

reviews

Janice Brown (writer,producer) and Brenda Hennig (producer), *The Matchless Six: Highlighting Canadian Women Track Athletes at the 1928 Olympic Games*. Great North Productions ; Kelowna, B.C, Filmwest Associates [distributor], c1996, 46 minutes in length, VH04682.

This film is the story of the Canadian women's Olympic track and field team in 1928, comprised of Bobbie Rosenfeld, Myrtle Cook, Ethel Smith, Jane Bell, Ethel Catherwood and Jean Thompson. They were called "the Matchless Six" after successfully competing in the 1928 Olympic Games in Amsterdam, the first Games that allowed women to compete in track and field events. The Canadian Matchless Six successfully earned 2 gold, 2 silver and 1 bronze medal, propelling Canada to finish 4th place overall in the medal standings, its best showing to that point. This film is an engaging portrayal of women's participation in elite-level sporting competition in events for which women's participation was not uniformly accepted.

The filmmakers weave together rich historical sources such as film footage of the women taking the ship over to Amsterdam and competing in the Games, pictures of each of them growing up and excelling at sports, as well as newspaper articles and coverage both in Canada and abroad. Particularly poignant is the interview/narration by Jane Bell, the only surviving member of the Matchless Six, who provides first hand recollections of their experiences as the first Canadian women's track and field team. The film crew travels to Amsterdam with Jane Bell as she re-lives the feeling of being in the stadium that brought her great success and glory in 1928. There are also interviews with Bobbie Rosenfeld's sister and Myrtle Cook's son, providing revealing testimony of their dedication and motivation to excel in sport. The personal anecdotes, such as dancing on the deck of the boat en route to Amsterdam, provide a valuable connection for an audience of younger viewers. While the film was produced in 1996, both the quality of original film and photos is exceptional and their use helps portray the social and sporting conditions of the time with a unique authenticity that draws the viewer into the experiences of the women. The primary sources are also well supported by reenactments of described events. For a film of just under 47 minutes, the subject matter covered is extensive. To begin, the film deftly contextualizes the 1920's as a golden time for sport in North America, the era of the flapper, increased urbanization, industrialization and growing women's movements internationally. This backdrop is imperative to understand the potential impact of this group of female track athletes and the challenges they confronted. The film follows with general biographies of each woman, highlighting the impact of family, friends, coaches and employers in their development to become elite athletes. It contextualizes the trajectory to the Olympic Games, detailing their coaching, training and resources each woman received or lack thereof. The film concludes with a post-script of their

lives following the Amsterdam Olympics and encourages viewers to reflect on the challenges and triumphs these women faced prior to, during, and after their remarkable Olympic success.

On the whole, this is a very good and historically-sound film with several notable strengths. The quality and quantity of historical sources is excellent and makes efficient use of video, pictures, and interviews to vividly depict this story. The interviews with Jane Bell and other family members go a long way towards bringing viewers directly into the world of the Matchless Six and understanding their accomplishments from a personal vantage. While we consider this to be an excellent film, a few weaknesses are noted. The film could increase its applicability to higher levels of undergraduate study by providing a more in-depth discussion on the impact of the Matchless Six in Canada and internationally, particularly the protests against women competing in track events at the Olympics, even after their outstanding performance. Moreover, a critical discussion on their impact on prevailing gender ideologies and the place of Canadian women in elite athletics could only enhance this film. Finally, as gender constructs are relational, comparing more of the experiences of men and women on the Canadian Olympic team could further reveal some of the inequities that existed in terms of access to team resources and training, etc.

The Matchless Six is a very accessible and engaging film that is a valuable resource for teaching and learning. It is well-suited for undergraduate courses in women's history, the history of sport, as well as other courses that examine gender and culture.

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