On this, the first day of September, 1924, we, the Editors of the SPORTSWOMAN, make our bow to the public. After a long and laborious struggle, mainly on the part of schools and colleges, and recently on the part of the United States Field Hockey Association, women’s athletics are at last coming into their own. We feel therefore that it is a propitious moment for the SPORTSWOMAN to enter the arena, confident that a woman’s magazine, published by women, devoted to all forms of sports in which women take part, linking together the interests of all players and keeping them in touch with each other’s achievements, will supply a real need. We have confidence also in our public. We write only for true lovers of sport. They alone will be our readers. Others will not be interested.¹

This epigraph is the opening paragraph of the first issue of a periodical named The Sportswoman, and it set the tone for a truly ambitious undertaking. While women’s magazines had long been a staple of the periodical market, this one was of the first to be expressly committed to women’s sports or women athletes.² Even the idea of women as athletes was relatively new in 1924, so a “fortnightly magazine dedicated to athletics for women” was indeed breaking new ground.³ The founders were confident that there existed a critical mass of women interested in sport and that those women would support the new magazine. Their perspective was grounded by their involvement in the fledgling United States Field Hockey Association (USFHA) and in their experiences as teachers, coaches, and players in schools and colleges. It was a time of greater visibility and expanding athletic opportunities for women—seemingly an opportune moment to introduce a magazine to serve this emerging market.

The 1920s are often referred to as the Golden Age of Sport for men, but they are also considered the “first wave of athletic feminism” for women.⁴ Since the lifespan of the magazine roughly parallels this critical period in the development of women’s sports, the Sportswoman represents a kind of time capsule that allows

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an examination of women’s sport in this period. The magazine, however, has significance beyond the confines of women’s sports. Through its coverage of certain segments of women’s athletic experience and omission of others, the *Sportswoman* captures broader social tensions over gender relations and class values. From this perspective, the *Sportswoman* becomes an important instrument for the study of sport, class, and gender in American culture. This article will present a content analysis of the *Sportswoman*, highlight the major themes in the magazine, and discuss their significance for the study of class and gender in this period.

**A Decade of Shifting Expectations**

The 1920s were a period of rapid technological innovation and changing social values. The growing reach of mass media (movies, radio, magazines, and newspapers) into Americans’ homes was creating a new national culture and one important aspect of that culture was sport. According to Lynn Dumenil, “sports embodied leisure, and offered escape from the workaday world; in addition it helped to enshrine commercialized youth and vitality as central parts of the consumer culture.” The popularity of sports was also connected to its ability to represent old-fashioned values such as hard work and discipline. The elevation of male and female athletes to celebrity status in this era reflected the power of the new media and embodied American’s desire for youthful vitality alongside a traditional work ethic.

Mark Dyreson observed that “the emergence in the public culture of the 1920s and 1930s of accomplished female athletes in high-profile competitions created a debate about women’s roles in American society in the wake of shifting political, legal, and cultural conceptions of womanhood.” These shifting conceptions were the result of several developments: women assuming traditionally male roles during World War I and continuing to move into the white-collar work force; women’s recent political equality, gained through suffrage in 1920; and new theories in psychology, which promulgated the idea that men and women were sexual beings. Victorian ideals of women’s chastity and moral superiority were undermined as the image of the flapper, with her aberrant behavior and dress, became the visible manifestation of women’s new social freedoms.

Attitudes about gender roles, however, did not necessarily keep pace with these social changes. According to Dave Kaszuba, “the landscape was dotted with passionate feminists, staunch chauvinists, and a silent majority caught in between—people who were supportive of women’s advances in certain arenas but not quite sure how to react to every new circumstance involving the ‘new woman’.”

Women’s theoretical equality challenged the old assumptions about what was inherently masculine and feminine. The idea of equality between men and women was unsettling and as Susan Cahn noted, the period was “marked by a new wariness and, at times, a barely suppressed hostility in gender relations.” Thus, as women moved further into competitive athletics, their performance challenged stereotypes about women’s physical abilities as well as pushed the boundaries of what was formerly considered masculine territory within the greater context of social unease about changing gender roles. Women’s sports became “an important symbolic as well as actual arena of competition.”