., Rooney, John; Emerton, Don and Wight, Jack., 1998

The Federal Golf Club story, 1933-1983, Clues, D. S., 1983

Catalogue

Good sports : a history of recreation in the Canberra region., Canberra Museum and Gallery, 2000?

Newsletter

Active: Women in Sport Newsletter, Women's Sport Promotion Unit

Resource

It's About Time for Women in Australian Sport, Lundy, Kate, 2012,
<http://www.katelundy.com.au/2012/11/01/about-time-for-women-in-australian-sport/>

Archival resources

ACT Heritage Library

[HMSS 0084 Canberra Croquet Club Records](#)

[HMSS 0473 Ainslie Tennis Club Records](#)

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