Fanny “Bobbie” Rosenfeld: A “Modern Woman” of Sport and Journalism in Twentieth-Century Canada

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Jewish-Canadian athlete Fanny “Bobbie” Rosenfeld has been remembered as an exceptional all-around athlete, whose career triumph occurred at the 1928 Olympics where she won a gold medal as the lead-off member of the 4 × 100-meter relay team, a silver medal in the disputed 100-meter race, and placed fifth in the 800-meter race. She was also a hard-hitting sports journalist, in an occupation dominated by men, who championed women’s issues at all levels—local, national, and international—through her daily column for the Toronto Globe and Mail from 1937 to 1958; a coach for the women’s track and field team at the 1934 British Empire Games; and a critic of sport policy, particularly amateur athletics. In 1950 she was named Canada’s woman athlete of the half-century, narrowly edging out figure skater Barbara Ann Scott. The only Jewish athlete ever to win a gold medal in track and field, she was inducted into the International Jewish Sports Hall of Fame in Israel in 1981. The accolades for Rosenfeld continued to mount. In 1991 the city of Toronto established the Bobbie Rosenfeld Park situated between the Sky Dome and the CN Tower. On 9 June 1996, the Canada Post Corporation paid tribute to the 100th anniversary of the Modern Olympic Games by issuing five stamps honoring Canadian Olympians who distinguished themselves at previous Olympics, and included Bobbie Rosenfeld among those recognized.1

Rosenfeld’s athletic career spanned that crucial period in women’s sport history between the two world wars, long recognized by sports historians as “the golden age of women’s sport in Canada.”2 Rosenfeld, with her bobbed hair—the derivation of her nickname “Bobbie”—her lean athletic body, independent career girl persona, and immigrant working-class background, was the embodiment of a new type of femininity that emerged in the interwar years known variously as the Modern Girl and the Modern Woman. As a collective of women’s historians demonstrated recently, the Modern Girl emerged quite literally around the world in the first half of the twentieth century.3 Historian Kathy Peiss writes, “The Modern Girl was variously a symbol of female social freedom, normative Western racial hierarchies, the universality of beauty, standards of hygiene and fashion, and a modernizing economy.”4 Whereas the Modern Girl is usually associated with the representation of the sexualized, commodified flapper in the scholarly literature, another version

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of the Modern Girl was embraced, her healthy and athletic sister, which as Uta Poiger points out, was used by the Third Reich to illustrate Nazi racial ideology.\(^5\) In the Canadian context, sport historian Bruce Kidd comments that alongside the rebellious flapper a woman athlete “could push back the conventional limits of her world,” through her athletic endeavors, lobbying for facilities, fighting for leadership in men’s clubs, and by forming independent woman-only organizations.\(^6\)

The image of the Modern Woman, therefore, was used in various ways sometimes as a symbol of the commodification of women’s beauty ideals, as representative of the emergence of the modern nation state, or by racial minorities in their respective political movements. Yet, being a Modern Woman was also a choice, or as Liz Conor suggests, a performance of the self that defined a new subjectivity for women.\(^7\) Fanny “Bobbie” Rosenfeld fashioned herself as a Modern Woman through her involvement in sport during the interwar period in the broader social context of the emergence of Canada as a modern industrial nation where immigrant working-class women flocked to cities and formed sports leagues. In developing our argument, we chose to use the term *Modern Woman* following Conor and other scholars of women and modernity, rather than the derivation *Modern Girl*, in order to suggest that a new modern female subjectivity emerged in early twentieth century Canada, where alongside a new feminine visibility in the public realm, women were active in the production of new subject positions by challenging the traditional articulation of sexual difference.\(^8\)

This research builds on the writing in the field of women’s sports history, notably the important works by M. Ann Hall, Helen Lenskyj, Bruce Kidd, and Don Morrow, who have demonstrated how women athletes in the interwar period took control of their own sports and organized their own institutions of sport, thereby resisting what some have identified as the “masculinising tendencies of sport.”\(^9\) The first part of this article explains how Rosenfeld emerged as a Modern Woman of sport through her participation in local Toronto sports leagues and as a member of Canada’s first women’s Olympic team in 1928, at Amsterdam, where she not only attained success in terms of medals won, but she also challenged the boundaries of traditional femininity through her performance of gender. Through her displays of outstanding athleticism and techniques of appearing, Rosenfeld helped to pave the way for the emergence of the Modern Woman of sport in interwar Canada—a representation of womanhood that was hugely contested at the time.

The second part of the article suggests that after her career as a competitive athlete Bobbie Rosenfeld fashioned herself as a Modern Woman of journalism. Three of the women on, or connected with, Canada’s first women’s Olympic team, namely, Fanny Rosenfeld, Myrtle Cook, and Alexandrine Gibb, became Canada’s first regular women newspaper sports columnists. A thorough reading of Rosenfeld’s columns for the *Globe and Mail* explain how she understood and negotiated women’s new, but still precarious, position in sport. A systematic search of Rosenfeld’s columns in the *Globe and Mail* was carried out using the *ProQuest* database.\(^10\) From close to two thousand columns, we identified nearly one thousand that exemplified the range of Rosenfeld’s perspective on issues surrounding “women in sports” through her twenty-year career as a journalist. These were then categorized using the following keywords: 1928 Olympic memories (15), childhood memories (20), community issues (120), the double standard between male and female athletes over issues of amateurism (36), fashion (14), femininity