

## reviews

Eshel, Shuli. *Jewish Women in American Sport: Settlement Houses to the Olympics*. 2007. 27 minutes, colour, DVD.

In *Jewish Women in American Sport*, director Shuli Eshel investigates Jewish women's struggle to find their way into American sport. The opening question posed by narrator Caryn Bark – “There is no such thing as Jewish women in American sport, or is there?” – sets the direction as it questions their enduring invisibility and reveals Eshel's avowed aim of shattering stereotypes through the narration of key moments of this progressive breakthrough. This first contention is illustrated by still pictures of contemporary Jewish American female athletes from a varied range of disciplines.

Moving along chronological lines, we are first shown settlement houses. Historian Linda Borish explains that these were created in the 1880s in cities such as Philadelphia, New York and Chicago in order to make the new immigrants accustomed to American values. They often accommodated gymnasiums but, as Dr. Diner recounts, in the beginning women were denied entry. The third historian, Steven Ries, mentions that the first settlement house to provide women with athletic facilities was founded by a philanthropic Jewish woman just one year before the first modern Olympic Games were held.

Chapter two shows that, thanks to the possibility of intensive training offered by such houses, Jewish women started playing a prominent part in sport. Elaine Rosenthal was one of the first women golfers and as such toured the US in 1917, playing exhibition matches. The founder of women's basketball was a Jewish immigrant named Senda Berenson, who had learned it from the creator of basketball himself. She slightly modified the rules and held the first women's collegiate basketball game in 1893. She was the first woman enshrined in the Basketball Hall of Fame. The third pioneer to be portrayed is Charlotte Epstein who founded the first women's swimming association in New York in 1917 and headed the first Women's Olympic Swimming Team at the 1920 Olympics. Her team won many gold medals in these and subsequent Olympics.

Despite these successful breakthroughs, these pioneers met with discrimination and had to fight in order to take part in sport competitions: many played under fake names for fear of being recognized as Jewish and Epstein had to battle the all-male committee to make women's participation possible in the 1920 Olympics. This struggle was all the more meaningful as demanding equality in sport also meant requiring more equality in other aspects of life. Thus Epstein organized “suffrage swim races”, to promote women's vote.

Chapter three focuses on two of “Eppie's swimmers” who took part in the second Maccabiah Games – an international Jewish competition – in 1935. Janice Lifson-Stuart and Doris Kelman-Beshunsky – now in their eighties – offer a lively testimony of this event. They tell how they first heard of the Games, how they passed the try-outs but had

to collect money for their team to travel there, and how successful they were. The interview ends with their recollection of the warm reception that awaited them upon their return to NYC. We then meet two other Maccabiah champions – the track and field athletes Sybil Koff and Lillian Copeland. Copeland won the discus both in the 1932 Olympics and in the 1935 Maccabiah, and qualified for the 1936 Berlin Olympics, held in Nazi Germany, which she decided to boycott. Janice Lifson explains why she and others did so as well.

Chapter four opens with Title IX which helped eliminate sexual discrimination in collegiate athletics and therefore enabled women to gain access to founding to support their careers. In 2003, the Jewish Sports Hall of Fame honored 19 Jewish women, among whom was the swimmer Marilyn Ramenofsky who explains that in the 1960s she had no knowledge of the Jewish women who had preceded her because of the lack of literature on their legacy. Borish adds that many former athletes now try to give back to their community, by becoming coaches or otherwise supporting young athletes.

The documentary ends with interviews with contemporary Jewish women athletes and the narrator concludes that these women now have full access to sport because women in the past opened the way by fighting strong prejudice.

*JWAS* offers a comprehensive narrative of the role of Jewish women in American sport. Starting in the 1880s when the practice of sport was not only a way of maintaining good health but a means of Americanization of newly arrived immigrants, the film is instructive as to how sport slowly became an end in itself in a community not commonly associated with sport. But for Jewish women, access to sport was rendered even more difficult by the joint effect of race and gender stereotypes. Therefore these female athletes' struggle to access sport facilities and later enter competitions is far from being anecdotal. As Eshel points out, it is part of a broader struggle for liberation from traditional roles assigned to women.

Thanks to extensive archival footage testifying to an impressive research effort, numerous interviews of female athletes recounting their experience and insightful information provided by three historians, Eshel manages to capture the essence of the quest for equality undertaken by these women in a situation of double jeopardy. Indeed, Eshel explains very well how race and gender stereotypes added up to prevent them from achieving their goals, although the Jewish community's perception of the role of women could have been analyzed more thoroughly.

Although sport plays an important role in American life, accounts of Jewish women's struggle to gain access to it are few and Shuli Eshel's instructive film certainly adds much needed insight into the subject as it not only proves that there are in fact many Jewish women in American sport, but pays a well-deserved tribute to the contribution of the outstandingly determined pioneers who made it possible.

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