

# Exercising women's rights to change

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

Sunday, June 30, 2002

Women did not participate actively in sports and exercise until late into the 19th century.

Horse riding and walking as means of recreation and transportation had been the two options available to them. Slowly, other activities such as tennis, golf, roller skating, croquet, hiking and bathing became popular. In time, each sport developed its own dress code.

By 1890, the idea of exercise as a healthy pursuit was still a foreign concept to most readers of the popular Domestic Monthly. One of the leading women's magazines at the time, it found its way into many local households. In one article, the magazine gently ridicules women who perform regular gymnastic exercises.

"There is a little book in current use ... This manual for encouraging the vanity of women also gives instruction in the art of developing the arms and necks and busts of the sex, but what it proposes for them to do is only, after all, what they are doing and have been doing always for their own improvement.

"A man exercises for his health - a woman for her looks. The growth of fashionable life, with the attendant increase of the use of low-necked dresses, has set many and many hundreds of women who want to shine in society, to racking their brains and busying their muscles toward improving their appearance. Many women who want to wear low ball and dinner dresses find they have bothersome bones in their necks which are quite useful in their way, but have no right to expose themselves when just a fair, smooth surface is desired.

"To sink these out of sight amid the fullness of a fashionable neck or chest is what is giving many a pugilist and fencing master and gymnasium manager wealth and business just now."

Though reluctant, the author recognized that this new interest in exercise would lead to changes. "The women are doing more, perhaps, to make themselves healthy and pretty than they ever did, or had a chance to do in modern times, before. Horseback riding, rowing, swimming, walking, exercising in gymnasiums, sparring, playing games that strengthen muscles and develop forms, and studying hygiene - with as little study and as much fun as possible - are some of their devices.

"Why, the young women are undergoing a revolution! Their mothers don't know what to make of them ....!"

This newfound interest in sports did indeed influence the way women dressed. Heavy corsets and tightly fitted clothing now needed to accommodate rapid movements.

The new corded corsets allowed "full expansion of the lungs. Perfect freedom of motion," while giving its wearer full support.

With the advent of bicycles, long, full skirts proved to be too cumbersome, opening the door for truly revolutionary changes in women's dress.

Bicycling became very popular during the 1880s, with more than 50,000 Americans taking it up. By 1896, the number was estimated at 10 million. While the first lady cyclists pedaled decorously in long skirts, fashion soon developed a more comfortable outfit.

In August 1894, the Domestic Monthly described a new pattern for Turkish Bicycle Trousers: "These trousers are worn, not alone for bicycling, but are superseding skirts for walking, and to the women who travel, have proven a great boon.

"... For bicycling they usually match the full short skirt worn, and are accompanied by gaiters, to the knee, of the same material. Some women with advanced ideas wear these garments without the skirt for bicycling, and it certainly is a style to be recommended."

Shorter hemlines to mid-calf, worn over knickerbockers or bloomers, or, even more daring, a split skirt, are shown in fashion magazines around 1898. The lightly fitted waist and jacket and a jaunty little hat, preferably "soft felt in Alpine style," as well as gloves complemented the stylish biking costume.

"Cycling has become more and more a universal pastime, and the approach of autumn heralds many new devotees who will enjoy its delights. In order to appreciate to the full the pleasures of cycling, it is essential to be properly and becomingly gowned, and the well-bred woman will plan her costume upon neat, simple lines and choose serviceable materials and colors. ...

"The skirts are planned to look equally well, whether the wearer walks or is mounted, and those which are in best taste are about 7 or 8 inches shorter than the ordinary walking skirt," admonishes the Delineator in 1898.

At the same time, colleges and schools added calisthenics and basketball for young

women to their curriculum. By the turn of the 20th century, the "gym suit" - bloomers shortened and widened to give the appearance of a short skirt, with a separate blouse, worn over long stockings and soft leather shoes - had become the accepted outfit.

Basketball quickly found its way to local schools, too. The first "Ulati," Vacaville High School's yearbook, proudly recorded the girl's basketball team in 1909: Ruby Larose (captain), Amy Bassford (manager), Ruth Myers, Esther Sharpe, Hazel Duncan, Elise Buckingham, Pearl Larose, Minti Perry.

The girls played against teams from all over Solano County and were quite successful. The exception was the season of 1915/1916. The Ulati Yearbook of 1916 records the charming story:

"Haven't you heard of the Basketball Girls of V.H.S.? No? Why that's peculiar! The basketball team comprised of the hearty, robust, and especially charming, not to mention, beautiful girls of the Vacaville High School, has had a spendoriforous campaign this year - let me tell you - they were not defeated once during the whole season and I call that record wonderful! Now to anyone who would like to know our secret, I shall say this: - The reason is we did not play one game. You inquire, Why? This really begins my story.

"Last vacation our honorable and highly esteemed janitor, due to the fact that after repeated, and, it is whispered, unheeded warnings to keep our suits off the basement floor, burned those once highly prized garments in the act of getting rid of all rubbish on the school premises. My! What a pow-wow arose, when upon returning to school in September, the girls heard the fatal news and later when we began to think of playing basketball, all our hopes of a team had vanished. Then ways and means of obtaining new suits were brought forth.

"Now this is the part I enjoy relating - the Trustees of the High School, always thinking of the best interest of the school, offered to buy new suits for us, under this one condition, that when we played a game we all should wear large orange ties, thus carrying out our school colors, - orange and black. Of course we consented; why should we not???

"The next difficulty now occurred. We sent for samples and after much delay they finally arrived. It was growing late in the season; we had even received two or three challenges from other towns to play in the near future, but of course, we had to send our regrets, etc.

"Then after picking out our suits, we sent in the order immediately, and after waiting for some time, in the meantime writing a little reminder to the firm to hurry, we received our

brand new suits. How nice we looked in them (so we thought) and how thankful we were to the trustees for getting them for us, - but my story has a sad conclusion - the number out for practice was hardly sufficient and the time (the S.C.A. League had already been completed) was late, so consequently, we did not play a single game.

"We are, however, waiting patiently for the next year when we intend that V.H.S. will carry off the cup."

Downloaded from the Solano History Database

<http://www.solanohistory.org/125>

<http://articles.solanohistory.net/125/>