

Breaking Through: How Female Athletes Shattered Stereotypes in the Roaring Twenties

Sue Macy

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Women athletes of the 1920s are seen overcoming stereotypes and opposition in Sue Macy's uplifting *Breaking Through*, a text that shows how women defied the odds during a definitive decade for competitive sports.

The 1920s debate around whether women should participate in world-class sporting competitions stemmed from a general rise in women's participation in physical fitness outlets—seen as beneficial for their strength, though many traditionalists believed that such changes were detrimental to women's health. Photographs, illustrations, and timelines trace this saga, while sidebars focus on specific critics and trailblazers to deepen understanding.

Focused on the benefits and drawbacks of women competing at the Olympics, the book forwards beliefs about women's constitutional ability to sustain vigorous athletic schedules and how such beliefs color debates. Any serious injuries or issues, Macy shows, were treated as evidence that women were safer when excluded from the competitive intensity.

While focused on history, the book contains anecdotes and moments of great courage; when one athlete was told that a sporting organization would ban women from participating, she said, "They certainly rule English football, but not the world, thank goodness." Such quotes keep the text light and exciting.

The content is direct and precise, its perspectives treated with nuance and care. When possible, the book relies on primary sources, including newspaper articles and quotes from athletes themselves. These open a window into the thought processes of the twenties. That decade is situated in the context of other historical events and topics, particularly in relation to greater equality for black Americans and women. A satisfying ending shows that the initiatives of the 1920s reverberated through the following decades, laying the groundwork for continued pushes toward equality.

Breaking Through is a stirring saga that uses excellent visual storytelling to capture a unique time in women's athletic history.

LAURA LEAVITT (January / February 2020)

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