Taking Aim: The Evolution of Women in Competitive Shooting Sports in the 20th Century United States

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Throughout history, women have been overlooked, discounted, and ignored for their skills and abilities as competitive and professional athletes. Competitive shooting sports were popular in the United States; however, men excluded women from participating in many of these activities until the early 19th century, when America saw the rise of famous markswomen such as Annie Oakley, Calamity Jane, and Lillian Smith. These women challenged the masculinity of the sport of shooting and bested many of their male counterparts as they traveled and performed across the United States. In the 1970s, women found themselves entering the Olympic arena of competitive shooting sports. Women such as Margaret Murdock, Pat Spurgin, and Kim Rhode achieved victories in numerous Olympic Games starting in 1976.

Historical scholarship appears to have missed the target by not focusing on women in competitive shooting sports. This thesis adds to the current scholarship of women’s history, gender history, and 20th century sport history and develops a narrative to explain how American women advanced in competitive shooting sports in the United States. Shooting sports have a significant place in sporting history, in which American women played a key role. This study adds to the narrative of the Women’s Liberation Movement of the 1970s, shows how female marksmen benefitted from the passing of Title IX of the Education Amendment Act in 1972, and illustrates how women began to excel in Olympic marksmanship.
TAKING AIM: THE EVOLUTION OF WOMEN IN COMPETITIVE SHOOTING SPORTS IN THE 20TH CENTURY UNITED STATES

by

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in History Western Michigan University August 2022

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CHAPTER 1
Introduction: An overview of Gender and Sport

“She looks like someone who would faint at the sight of a gun…”¹

Perhaps the greatest markswoman the world had ever seen did not emerge from the ruffian towns of the Wild West, nor from Buffalo Bill’s exotic performances. Arguably the best woman rifle shot of all time was described in the 1976 Los Angeles Times as “a kind of dumpy hausfrau from Topeka with bifocal glasses and patches of gray in her hair. She looks like a checkout counter clerk at a supermarket or a lady in a commercial demonstrating a washday miracle.”² Her name was Margaret Thompson Murdock and, according to Times editor Jim Murray, she was “the best damn rifle shot in the whole world this side of television.”³

In a few short hours on July 21, 1976, Margaret Murdock won the Olympic gold medal in small bore rifle, three positions, one of the Olympic shooting categories. This simply meant she fired a .22 rifle at a target 120 times- 40 kneeling, 40 standing, and 40 lying down.⁴ She successfully achieved 1,162 points out of a possible 1,200 and no competitor shot better than she did.⁵ Most believed Murdock had achieved one more point than her fellow male countryman, Army Captain Lanny Bassham, but after the competition officials discovered a clerical error in Bassham’s count. The recount tied Bassham with Murdock, and “suddenly, she only had a silver to match her hair.”⁶

³ Ibid.
⁵ This event will be explored more fully in chapter five of the thesis.
International Olympic rules called for judges to review the last ten shots of the competition. In the last ten, kneeling, showed that Bassham had scored 98 points, Murdock 96, and for that she lost the gold medal. This outraged many male and female spectators and even Murdock’s fellow competitor, Bassham. Editor Jim Murray commented, “Margaret lost in overtime to a pencil shuffler, not a shootoff.” The handling of the recount angered Bassham and he believed a shootoff would have been a more appropriate tie breaker. “This is arbitrary rubbish. There should be two Olympic champions this time,” said Bassham as quoted in the Los Angeles Times. After the official announcement, Bassham told officials he would not wear the gold medal around his neck and, instead, Murdock will hold it jointly with him as a form of protest. When Olympic officials awarded medals, Bassham pulled Murdock onto the first place platform with him to celebrate their win for the United States.

No evidence directly indicates that Bassham’s win was solely based on his gender, but his victory should not come as a surprise based on the language used to describe not only Murdock’s appearance, but the way observers perceived her as a female marksman. Many Americans were disappointed with the outcome of the 1976 Olympic small-bore rifle competition. Editor Jim Murray from the Los Angeles Times claimed that the Olympic organization wasted a great opportunity for an intense shootoff to break the tie. “I can just see it now. The bad guy (Bassham) comes out with rifle gleaming in the sun but Meg first has to untie her apron strings and take the baby over to her mother’s and drop the laundry off and put the roast in. Then she knocks him dead. Is that picture, baby?” This statement in the Los Angeles Times.

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8 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
Times exemplifies the lingering gendered social constraints in America that date back long before the start of the modern Olympics in 1976. These theoretical chores that Murray assigned to Murdock are all domestic ones and his words further demonstrate that gender was a serious factor in female participation and success in competitive shooting sports.

While this small story contains numerous points that could be analyzed, our story will begin with gender as the key form of historical analysis to explain the evolution of women in competitive shooting sports. Was the official decision to give sportsman Bassham the gold based on gender? If not, why would Bassham react the way that he did? Would Bassham have held a different opinion on the tie breaker if his fellow competitor were not a woman? Why did the newspapers focus on Murdock’s physical looks and describe her the way they did with gendered observations? Why was her appearance important to note numerous times in a publication while Bassham’s appearance received no mention? Why did the editor of the Los Angeles Times describe the life of Margaret Thompson Murdock outside of her athletic career as being a typical female dwelling in the domestic realm? Why did the editor say Murdock “looks like someone who would faint at the sight of a gun…”? Why did Margaret Murdock have to initially fight her way into the Olympic arena despite her long history of outstanding marksmanship? The answer is historically telling.

The story of Margaret Murdock’s disappointing loss of the gold medal in the 1976 Olympic games provides just one example of how gender impacted the sport of competitive shooting. Murdock alone faced many obstacles on her journey to becoming an Olympian and most had to do with her competing as a woman. She began shooting as a little girl in the

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12 This issue will be explored further below in the thesis.
basement of her home after her father had purchased her a rifle and a target trap.\textsuperscript{14} When she attended Kansas State University, many tried to bar her from the all-male rifle team until she out-shot everyone on it. Despite her unmistakable skill and talent behind the barrel, university officials requested she not wear her letterman’s jacket on the campus.\textsuperscript{15} In a 2011 interview with the \textit{Topeka Capital-Journal}, Murdock stated that “My first year at K-State, I couldn’t shoot on the team because I was a female. I could practice with the K-State team, but I couldn’t be on the team. They got a new coach and he thought it would be a good idea for me to be on the team since I was shooting better than everyone else.”\textsuperscript{16} At Kansas State, Murdock became the squad’s number one shooter and in 1963 and 1964 she was named an All-American, the highest collegiate honor for an amateur athlete.\textsuperscript{17}

After college, Murdock gravitated toward the Army where she taught marksmanship at Fort Benning, Georgia. If a recruit objected to being instructed by a woman, Murdock reportedly would pick up her rifle and spend five minutes putting shots through her original bullseye.\textsuperscript{18} During her career in international competition in the Olympics, Pan American Games and World Championships she won a total of 30 medals: 22 gold, 6 silver, 2 bronze.\textsuperscript{19} Despite her great success as a professional markswoman, the press and media continuously hurled gender-charged insults, comments, and judgements on everything from her skillset to her manicured fingernails.\textsuperscript{20} These gendered depictions kept women out of competitive shooting sports

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\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.  \\
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.  \\
\textsuperscript{16} Ken Corbitt, “Murdock Didn’t Miss Upon Getting Her Shot,” \textit{The Topeka Capital-Journal}, August 26, 2011.  \\
\textsuperscript{17} Jerry Soifer, “MONTREAL ’76: SHOOTING: One of the Sharpshooters Is a Woman,” \textit{Los Angeles Times}, July 9, 1976, 5.  \\
\textsuperscript{19} Ken Corbitt, “Murdock Didn’t Miss Upon Getting Her Shot,” \textit{The Topeka Capital-Journal}, August 26, 2011.  \\
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throughout history and each of the women participants like Murdock had to prove themselves capable of beating men at their own game.

**Gender and Competitive Shooting in American Culture**

The gendered hierarchy that existed and practiced, normalized, and enforced throughout American history had lasting impressions on the course of sporting culture in the United States and, more specifically, on the progress of American women in shooting sports. Throughout history, women have been overlooked, discounted, or ignored for their skills and abilities as competitive and professional athletes. Competitive shooting sports were popular in the United States from the start of the colonial era and evolved significantly into the 21st century. Men typically excluded women from participating in many of these activities until the early 19th century when American people witnessed the rise of famous female marksmen such as Annie Oakley, Calamity Jane, and Lillian Smith as Princess Wenona. These women challenged the masculine sport of shooting and developed mastery over many of their male counterparts as they traveled and performed across the United States. Women began to participate in early field precision sports, like shooting and archery, and proved themselves worthy of participation and attention. In the 20th century, archery was a common sport for women to compete in since it appeared to have the attributes of a sport seemingly appropriate for a woman’s physical stature and mental capacity and women wore gender appropriate sporting costumes. Around the turn of the 20th century, it became more common for women to pick up rifles, pistols, and shotguns to demonstrate their marksmanship skills on the range. During this time, many famous health and wellness experts advocated for female marksmanship and argued in favor of training women to use firearms for sport. Later, in the 1970s, women found themselves emerging from the dim

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21 I use the terms female marksmen, markswomen, and marksmen interchangeably throughout this study.
lights and smoke into the Olympic arena for competitive shooting sports. Women such as Margaret Murdock, Launi Meili, and Ruby Fox achieved victories in numerous Olympic games starting in 1976.\textsuperscript{22}

Historical scholarship appears to have missed the mark when searching for literature on the history of women in competitive shooting sports. This thesis seeks to develop that narrative and explain how American women pursued and advanced in competitive shooting sports in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century United States. I will argue in this thesis that firearms have a significant sporting history in which American women played a role, and these women actively performed in this sport and at times defeated their male counterparts. This thesis will add to the literature on the lives of women during the Women’s Liberation Movement of the 1970s in which women’s roles were expanded, including in sports, to show how female marksmen benefitted from the passing of Title IX of the Education Amendment Act in 1972, and how women began to excel in the Olympic arena with their guns in hand. This thesis adds to the current scholarship of women’s history, gender history, and 20\textsuperscript{th} century sport history.

**Methodological Approach**

This thesis focuses on how American women pursued and advanced in competitive shooting sports in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century United States. Interest in competitive precision sports can be traced back to spear throwing, stone and projectile competitions, and even the development of the first shooting clubs in the 13\textsuperscript{th} and 14\textsuperscript{th} century in Europe. These activities, however, were typically the prerogative of men. In the United States, shooting competitions became popular after the Revolutionary War in the form of “rifle frolics” or “turkey shoots” where participants

competed by shooting moving targets and would receive a turkey as their prize. Limited evidence exists that might indicate if women participated as competitors in turkey shoots, but women likely participated as spectators of these events. At the turn of the 19th century, women became more involved in precision field sports. Non-competitive archery became a common pastime for women to participate in since it seemed an acceptable physical activity that fit into Catharine Beecher’s idea of a “robust woman,” of physically and morally pursuing domestic roles. These common beliefs made archery a popular, non-competitive outdoor sport in which many women participated.

Female interest in competitive shooting sports advanced in the middle of the 19th century when key female marksman came into the spotlight through exotic Western shows and performances. In the United States, professional female marksmen showcased their abilities and Americans attending these shows celebrated famous names such as Annie Oakley, Calamity Jane, and Lillian Smith as Princess Wenona. An American fascination with firearms continued to grow and, with it, advocacy for female participation in shooting sports. Popular health and wellness writers and, even the occasional military officer, often wrote in favor of training women to use firearms. Physical fitness educator, Dr. Dudley Allen Sargent, shared these sentiments and believed that the female body and mind had the necessary characteristics that would make women more fit to operate and use firearms.

In the 1970s, women became fierce competitors in Olympic sports and Title IX in 1972 helped to pave the way for female marksmen to take the field in Olympic competition. Female athletes like Billie Jean King, star tennis champion, helped fight for female equality in sport. She celebrated numerous impressive tennis victories throughout the late 20\textsuperscript{th} century. These athletic achievements showed that sporting women like markswomen could become professional marksmen to compete against men in the Olympic games.\textsuperscript{25} Women competed not just among themselves but competed against men in some of the Olympic events. Olympic marksmen such as Margaret Murdock, Launi Meili, and Ruby Fox won numerous medals in Olympic Games after Title IX. These women represent the pinnacle of female marksmanship and exemplify how women overcame the obstacles to reach Olympic elite-level status as competitive marksmen.

I analyze the evolution of women in competitive shooting sports by using gender as the key lens of historical analysis. I will use scholar Joan W. Scott’s definition of gender to examine how gender history serves as an approach. I plan to answer key questions such as, how did the popular press portray women in early 20th century shooting sports? How did women get involved in professional marksmanship and how did women participate in early 20\textsuperscript{th} century shooting sports? This study will explore the gendered nature of guns in the 1950s and 1960s from a gender lens and how guns were marketed for home use. In the later part of the thesis, my focus centers on how women fought for equality in Olympic sport and what Olympic sports paved the way for professional female marksmen and how that exemplifies the impact of Title IX. These issues will be explored through five separate sections that move through the evolution of women and competitive shooting sports through the 1990s.

**Historiography**

Historian Joan W. Scott stands as one of the first scholars to draw a distinction between biological sex and sociocultural gender. Scott defines gender as being a social and cultural construct rather than simply a biological sex. In Scott’s article, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” she discusses the historical authenticity of words, how they change, and how they can be used to change attitudes or indicate common stereotypes.26 Scott states that “Through the ages, people have made figurative allusions by employing grammatical terms to evoke traits of character or sexuality.”27 This is precisely the methodology I will use when developing my thesis. Scott uses the term “gender” to place specific characteristics or defining traits on both sexes and this creates a history that is, in part, based on certain attributes assigned to the sexes. Society has built distinctions and status based on sex and this has a direct impact on the course of history. In Scott’s larger work, “Gender and Politics of History,” she describes the agency of women and their significance in history.28 This project will explore female agency in the history of competitive shooting sports. Virtually all the following historical works have been from Joan Scott’s leading work on gender as a form of historical analysis.

Similar to Scott’s discourse on language and authenticity of words is Debra Shattuck’s terminology of “gender-neutral” versus “gender-specific.” In Shattuck’s work *Bloomer Girls*, sport is described as “one of many tools human beings use to inculcate and express sociocultural identities like race, gender, social class, and identity.”29 Shattuck argues that individual sports can be categorized as gender-neutral, masculine, or feminine. Most importantly, she notes that these categories are fluid and the characterization of sport as masculine or feminine can change

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27 Ibid.
with society. Shattuck’s analysis of gender as it relates to sport serves as a key component of this thesis and will show how competitive shooting developed as a gendered sport.

Scott and Shattuck provide the foundation of scholarly work for using gender as a category of historical analysis, yet other historians have drawn on these concepts to further the historiographic analysis. Historians Nancy Cott and Anthony Rotundo provide essential historical components to the middle sections of this thesis. In *The Bonds of Womanhood: “Woman’s Sphere” in New England, 1780-1835*, Nancy Cott examines the concept of separate spheres. Cott argues that the female sphere was rooted in domesticity, which was a woman’s ability to manage a home, organize tasks and establish a well-regulated household. Cott focuses on the experiences of women and shows how within their sphere, they wielded considerable power and influence. “The ideology of woman’s sphere formed a necessary stage in the process of shattering the hierarchy of sex” and this proved to be part of women’s quest to expand their roles in American society. Although Cott’s work focuses on New England through the turn of the 19th century, her work remains significant to the overall themes of this thesis. Women used their agency to break out of constrained social spheres that Cott describes, but the societal implications of these spheres persist well throughout the 20th century.

Historian Anthony Rotundo helps contextualize Cott’s work in *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* regarding “boy culture.” Rotundo argues that boy culture resulted from white middle-class urban youth who enjoyed free time, autonomy from adult supervision, and easy access to their peers. This subculture created

30 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
characteristics in boys such as physical courage, loyalty, and a peculiar aggressiveness that resulted in harsh pranks, torture of small animals, and constant physical aggression and competition between friends. Later in this book, Rotundo creates a comparative analysis between the world of boy culture and that of the world of adult male work. The adult world for men seemed not far from the boy culture they had growing up. Men still experienced freedom and mastery, risk taking, and abuse in their adult lives. 33 The tendencies Rotundo describes young boys as possessing fit well with the idea of gun culture and the power one obtains with a deadly weapon in hand. The concept of boy culture can be used to further explain why Americans viewed guns and shooting sports as a masculine activity in American society.

Historian Kathy Peiss portrays working women’s culture at the turn of the 20th century with her work Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York. Peiss argues that “the working-class construction of gender was influenced by the changing organization and meaning of leisure itself, particularly the effects of ongoing capitalist development on the organization of work and time, and the intensive commercialization of leisure in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.” 34 Peiss’ analysis on female leisure time is significant to the foundation of women in precision sports. The topics of gender, class, and leisure that Peiss analyzes in Cheap Amusements are all factors that influence competitive shooting sports in American culture. While Peiss provides a study focused on how gender impacted leisure time activities, other historians have explored how gender impacts competitive sports.

In Historian Linda J. Borish’s article, ‘The Cradle of American Champions, Women Champions ... Swim Champions’: Charlotte Epstein, Gender and Jewish Identity, and the Physical Emancipation of Women in Aquatic Sports, the issue of gender constraints on the competitive sport of swimming is analyzed through the remarkable life and legacy of Charlotte Epstein, known as the ‘Mother of American Swimming.’

According to Borish, “Charlotte Epstein campaigned to reform gender constraints in aquatic sports and expanded these sports for women swimmers, Jewish and Gentile, in the United States.” Her work exemplifies the ways that “gender, ethnicity, class, and religion have a bearing on the competitive and administrative facets of sporting contexts.” This thesis will draw on these concepts of women in competitive sports to show the similar obstacles female athletes faced when attempting to compete in the Olympic arena. These ideas tie in closely with historian Allen Guttmann’s Women’s Sports: A History where he examines the history of the conflict between what was considered a woman’s natural function and her desire to participate in competitive athletics. Guttmann provides a detailed narrative on how athletics and sport became a battleground for gender conflict and reflected the changing status of women in American culture. Other historians have continued this narrative with specific examples of the gender conflict between men and women in sports.

Historian Susan Ware’s work in Game, Set, Match: Billie Jean King and the Revolution in Women’s Sports remains a significant contribution to understanding the role of sports in the Women’s Liberation Movement of the 1970s. Ware emphasizes the importance of Billie Jean

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36 Ibid.
King’s strong advocacy for female athletes in the 1970s and proves that King played a key role in not only encouraging women to participate in sport, but also “challenging and eradicating all forms of discrimination in athletics so women could play sport on equal terms with men.”

King was a fierce advocate for women to use their abilities to make a living as professional athletes. Ware’s analysis of Title IX and the Women’s Liberation Movement applies directly to this project since professional female marksman benefitted directly from the movement. These female athletes in shooting sports persisted to compete as Olympians.

It is critical to point out that there is little to no historiography about women in competitive shooting sports. The pre-existing works this thesis will draw on are gender history and sport history from major historians who are experts in the fields. This study will follow Joan Scott’s definition of gender and how it shapes history to reveal a deeper historical narrative about the evolution of women in shooting sports.

**Primary Source Evidence**

Each section will use various primary source material to answer key research questions. The first section of this project will analyze guns and gender which will study historiography on gender and sport developed by key historians. Section one will primarily draw on secondary work from noted historians like Susan Ware author of *Game, Set, Match: Billie Jean King and the Revolution in Women’s Sports*, Allen Guttmann author of *Women’s Sports: A History*, Nancy Cott author of *The Bonds of Womanhood: “Woman’s Sphere” in New England, 1780-1835*, and Anthony Rotundo author of *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* to fully shape the idea of gender’s impact on shooting sports.

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The four remaining sections will use primary source material such as newspapers, images, advertisements, catalogs, magazines, official Olympic reports and, when possible, personal writings or statements from professional female marksmen. Numerous advertisements exist in newspaper archives that speak highly of Annie Oakley’s marksmanship specifically. One example of this is in *The Evening Star* from Washington D.C. where the editors published an honorary tribute after her death. One comment from the article claims that Oakley “was undoubtedly the best shot to be found among the women of the United States and most probably of the world.”

I will rely on primary sources such as this to further understand Oakley’s professional career in shooting and how the public perceived her. For the fourth chapter, “Advocacy for the Female Marksman,” I will use primary source material such as interviews, magazines, and newspapers. One magazine, *Outing: An Illustrated Monthly Magazine of Recreation*, is significant to this research because it features articles by doctors and leading physical education activists writing in favor of female participation in shooting activities.

Some primary sources will be drawn from footnotes in secondary source books and articles. Additionally, secondary sources will be used alongside primary sources to place in context the themes of gender and the larger histories of the period. For example, section two, “Early Professional Female Marksmen,” will include secondary source material about Annie Oakley, a well-researched historical figure. Shirl Kasper’s *Annie Oakley* is a comprehensive history and is a valuable source to provide background on Oakley’s life, rise to fame as a professional female marksman, and an analysis of Oakley’s role in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West

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Show. *The Life and Legacy of Annie Oakley* by Glenda Riley is another secondary source that includes important details about Oakley’s performances, instead of competitions, in the West.

**Thesis Chapter Outline**

The plan for this thesis is to organize the work into four major chapters with the addition of an introduction and a conclusion. The second chapter, “Gender, Guns, and Historical Sporting Context in American Culture,” will connect Joan W. Scott’s definition of gender history to the larger themes of this topic. From there, I will apply Shattuck’s idea of gender-specific and gender-neutral sports to the language and culture surrounding guns in the early 20th century. People in American society viewed shooting as a masculine activity in the early period but moved to seeing it as gender-neutral towards the middle of the century. This section will also use concepts from Cott and Rotundo to discuss the gender theories of men and women which includes gendered spheres and boy culture.

I will analyze, in chapter three, early professional female marksmen and the general perceptions of them, especially male perceptions by the press. The language used to describe these women will be carefully searched for gendered terminology and to see if men perceived women as performers or skilled athletes. There are records of large shooting festivals in which famous female marksmen, such as Annie Oakley, attended and even competed against men. These festivals and traveling shows reveal how the media perceived women and reported about them in news and popular culture.

Chapter four, “Advocacy for the Female Marksman,” will analyze writings and opinions from well-known health and fitness professionals as well as other authors about female participation in shooting sports. This chapter highlights authors who challenged the commonplace view that shooting sports should be considered a masculine sport and that women
did not possess the skill, body, or mind to endure the rigors of operating a firearm. Many of these authors argued that the female body and mind was better equipped for shooting sports. This chapter concludes with an analysis on the ways Annie Oakley advocated for female marksmanship and how she dedicated the latter half of her career to training young women to handle a firearm and participate in shooting activities and competitions.

Chapter five, “Different Sports, Similar Struggles: American Olympic Markswomen and Their Path to Olympic Stardom,” covers women in Olympic gun sports. I will describe the early periods of the fight for women to compete as Olympic athletes. This section will explore information about American women in early Olympic competition from Ware’s study on women’s sport and Billie Jean King and Linda Borish’s article ‘The Cradle of American Champions, Women Champions ... Swim Champions’: Charlotte Epstein, Gender and Jewish Identity, and the Physical Emancipation of Women in Aquatic Sports. Chapter four will cover Title IX and the modern Women’s Liberation Movement and expanding sporting opportunities. Special attention will be paid to Margaret Murdock and the 1976 Olympic games where she tied Lanny Bassham, but he was awarded the gold medal since he was a man.41 Finally, some mention is given to Kim Rhode who is a six-time Olympic medal winner in skeet and double-trap competitions. She won a gold medal in skeet shooting at the 2004 and at the 2012 Summer Olympics, equaling the world record of 99 out of 100 clays.

The conclusion analyzes the overall narrative of the ways gender impacted the sport of competitive shooting. Over time, women broke down barriers to compete in competitive

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shooting sport. Women in sports wanted to participate and compete, however, gender roles kept them from professional competition.
CHAPTER 2
Gender, Guns, and Historical Sporting Context in American Culture

“As the urchin is undoubtedly physically safer for having learned to turn a somerset and fire a gun, perilous though these feats appear to mothers, --so his soul is made healthier, larger, freer, stronger, by hours and days of manly exercise and copious draughts of open air, at whatever risk of idle habits and bad companions.”\(^1\) - Thomas Wentworth Higginson (1858)

Introduction
The quote from Thomas Wentworth Higginson’s essay “Saints, and their Bodies” in the *Atlantic Monthly* (1858) reveals the workings of gender in how commentators viewed both men and women during this period. Higginson’s words reflect the gendered divide between male and female participation in sporting activities that existed at the middle of the 19\(^{th}\) century and raises the issue that dangerous outdoor sporting practices seemed appropriate and healthy for only men. Although Higginson does not mention acceptable outdoor activities for women, he provides a glimpse into the prevailing perceptions of women concerning both guns and sport. He stated that mothers viewed these outdoor activities, especially those involving guns, as perilous and worrisome. In doing so, it appears that women had no place participating in these feats and should remain in their social role as nurturing champions of the family in the domestic realm. Higginson’s connection between sport and masculinity is significant because it reinforces the gendered viewpoints that later commentators expressed about women like Margaret Murdock in the 1976 Olympics.

To understand gender as an analytical tool for studying the history of women in competitive shooting sports, it is important to first study the historiographic concepts about

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gender developed by some leading historians in the field. This chapter will look at the methods and theories of gender from historians such as Joan W. Scott, Nancy Cott, Anthony Rotundo, Linda J. Borish, and Allen Guttmann to apply their ideas and approaches to gender studies to the study of American women in competitive shooting sports. This chapter uses Joan Scott’s definition of gender to explain the larger themes of the history of women in shooting sports. Most observers and shooting enthusiasts viewed shooting for sport as masculine in the early period of the 20th century but changed to see it as gender-neutral towards the middle of the century. This chapter will also use concepts from Nancy Cott and Anthony Rotundo to discuss the historical context of men and women’s roles which includes gendered spheres and boy culture. Concepts from historians Linda J. Borish, Allen Guttmann, Kevin Wamsley, and Mary Lou LeCompte will explain how athletics and sport became a battleground for gender conflicts and altered the way that women could participate and excel in professional sport over time.

Joan W. Scott

Historians and social scientists of the 1970s were some of the first academic professionals to utilize the concept of gender as a form of historical analysis and defined it as being both a social and a cultural construct. In her significant 1986 article “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” historian Joan W. Scott defines gender into a larger theoretical concept. Scott highlights the shortcomings of existing theories of gender and explains that the historical inequalities between women and men require a new conceptualization of the term gender and its usage in historical contexts. Scott defines gender as not only “a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes,” but it is also “a primary way of signifying relationships of power.”\(^2\) She explains that changes in the

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organization of social relationships always correspond with changes in representations of power and she applies this theory to political history later in her article. However, as Scott demonstrates, politics is only one of the areas that gender can be used for historical analysis.

Scott claims that “feminist historians, trained as most historians are to be more comfortable with description than theory, have nonetheless increasingly looked for usable theoretical formulations.” To Scott, this caused many non-feminist historians to acknowledge then dismiss works on women’s history since, on the surface, they did not add to the overarching scholarship of various historical topics. In order for women’s history to assimilate into prevailing scholarship, Scott suggests that it will require “analysis not only of the relationship between male and female experience in the past but also of the connection between past history and current historical practice.” Scott’s approach to gender analysis applies to the history of competitive shooting sports in the 20th century United States and it will be used to explain how societal gender constraints altered the participation and agency of women in competitive shooting sports. If women’s history is exclusively about women, it is missing a large contextual component to the bigger picture. The struggles and obstacles that women endured throughout history, and into modern times, were due to the traditional gender roles that existed for both men and women.

Nancy Cott
Perhaps one of the most renowned historians on the study of traditional gender roles, or “spheres” of men and women, is Nancy Cott with her influential book The Bonds of Womanhood: “Woman’s Sphere” in New England, 1780-1835 (1997). Despite her historical

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3 Ibid., 1055.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
timeline dating back to the 1780s, Cott’s analysis of gendered spheres holds relevance well into the 20th century United States. In the early 19th century, social attitudes often labeled the “cult of true womanhood” and the “cult of domesticity,” described women’s actual circumstances within society and their homes. This hypothetical cult, was the traditional American family composed of mother, father, and children whose influence reached outward into communities and social culture. Cott states that “the cult both observed and prescribed specific behavior for women in the enactment of domestic life.” According to Cott, the period between 1780 and 1830 emerged as a time of dramatic transformations of many kinds, but also the conceptualization of “domesticity.”

As early as the 1820s, American thinkers, writers, reformers, and others produced countless works on the female role in society that took the form of poems, manuals, essays, sermons, and novels. Nancy Cott breaks down these literary works into five different categories that, together, reveal a realm of domesticity. These categories included motherhood responsibilities, child rearing, women’s social roles, the appropriate education for women, and etiquette traditions for both men and women. Many of the sentiments included in these works had an immense impact on American culture and divided up society based on gender roles that restricted women to the world of domesticity. Cott explains that the “spirit of business and public life thus appeared to diverge from that of the home chiefly because the two spheres were the separate domains of the two sexes.”

7 Ibid., 2.
8 Ibid., 3.
9 Ibid., 63.
10 Ibid., 63-4.
The implications of these social spheres are seen throughout American history and are still apparent in modern society. In the domestic sphere, women “symbolized and were expected to sustain traditional values and practices of work and family organization.”\textsuperscript{12} This idealism persisted well into the 1970s and beyond, but it took on an indirect form. Cott’s definition of the domestic sphere as a place of salvation, peace, and tenderness left little room for women to participate in gun culture and operate a potentially deadly firearm in competitions. In this domestic “sphere” guns were a masculine product better assigned to the male sex.

**Anthony Rotundo**

Historian Anthony Rotundo’s analysis of boy culture in his book *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (2001) may help explain why that might be the case. In Rotundo’s work, an interesting approach is taken to the study of primarily white, middle-class, Northeastern males and how the American man obtained his role in society starting from boyhood. Rotundo describes an adolescent world, or a “boy culture,” that most white men experienced before assimilating into the male sphere.\textsuperscript{13} This boy culture was a “free nation” of boys and was a distinct cultural world with its own rituals, symbols, and values. As a social sphere, it was separate from both the domestic world of women and the public world of men and commerce.\textsuperscript{14}

Boys moved constantly in and out of this distinct culture that ultimately prepared them for life in the adult spheres that encompassed them. However, young boys experienced a different way of life in the years prior to boy culture experience. Until around the age of six, boys were submerged in the domestic realm of brothers and sisters and rarely escaped from the

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
supervision of adults. In these early years, boys dressed in the same loose gowns that their sisters wore which subconsciously sent the subconscious message that they were to act and behave like their female kin who would never leave the domestic sphere. Once boys reached the age of six, they were able to venture out of the domestic and feminine sphere and into a world of their own. Rotundo states that “As they broke away from the constant restraint of home, boys shed their gowns and petticoats. Suddenly, the differences between themselves and their sisters seemed to be encouraged and even underscored.” Boys were freed from constant adult supervision where they were able to pursue a range of activities that would have been nearly impossible within the moral etiquette and watchfulness of the domestic sphere.

The general experiences of boyhood fostered characteristics within young men that would follow them as they grew into the social and political sphere. Boy culture encouraged boys to be the master, the conqueror, and the champion over nature. Boyhood was rooted in competition, hierarchy, and strength. These characteristics of boy culture made men, not women, the perfect candidates for gun-toting and precision shooting competitions due to the sense of power and authority that came with operating a firearm. As the following chapter will explain, women in the 19th century who participated in shooting competitions were viewed as an exotic anomaly that was separate from the socially gendered reality and their exceptional talents served only to entertain the masses.

Linda J. Borish

Concepts from Cott and Rotundo help to explain the way gender in society altered and shaped female participation and success in competitive shooting sports in the 20th century United

15 Ibid., 34.
17 Ibid., 35-36.
States. Stereotypes of both men and women are rooted in the gendered spheres that Cott describes while Rotundo’s study of boy culture exemplifies why shooting might be viewed as a masculine activity in which women could not acceptably participate. The social and health reformer Thomas Wentworth Higginson (1823-1911) wrote and criticized the condition of the social, physical, and moral health of American citizens in the mid nineteenth century. Historian Linda Borish states that “Higginson believed that the fulfilment of men’s roles required physical fitness” and that “Higginson thought that physical exercises and sports ought to become a training ground for manhood.”18 In the essay “Saints, and their bodies,” Higginson stated that “‘To own the poorest boat is better than hiring the best. It is a link to Nature; without a boat, one is so much the less a man.’” Higginson promoted physical health and fitness for men, and occasionally women, and shared the belief with female health reformer Catharine Beecher (1800-1878) that acceptable physical activities differed for each sex. Beecher viewed mild and uncompetitive exercises like domestic labor, calisthenics, walking, horseback riding, gardening, and croquet as appropriate activities for female fitness.19 Despite Beecher’s advocacy for female fitness, she excluded strenuous exercises that were “‘suited to the stronger sex, but not suited to the female constitution.”20

Alternatively, Borish states that Thomas Higginson advocated for men to participate in “active exercises and sports, especially outdoor ones.”21 Although Beecher discusses the importance of fresh air and time spent outdoors, she is careful to describe only nonstrenuous and noncompetitive activities for women. Conversely, Higginson wrote “‘The most important portion

19 Ibid., 144.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid., 148.
of a boy’s life is perhaps his outdoor training, since to live out of doors is to be forever in some respects a boy.”  

Higginson also endorsed competitive team sports for men, calling them “contests of manhood” and, therefore, something that was not appropriate for the female sex.  

These ideas on appropriate sporting activities for men and women from Beecher and Higginson show another reason sport organizers excluded women from participating in competitive shooting sports.

**Other Historians of Sports and Gender**

Furthermore, historian Kevin Wamsley states that “men in America have linked sporting prowess and the value of sport to manhood and social capacity to great advantage.”  

For women, however, there were limited options for participating in sport in this period of the 19th century. Historian Roberta Park shows how women in American culture, according to health reformers and medical doctors, were believed to be less capable of physical exercise and sport. She explains that these tendencies “would last for decades— making sports for girls and women separate— from the sports played by boys and men, often with their own rules and values.”  

For centuries, sporting observers regarded women as the “weaker sex” and viewed them as incapable of performing in athletics to the same degree of men. Given men’s participation in sport, Wamsley explains that the role of sports in men’s lives significantly contributed to the inequalities between men and women in sport and society.

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23 Ibid.


As demonstrated by the examples from Beecher and Higginson, gender had a strong bearing on which sports and physical activities were deemed socially acceptable for women to participate in the 19th century. One of these sports, however, seems to contradict some of the gendered reasoning behind the exclusion of women in competitive shooting sports. Many believed that men were better fit for gun toting and shooting activities because of their rough and masculine nature. Shooting was good, even healthy, for them to do. On the other hand, many gun participants supposed women to be the ones who sneered at violence, softened a man’s rough edges, and nurtured a peaceful solace in her home. Therefore, it was taboo to see a woman with any sort of weapon, let alone a firearm.

**Allen Guttmann**

However, historian Allen Guttmann explains the overall history of women’s sports and explains that archery was a widely practiced activity for women dating back to the time of the Greeks.²⁶ Not only was archery an acceptable sport for women, but societal writers also often encouraged this sport in the early 19th century. Guttmann states that “Archery, which had for centuries attracted a number of aristocratic women, seemed on the verge of a new wave of popularity.”²⁷ Pierce Egan, who was one of the first great sports writers, believed he had identified this trend as early as 1828, stating:

> Archery is equally open to the fair sex, and has these last thirty years, been the favourite recreation of a great part of the female nobility, the only field of diversion they can enjoy without incurring the censure of being thought masculine.²⁸

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²⁷ Ibid.
For whatever reason, people viewed archery as having a feminine charm to it that portrayed
elegance and appeared appropriate for a woman’s nature. The *Young Lady’s Book… of Elegant
Recreations, Exercises, and Pursuits*, originally published in 1829, stated “‘the attitude of an
accomplished female archer…at the moment of bending the bow, is particularly graceful.’”\(^{29}\) The
language surrounding female participation in archery had almost nothing to do with a woman’s
skillset as an archer and focused exclusively on her appearance with the bow. Male
commentators frequently ignored female archers and, with it, the similarities between archery
and shooting sports.

**Gender Impacts Sports**

Gender as a social construct prevented women from participating in other sports as
professional athletes until the 1970s when women began to protest for their right to compete in
this sport and in the Olympic arena. Earlier breakthroughs in other sports created greater public
acceptance of women competing in sports, and those breakthroughs set the stage for the change
in shooting sports. One example of this breakthrough occurred in the aquatic sports with
Charlotte Epstein and her fight to reform gender constraints in water sports in the early 20th
century. Historian Linda Borish recounts this story in detail in her article, “‘The Cradle of
American Champions, Women Champions… Swimming Champions’: Charlotte Epstein, Gender
and Jewish Identity, and the Physical Emancipation of Women in Aquatic Sports” and explains
how female athletes like Charlotte Epstein and Gertrude Ederle battled gender constraints on
sport.\(^{30}\) Although women were able to participate and sometimes compete in swimming, officials
placed constant limitations on the sport that only women encountered in the water. For example,

\(^{29}\) Ibid.

Borish explains “Women needed to wear proper bathing costumes to secure physical mobility in the water.” There were considerable debates about the appropriate outfits that women should wear while swimming. Charlotte Epstein advocated against heavy stockings that would “‘tire the legs, interfere with a natural, free movement of the muscles, and cause distress to the wearer.’”31 The restrictions on swimming apparel revealed the gendered nature of the sport as no such costume restrictions existed for male swimmers. Furthermore, Borish explains that women like Epstein had to fight and lead the way to compete in Olympic events of high-level competition in 1920. Women in competitive shooting sports as we will see in later chapters followed this same narrative to gain entrance into Olympic arena.

Although the gendered battle to achieve Olympic status in shooting sports for women began in the 1970s, women gained momentum and recognition as active participants in shooting sports in the latter half of the 19th century. However, like the female archers Allen Guttmann describes, sports writers and commentators failed to recognize the female athleticism displayed, and instead, focused on women as exotic entertainers for Wild West shows. Mary Lou LeCompte’s book *Cowgirls of the Rodeo: Pioneer Professional Athletes* is an interesting parallel between the experiences of cowgirls and the experiences of early female marksmen. LeCompte describes cowgirls growing up on ranches and homesteads where they could rope and ride just like the boys in the rodeo. Few of the women possessed the skill required for a professional rodeo career, though.32 Although these women performed the same activity on their ranches as male rodeo stars did in professional arenas, rodeo performers often snubbed women who wanted

to participate in rodeo competitions. Similarly, this was true for female marksmen as well. Women were able to enjoy target practice with their husbands at the privacy of their homes, but men discouraged them from taking their guns to compete. Moreover, LeCompte argues that the origins of female participation began in “rodeos and cowboy tournaments that ranch communities staged for local amusement.” Regardless of the sport, a common thread emerges through sport history that women displaying their athleticism could not be taken seriously and, to sport promoters and American society, their efforts were viewed as somewhat entertaining, occasionally humorous, and almost always sexualized.

Professional rodeo began almost simultaneously with the rise of professional shooting when Buffalo Bill Cody realized the public’s fascination with everything “wild west” in the late 19th century and went on the road with his exciting new shows. LeCompte states that cowgirls finally had their spotlight in Cody’s shows after “following the lead of sharpshooter Annie Oakley, the first female Wild West superstar.” Before signing the legendary sharpshooter in 1885, Buffalo Bill featured no women in his original cast. LeCompte rightfully gives some credit to Annie Oakley for paving the way for female participation in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West as several cowgirls performed with his 1893 production. Despite western shows developing a strong female presence over the years, LeCompte does not label those women as professional athletes. This is not to discount the abilities of these women, but to differentiate between women who competed for prizes and those who showmen promoted for entertainment.

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33 Ibid., 1.
34 Ibid., 6.
36 Ibid, 39.
LeCompte also discusses the impact of popular culture on competent, athletic women. She argued that popular culture of the mid-twentieth century “reinforced the prevailing stereotypes of domesticity and compliance.”37 In the 1948 Broadway hit Annie Get Your Gun, the authors and lyricists outright ignored the true accomplishments of Annie Oakley, who defeated Frank Butler at sharpshooting and went on to be his wife and lifelong companion.38 However, in the musical, Oakley exclaimed that “You Can’t Get a Man with a Gun,” and lost the match to win Butler. LeCompte comments that “the message was unmistakable.”39 Even in the late 1940s, the western show limited women in how they were portrayed and used in shows with their guns. The story of Annie Oakley, and the rise of other early professional female marksmen and gender viewpoints about these female marksmen’s skill, forms the theme of the next chapter.

37 Ibid, 146.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
CHAPTER 3
Early Professional Female Marksmen

“‘At first, Colonel Cody entertained a grave doubt as to whether I should be able to withstand the recoil from a shotgun,’”1 - Annie Oakley.

Annie Oakley

In the decades following the Civil War, the cattle industry in the United States began to thrive and, with it, created not only a steady supply of beef across the country, but produced the legendary Wild West that altered the cultural future of American society. Images of muscular cowboys with Stetson hats, leather chaps, and pistols hanging from their hips flooded American media and entertainment. Women, however, were often left out of this ideal world of cowboys and excitement of the western frontier. Despite the masculine perceptions of the Wild West, one woman’s undeniable skill and precision behind the gun proved impossible to ignore. Annie Oakley “burned into the public mind a vision of the archetypal western woman—daring, beautiful, and skilled.”2 Richard W. Etulain, the editor of Glenda Riley’s insightful book, The Life and Legacy of Annie Oakley, made the important observation that “Annie opened the tightly shut door of respectability for women as users of guns. After her, the handling of weapons, hunting, and shooting became more acceptable activities for women.”3 The professional career of Phoebe Ann Moses, known by her legendary stage name “Annie Oakley”, marked the true beginning of female participation in competitive shooting sports. In a 1926 article, writers of the

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1 Quoted in Shirl Kasper, Annie Oakley (Oklahoma, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016), 32.
3 Ibid., xi.
Associated Press regarded Oakley as “perhaps the greatest woman shooter of all time” and, even over a century later, Annie Oakley has not lost her luster.⁴

Annie Oakley’s childhood was rough, to say the least. Growing up with eight siblings, her family struggled through life and Annie was unable to attend school or experience leisure time as other children her age could.⁵ At six years old, Annie’s father passed away and left her mother, Susan, with nine mouths to feed. Seeking ways to contribute, Annie hunted and trapped small game animals to provide fresh meat for her family. “‘There were plenty of quail, squirrel and rough grouse…I busied myself with traps made from the heaviest cornstalks, laid up like a loghouse and tied together by strings’” Annie recalled in one of her memoirs.⁶ These small catches, however, were not enough for her. Around the age of six or seven, the young Annie Oakley climbed up above the fireplace to take the “old forty-inch cap-and-ball Kentucky rifle that had hung there since her father’s death.”⁷ She filled the gun with enough powder “‘to kill off a buffalo’” and shot her first small game animal. Annie followed her late father’s instruction to shoot the animal in the head to avoid contaminating the meat with shot. Her mother, however, adhered to Quaker principles against firearms and forbade Annie from using the rifle.⁸ This ban, of course, was short lived.

As Annie got older, she reclaimed her love for the outdoors and shooting by, again, hunting to support her family. Not only did she supply her family with fresh game, but she sold the surplus to a local shopkeeper in exchange for either cash or more ammunition.⁹ This small-

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⁶ Ibid., 6.
⁷ Ibid., 7.
⁸ Ibid.
⁹ Ibid., 11.
game hunting business earned her enough money to pay off the mortgage on her mother’s home, an accomplishment she was quite proud of.\textsuperscript{10} Annie Oakley experienced a unique childhood that departed from the traditional girlhood values and nearly crossed into the “boy culture” that historian Anthony Rotundo describes. Although Annie learned the long-established domestic duties such as cooking, cleaning, and sewing, she also delighted in a life outside of the home. “Oh, how grand God’s beautiful earth seemed to me as I glided swiftly through the woods” Annie wrote in a personal memoir.\textsuperscript{11}

Historian Glenda Riley describes Oakley’s early life with rich detail and gives the impression that Annie’s hometown community not only accepted her hunting skills but encouraged her to compete in a nearby competition which undoubtedly sparked her infamous shooting career. The owner of a local hotel, Jack Frost, who often purchased her game, suggested that she accept a shooting match near Cincinnati, Ohio.\textsuperscript{12} Annie was unaware that her opponent, Francis (Frank) Butler, was an accomplished marksman who often boasted he could beat anyone in competition. Historical sources on this competition remain limited to recollections left in later interviews with Annie and Frank who provided inconsistent details of the event. Nonetheless, Annie proved victorious and earned a name for herself, an open door to compete, and a man to call her husband just one year later.\textsuperscript{13}

In 1882, or early 1883, Oakley joined her new husband, Frank Butler, and his performing partner, John Graham, on tour. Not part of their act until John Graham became ill, Butler at first asked Oakley to hold various objects as he shot them.\textsuperscript{14} However, one day, Butler was struggling

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 12.
\textsuperscript{11} Quoted in Glenda Riley, \textit{The Life and Legacy of Annie Oakley} (Norman, OK: Red River Books, 2002), 11-12.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 15.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{14} Shirl Kasper, \textit{Annie Oakley} (Oklahoma, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016), 22.
to hit the targets and, allegedly, a spectator yelled “‘Let the girl shoot!’”\textsuperscript{15} Annie had never practiced the shot, but she picked up a gun and hit the target on her second shot. Frank Butler commented that “‘The crowd went into an uproar and when I attempted to resume my act I was howled down, and Annie Oakley continued.’”\textsuperscript{16} Butler quickly recognized a good act and made his wife his new partner and the shooting team of Butler and Oakley was born.\textsuperscript{17}

The crowd’s wowed response to Oakley’s superb shooting was unsurprising. Since Annie Oakley’s career marked the true beginning of women in shooting sports, it was likely that no one in Butler’s audience had ever seen a woman perform trick shots with a firearm, let alone outperform her husband in the process. Sharpshooting acts were relatively common spectacle in traveling performances; however, Annie Oakley was different. Historian Shirl Kasper explains that part of Oakley’s appeal included that she “dressed simply in a dark dress with a starched white collar and pretty cuffs at the sleeve. She stood only five feet tall and weighed about 110 pounds. She looked innocent and above reproach, a sweet little girl—yet a sharpshooter of matchless ability.”\textsuperscript{18} Annie was beloved by the American public because, despite her participation in a seemingly masculine sport, Oakley carefully presented herself synchronously with the traditional feminine etiquette and poise expected from white women in society. In fact, historian Glenda Riley explains that “Annie [also] maintained her costumes, tent, and homes with such meticulousness that she frequently annoyed those around her.”\textsuperscript{19} Annie was especially

\\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} Shirl Kasper, \textit{Annie Oakley} (Oklahoma, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016), 22.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
careful with her appearance because she knew, as a woman in the public eye, that her physical features went hand in hand with hitting the target.

Figure 1: Annie Oakley. “Portrait photograph of sharpshooter Annie Oakley, full-length portrait, standing, facing front, holding rifle, with many medals pinned across the top of her dress.”

In figure 1, Oakley is pictured holding her competition rifle. Notice that her clothing covers all over her body, only revealing her face. Her stockings are long and sit neatly over each of her boots and her dress is carefully pressed. Oakley’s conservative appearance made her admirable to the American public which made her an acceptable figure to the public, even shooting a gun. The only decorative element to Oakley’s attire is on the bodice of her dress which bears medals and pins she won and represent her success as a markswoman.

Although Annie Oakley undeniably possessed the skill to uphold her reputation as a highly skilled markswoman, much of her success was aided by her husband who acted as her manager and biggest supporter. As her husband, Frank Butler could have prevented Annie from participating in competitions and even shooting in general. However, her skill behind the rifle was irrefutable and Butler was proud to work with and support his wife. Editors of *The Daily Banner* claimed that “Mr. Butler… is exceedingly proud of his wife, even though she crowded him off the map as a marksman. He was a professional once, or thought he was.”20 After spectators caught a glimpse of Annie, Frank Butler’s career quickly shifted to the sidelines as he acted as manager for his talented wife. Butler “placed ads in the trade papers, talked to theater managers, made bookings, consulted train schedules, and counted the money.”21 Annie would say “that part was always in my husband’s hands, and I owe whatever I have to his careful management.”22 In fact, Butler took his wife’s career so seriously that he would not let her be called “Mrs. Butler” but only by her stage name, Annie Oakley.23 Butler’s role in Annie’s career demonstrates the separation of spheres based on gender. Frank Butler handled the business,

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financials, and logistics of Annie’s career, which fit well with men holding the power in public and monetary venues, according to characteristics granted to the male social sphere.

The couple traveled and performed together across the United States and even met the Sioux Chief, Sitting Bull, who gave Annie the nickname “Watanya Cecila” or Little Sure Shot. Annie slowly made a name for herself through small performances at theaters, shooting matches that closely resembled hustling, and contracts with traveling circus performances. In the late 1880s, Annie Oakley finally achieved famous stardom when she joined the Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show.

In December of 1884, Oakley and Butler first encountered Buffalo Bill’s show and they sought a place in the act. After meeting Bill Cody, or Buffalo Bill, at one of their circus performances, the sure shot couple asked for work with the wild west crew. Unfortunately, Cody already had the necessary shooting acts filled and he did not need another pair of sharpshooters in his performance.\(^{24}\) However, the spring of 1885 brought troubles for Cody’s Wild West Show when the famous sharpshooter, Captain Bogardus, resigned from the job and took his shooting partners, his three sons, with him. When Annie and Frank learned of this news, they immediately wrote to Bill Cody.

Apparantly, Annie’s terms to join the wild west show were too steep and Cody, offput by the salary she requested (because she was a woman) almost did not hire her. Annie’s small stature, modest charm, and delicate appearance made Cody skeptical whether she could handle the rigorous responsibilities of an entertaining marksman. He did not believe a woman would have the skill or ability to fill Captain Bogardus’s shoes. “At first, Colonel Cody entertained a

grave doubt as to whether I should be able to withstand the recoil from a shotgun,” Annie wrote. Here, the male manager had gendered preconceptions about Oakley not being able to withstand shooting as he believed only a man could fulfill this role, not a woman like Oakley. However, not fazed by his doubts, Oakley agreed to a three-day free trial to prove she could complete the shooting Bogardus did. If Cody was dissatisfied with her act, she agreed to leave the show for good.

Cody’s skepticism of Annie Oakley as a worthy act in his show demonstrates the obstacles that women faced whenever they attempted to participate in any activity outside of their designated female gender role. Although Bill Cody had already seen Annie shoot in circus acts, he was leery of hiring her permanently to perform in his own shows. The doubts he expressed about Oakley were purely based on her sex and not on her abilities as a professional markswoman. Cody worried about her strength and stamina as a woman. Historian Shirl Kasper hypothesized the thoughts of Bill Cody and wrote that “the captain’s [Bogardus] shotguns weighed ten pounds each. How was a woman of 110 pounds going to bear up underweight like that day in and day out in the arena?” Although Annie was unphased by the critics of her strength, she needed to prove herself as a female competing in a man’s world. If a man possessed the natural talent that Annie Oakley exhibited in every performance, he likely would have been hired on the spot with no trial run.

On the first day of her three-day test, Oakley and her husband arrived in Louisville, KY at the Wild West Show’s camp. The camp was nearly empty since most of the cast, along with Cody, went out for a street parade. Annie took the opportunity to practice a few shots before

Cody returned to judge her performance. When Oakley and Butler entered the arena, they realized they were not alone and believed a civilian had simply wandered in the venue. However, Oakley paid no mind to the man in the arena and ran through her performance with her gun upside down, right side up, left-handed, and right-handed. When she finished, the man ran to her amazed and asked if she had photographs of her with her guns. Unbeknownst to her, Annie had just performed in from of Nate Salsbury, the Wild West business manager. He was so impressed by Annie’s shooting he hired her to join the show without consulting Cody.

According to historian Mary Lou LeCompte, “Buffalo Bill had no women, other than actresses, in his original cast until he signed legendary sharpshooter Annie Oakley in 1885.” Salsbury knew Annie Oakley was destined to be a star; for seventeen years she became the lead attraction for Buffalo Bill’s Wild West show and was listed as part of the “Famous Shootists.”

From its origins, Buffalo Bill’s Wild West show stirred up concerns about the repetitive use of firearms throughout the performance. The show’s press agent, John Burke, stated that “it was at first thought that so much shooting would cause great difficulty. It was said that horses would be frightened, women and children would be terrified.” However, Bill Cody decided to rearrange the acts so that Annie Oakley would kick off the show instead of performing halfway though. Cody believed that by putting Annie right after the opening act, the audience would feel at ease due to her feminine charm. John Burke echoed Bill Cody’s ideas in a statement given to The New York Times remarking in 1901 that:

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27 Ibid., 39.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
31 “Some Famous Shootists,” The Ocala Evening Star, Ocala, FL February 22, 1908, 3.
She comes on very early in the performance. She starts very gently, shooting with a pistol. Women and children see a harmless woman there, and they do not get worried. Gradually she increases the charge in her rifles until at the last she shoots with a full charge. Thus, by the time the attack on the stagecoach comes the audience is accustomed to the sound of shooting, and in all the history of the Wild West there has never been a horse frightened sufficiently to run away at any of our outdoor performances.

This statement from the show’s press agent reveals gendered sentiments from this period on two levels. First, Bill Cody moved Annie Oakley to the forefront of his show not based on merit of her shooting abilities, but to use her biological sex to comfort those in the audience that were seemingly frightened by the crack of firearms. Second, Burke’s words revealed preconceived notions about the gendered spheres that existed in American society. The mere presence of a woman in the show, in principle, provided a unique gentleness that would calm the anxious minds of the women and children in the audience, but not the men who should have been unphased. A feminine presence in an otherwise “manly” show echoes the characteristics of the domestic sphere directly. Recall that the domestic sphere encompassed a place of refuge from the harsh realities of the male sphere in the public. It was the woman’s role in the home to nurture, comfort, and embody spiritual morality in her family members. In the same way, it became part of Annie’s role in the Wild West Show to continue this domestic influence, whether she knew it or not.

Not long after joining the Wild West Show, Annie Oakley’s fame grew and more of the American public heard of her spectacular trick shots. As a female in a male dominated sport, Oakley faced almost no criticism from journalists in the press on the matter. Much of this
focused on her reserved personality and adherence to the gendered roles that American society
demanded. Writers of a Maryland newspaper, *The Daily Banner*, published an article that briefly
mentioned Oakley’s opinion about women using guns and oddly also discussed women’s
suffrage. In the article, the author wrote that “Annie Oakley believes that every woman should
learn to use a gun. She is teaching Fred Stone’s three little daughters to shoot during her stay at
the Stone home in Amityville. ‘No one,’ she says, ‘knows what may happen in these times, and a
woman ought to be able to protect herself.’ About voting, she isn’t so sure.” Annie Oakley
carefully presented herself to the American public. She likely understood that taking a hard
stance for or against women’s right to vote would spark controversy and might have a negative
impact on her career. Similarly, it would have been contradictory for Annie Oakley, arguably the
best sharpshooter to date, to advocate against women being trained to operate firearms. She took
pride in her career, knew her worth as a shooter, and taught many women throughout her lifetime
how to shoot.

Annie Oakley seemed to possess all the appropriate requirements demanded from mainly
men in American society as a shooter and represented the first female marksman. She was polite,
charming, attractive, and humble. Her performances involved athleticism and toughness, but
even then, she remained within society’s definition of a proper lady. Because of this, Annie
Oakley opened the door for other women to step into the arena with firearms in hand by not
bucking traditional gender expectations too much. However, the women who came directly after
her were constantly compared to Annie.

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**Lillian Smith**

Lillian Frances Smith from Coleville California emerged as Annie Oakley’s only real rival in 1887 when she joined Bill Cody’s Wild West Show. Annie Oakley made a name for herself by besting male sharpshooters and Smith represented her first female rival. However, the women specialized in two different styles of shooting. Oakley preferred the shotgun with flying targets while Smith favored the rifle with still precision shots. Regardless, the relationship
between the two markswomen quickly turned sour as Lillian was the polar opposite of Annie. Lillian often bragged about her rifle skills and reportedly declared “‘Annie Oakley was done for’” now that she was part of Cody’s show. Historian Shirl Kasper noted that “Lillian was about as good at bragging as she was at breaking glass balls. She’d been doing both since she was a girl back in California…” Although Annie was confident in her skills as a sharpshooter, she protected her public image and never barked intimidating words at her competitors.

Another unpleasant contrast with Oakley was that Lillian “spoke coarsely and wore flashy clothing, both qualities anathema to the more conservative Oakley.” Perhaps the most distasteful characteristic of Lillian Smith was she was known to be a shameless flirt. Although this proves difficult to document in Lillian’s private life, there was one instance that became public knowledge. Writers of the Alexandria Gazette in D.C. produced an article titled “Weary of Lillian, the Cowgirl” in 1889 that revealed an odd, secret marriage that took place between Lillian Smith and a cowboy known as “Jim the Kid.” Allegedly, Jim fell in love with Lillian and the two secretly wed in “Buck” Taylor’s tent, officiated by Justice Hulsebus. At sixteen years old, Lillian was married without her father’s consent. Once her father learned of this, he “became indignant and threatened to take Miss Lillian, who was only sixteen years of age, away from the show.” Eventually Lillian’s father became reconciled to the match and the couple stayed together during their travels with the wild west show. However, just two years later, Justice Hulsebus received a letter from Jim which stated he was “still with Buffalo Bill’s show,

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35 Oakley, The Story of My Life, chap. 7.
36 Shirl Kasper, Annie Oakley (Oklahoma, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016), 60.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
as was also his wife, but the latter had proved untrue to him, and that he had about made up his
mind to bring suit for divorce. He requested Justice Hulsebus to write to him, advising him as to
how he could get rid of her.”

Somehow, these letters became public and were published in the *Alexandria Gazette* in August of 1889.

For obvious reasons, this damaged Lillian Smith’s image in the public eye. Rather than a
moral or nurturing woman, she embodied immoral qualities. Since Annie’s husband was also her
manager, the two were always together which left little room for speculation on their loyalty to
one another. Additionally, Annie’s meticulousness about her public image likely kept her away
from any potentially controversial scandals. Not only does this story provide a contrast of
personality between Smith and Oakley but demonstrates the deep intertwining’s of gender in the
professional careers of these women. Had Lillian Smith’s marital situation been reversed, and
her husband had been unfaithful, it likely would have gone unnoticed or even unreported in
newspapers. The gendered expectations placed on women by society put obstacles in the way of
their ambitions and delayed their participation in professional sport. Furthermore, since there
were so few women who participated in precision sports at this time, those who did participate
were subjected to unnecessary and unfair comparisons against one another. Annie Oakley’s
name is brought up even today when a woman shows even a trace of exceptional skill with a
firearm. After her death, the popular Broadway musical, “Annie Get Your Gun,” emerged and
served as a theatrical memorial of Annie Oakley. If Oakley’s success in shooting sports remains

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41 Ibid.
43 For example, when I was a young shooter of precision sports, other young women and I were often referred to as
“Annie Oakley.”
a commonplace over a hundred years later, one can only fathom the envious attitude Lillian Smith possessed as she was forced to dwell in the shadow of Annie Oakley.

In a last-ditch effort to completely erase her past and start her shooting career over again, Lillian Smith transformed from the “California Girl” sharpshooter who could not defeat Oakley in Buffalo Bill’s Show into “Princess Wenona,” a faux Sioux girl. With Smith now an official member of Frederick Cummins’ Indian Congress, one rival of Cody’s show, Cummins described her in advertisements as the “champion rifle shot of the world,” but also the daughter of a chief named Crazy Horse and a white woman, born in a “tepee on the south bank of the Big Cheyenne, near Fort Bennett, Dakota,” and only 18 years old. None of this information was true, but it served the purpose of drawing people in to see a good show. Even under her new persona, Smith still could not escape living under the shadow of Annie Oakley and her career never blossomed beyond Oakley’s.

**Calamity Jane**

Not every woman who participated in shooting sports exuded the attractive feminine charm that so easily drew the American public to watch markswomen like Oakley and Smith. Likewise, not every famous female shot was a full-time performer. Martha Canary, or known publicly as “Calamity Jane,” rose to fame, allegedly, as a real scout in the west fighting Indians and claiming victories for American progress. Known as “a famous character on the western frontier” she had a “strange personality,” and eventually “donned male attire in 1870, when she volunteered to go as a scout with Custer in one of his Indian raids, and wore it during the greater

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part of her remaining years.” Although Calamity Jane did not always compete in the traditional theatrical sense as Oakley and Smith, she undoubtedly was an anomaly in the public eye and stood out as dead accurate rifle shot. Several American people viewed Calamity Jane as an American hero, a woman of remarkable bravery, and a person who “absolutely knew no fear of anything.” In figure 3, Calamity Jane is pictured holding her firearm and gazing off the camera’s focus. Notice the difference in Calamity Jane’s costume compared to those of Oakley

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45 “Calamity Jane: Death of a Celebrated Frontier Character,” *Tonopah Bonanza*, Butler City, Nevada, August 22, 1903, 2.

and Smith. Calamity Jane appears in male attire, wearing slacks, a frock coat, and button up vest. Her hair is chopped short to help her pass as a male. Unlike Oakley, she went gloveless, had no long skirt or dress, and her belt was a leather ammunition holster. Despite her seemingly masculine features of her costume, Calamity Jane still captured the interest of the American public and drew in curious minds about the exciting and dangerous American West.

Calamity Jane was born in the New England area in 1856 and, as a young girl, travelled out west permanently with her family. However, both of her parents died when she was thirteen years old which left her in a difficult situation where she, as the eldest daughter, needed to care for her younger siblings. Various primary sources such as newspapers, personal writings, and one unauthorized biography of Calamity Jane provide an extremely muddled narrative of her life. Facts about her movements, marriage(s), and even her adventurous journeys in the west are tightly intertwined with legends that make her professional career a difficult story to tell. Historian Richard W. Etulain explains that “even though Calamity Jane may have been the most-written-about woman of the pioneer West, the facts of her life seemed but a mole-hill beside the mountainous legends already stacked around her.”

Martha Canary was christened with the name “Calamity Jane” in 1872 after accomplishing a daring feat in the west. Captain Egan, a commander of the army post at Goose Creek, South Dakota, was shot from his horse by a Native American and badly wounded. According to local journalists of the South Dakota newspaper, the Madison Daily Leader in 1903, “the woman scout killed the Indian and, picking up the wounded officer, she placed him

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47 Calamity Jane: Death of a Celebrated Frontier Character,” Tonopah Bonanza, Butler City, Nevada, August 22, 1903, 2.
48 Ibid.
50 Ibid.
across her saddle and rode off to the fort under the fire of other Indians. Allegedly, according to reporters, after Captain Egan awoke and learned of his rescue, he said to her, “You are a good person to have around in the time of calamity, and I christen you Calamity Jane, the heroine of the plains.”

It is likely that the author of this article fabricated this story slightly to provide a more dramatic and heroic narrative. Regardless of the factuality of this event, it reveals some of the compromises the American public made in terms of the gendered sphere in trading propriety for an interesting and heroic American story.

Editors of newspapers across the United States published countless articles about Calamity Jane’s heroic acts in the western frontier. However, even during her lifetime, it was nearly impossible to separate fact from fiction. After her death, Captain Jack Crawford, the former Chief of Scouts for the United States Army came forward to dispel some of the misinformation printed about Calamity Jane. His words revealed a sad reality not only for Calamity Jane, but for American women during this time. He wrote:

Women have been glossed over with a glamour of romance, whose lives, in reality, were wretched and dissolute and in consequence many a young girl who has started out in the world full of lofty ideals and high aims, fired by the illusion that has been placed before her in the papers and books, ends, like the subject of the story herself (if truth were told), in shame and sorrow.

Captain Crawford’s statement further revealed a gender focused mindset when discussing a famous woman shooter. He explains how western women lived rough, difficult lives

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52 Ibid.
53 “‘Captain Jack’s’ Story of ‘Calamity Jane,’” *The Minneapolis Journal*, April 22, 1904, 10.
that were polished up for newspaper press and publications. Since Calamity Jane could not be discussed as a delightful and cute girl of the west, like Oakley and Smith, her public persona shifted to the role of an American heroine who slaughtered Native peoples in the name of western expansion. The American public willingly turned a blind eye to Calamity Jane’s lack of femininity due to her important role in advertising the west as an exciting, dangerous, and necessary part of American progress and westward expansion. Although she drank heavily, used profane language, and reportedly worked as a prostitute during her early years in the west, the American public idolized her due to her strong embodiment of advancing manifest destiny.⁵⁴

The fictional character of “Calamity Jane” seemed to spark public interest more than the woman herself and much of her fame grew rapidly after she was portrayed as a heroine in dime novels such as Deadwood Dick on Deck (1878) by Edward L. Wheeler. Historian Richard W. Etulain argues that these novels represented “imagined nonsense, but became one of the most popular dime novel series of all time.”⁵⁵ Publications like this made Calamity Jane known to the public, but did almost nothing to improve her professional career and she lived primarily as a camp follower in Deadwood for most of her life.⁵⁶ Martha Canary died in 1903 and left a confusing legacy that is littered with fictional stories. However, she is remembered even today as a prominent figure of the American West who was a gun-toting female with a brave heart, a steady hand, and an eye for shooting accuracy.

⁵⁴ “Calamity Jane: Death of a Celebrated Frontier Character,” Tonopah Bonanza, Butler City, Nevada, August 22, 1903, 2.
⁵⁶ Ibid., 25.
Conclusion
One fact that prevails from examining these three remarkable markswomen centers on their shooting abilities that seemed to not matter to the general American public. None of these women earned success based on their own merit alone. Competitive shooting for women did not begin as a sport in the late 19th century as we understand the term today. Journalists, reporters, and the public viewed these female marksmen not as athletes, but as performers who entertained. During this period, American society viewed female competitiveness as inappropriate, immoral, and against the duties of the domestic sphere. Since many people viewed these women as performers, their unmatched skill as markswomen was often overlooked, undercut, and clouded by gender traditions.

Annie Oakley’s professional career was guided by her husband’s close management and her carefully manicured public image to appeal to American tradition and gendered concepts. From the performance set list to her starched white collar, Annie Oakley meticulously crafted her appearance and performance to appeal to the audience. Recall Buffalo Bill’s initial reaction to Annie performing in his show: a woman simply could not handle the weight of a rifle or the physical strain from executing complicated trick shots. Even the woman who is still highly regarded today as one of the greatest shooters of all time faced doubt, discrimination, and sexualization based on gender.

Lillian Smith rose to fame as a young girl who was locally known for her ability to break glass balls with her rifle consecutively without flaw. Like Oakley, she impressed her peers in her local community who then encouraged her to pursue stardom. Once she gained the public’s attention, however, the narrative changed, and she along with other female athletes of this time faced obstacles unknown to the male population. Although
Smith and Oakley possessed the skills to compete and perform with the best, they were frequently viewed as inferior and weaker since they were women. Lillian Smith, in particular, had an unfair disadvantage as the rival of Annie Oakley. She constantly dwelled in Annie’s shadow and knew her career depended on outperforming Oakley. The two women had conflicting personalities and the public favored Oakley’s. Lillian Smith, known to be egotistical and overly competitive, highlighted characteristics that she ought not possess; these qualities jarred with public perceptions of a lady at this time. Lillian Smith had incredible shooting ability, but the public found her arrogant attitude to be off-putting. Once journalists exposed her marital infidelity, her career sunk further behind Oakley and American viewers felt uncomfortable watching her perform with the knowledge of her questionable morality in mind.

Calamity Jane’s shooting ability was harshly ignored when compared to Oakley and Smith. Jane’s appeal came from her heroic stories from the west that just happened to include a gun. Nonetheless, Martha Canary’s image of a gun-slinging woman of the west circulated throughout the United States and, together with Annie Oakley, she helped the American public get used to seeing women holding a firearm. It became less publicly scandalous to shoot a gun as a woman and showed American women that they should not be afraid of them. Annie Oakley advocated for women to learn how to shoot not only for sport, but also to protect children and themselves. Images of women like Annie Oakley, Lillian Smith, and Calamity Jane became increasingly popular and truly marks the beginning of women in competitive shooting sports. These women proved that a woman needed to navigate her femininity while operating a firearm.
As more women emerged as talented sharpshooters, it became difficult for the American public to ignore the female progression into shooting sports. Despite the prevailing male opinions on female participation in shooting sports, many people rose to advocate for women to take part in shooting sports. The following chapter will explore some of these progressive opinions on women behind the gun.
CHAPTER 4
Advocacy for the Female Marksman

“The fields are free, and to reckon up the requirements of a good shot I should say a clear eye, steady hand and nimble feet. Can not a woman be all of this?” Margaret Bisland

“Women and Their Guns”
Annie Oakley’s stardom and skill behind the barrel proved to other women that females could participate in shooting sports and that guns could be used properly by women. Several writers and doctors advocated that women could handle the rigors of a firearm and that the female sex was more fit to handle a gun than the male. Perhaps one of the earliest of these new perspectives is found in the 1889 article “Women and Their Guns,” published in Outing; An Illustrated Monthly Magazine of Sport, Travel, and Recreation written by Margaret Bisland argued in favor of female shooters, writing that:

“I have made for myself a discovery which would seem to add one more link to the already potent argument in favor of woman’s equality. Now, the feminine nature in its purest form is supposed to be so peculiarly and delicately organized that it will shrink from inflicting pain, even upon a man’s natural prey of the feathered or finny tribe, while the male in his most civilized condition is still brutal and savage enough to find pleasure in the chase. But indeed I can prove to the contrary that love of this sport is but a latent passion in the female character. All that woman lacks is the opportunity. Give her a rifle and comfortable clothes and she will lay aside her

1 Margaret Bisland, “Women and Their Guns,” Outing; An Illustrated Monthly Magazine of Sport, Travel, and Recreation (1885-1906), December 1889, xxxiii.
womanly prejudices in favor of the exhilarating pleasure to be derived from long
days afield with gun and dogs.”

This passage from Bisland denotes the highly gendered ways of thinking in American society near the turn of the twentieth century. Her words echo ideas from other earlier health and wellness writers discussed previously in Chapter 2 like Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Catharine Beecher. Likewise, Bisland explains that there are “manly” sports that women exceed slightly past their gender to share with men such as rowing, fencing, and riding; women enjoy and healthfully benefit from such sports. However, even though women can participate in these activities, “she still remains the weak woman, her lack of physical strength relegating her to a secondary position.” A woman’s lack of physical strength, however, proves not to be a necessary requirement for handling a gun. Bisland argues that short, lightweight firearms are just as effective at long and short ranges as heavier guns. Furthermore, Bisland states that “the fields are free, and to reckon up the requirements of a good shot I should say a clear eye, steady hand and nimble feet. Can not a woman be all of this?”

Recall Buffalo Bill Cody’s concerns with Annie Oakley performing in his show as a female rifle shot. He doubted her ability to carry out the act due to her small feminine stature based on his assumption that she was physically weak. Bisland believed that women could and should participate in shooting sports and, if the gun was too heavy, simply obtain a lighter one. If Bill Cody was truly concerned with Oakley’s physical strength, why did he not offer her to shoot a lighter firearm in her performances? Perhaps this question can be pursued by studying some of

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3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.
the magazine readers’ responses that were published in *Outing* about Margaret Bisland’s 1889 essay.

One such reader response, published in *Outing* magazine in 1890, attacked Bisland’s recommendations for which firearms best suited women. The author signed his letter to *Outing* as “President Bates” but provided no further detail of what organization he oversaw. Bisland based her advice off her own experiences and preferences on firearms, however, critics questioned her knowledge and credibility. This male commentator claimed that Bisland’s description of her “education with a rifle” reflected what sounded, to him, to be a shotgun. Bisland stated that she “‘would recommend,’ for a woman, ‘a double-barrel breech-loading rifle, twenty-seven inches long from hammers to bead; the bore twelve, and the weight five and three-quarter pounds!’”5 He added that Bisland exclusively wrote of bird hunting and wing shooting which, typically, requires a shotgun and not a rifle. This observation appears to be wrong and irrelevant, considering that Bisland wrote the article to advocate and encourage women to shoot and hunt small game.

Despite this author’s nitpicking on Bisland’s firearm terminology, he did not agree with Bisland’s thoughts that women needed lighter guns to shoot. He already favored a more progressive idea that women had already demonstrated that they use heavier firearms. Bates informed his readers that there were women “in the west, and in Michigan, that can put six or seven bullets out of ten from a genuine rifle inside of a thirteen-inch ring at a distance of 200 yards, shooting from the shoulder, and who can pick a squirrel off the tallest tree, touching

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nothing but his head.” Bates certainly believed that at least some women were fully capable of handling the rigors of an average gun and could achieve great feats with them. In fact, he told a story about a woman in northern Michigan who killed a bear with a single shot. Bates wrote that:

A genuine lady, refined and cultured, dropped a large bear dead in his tracks, with a bullet through his head, at a distance of over one hundred yards, and this while the animal was in motion, walking. She used a true rifle, calibre thirty, and she thinks that a rifle—calibre twenty-eight, weight five and a half to six pounds—is the king of arms for a woman, as well as for a man, while a shotgun ranks second.

Bates would not have included this narrative in his piece to the magazine’s editor if he disagreed with it. His language is direct and his story of the Michigan woman’s bear hunt sounds approving. It appears that Bates believed women were capable of much more than shooting birds and small game. Rather, he provided the readers of the *Outing* with a remarkable story of a “genuine lady” shooting a large bear dead in its tracks. It is interesting to speculate what Bates’ opinion might have been if he did not believe this huntress to be, in his words, “refined” or “cultured.” Perhaps the viewpoint would have been negative, for recall what happened to Lillian Smith’s professional career when news of her unfaithfulness to her husband went public. Ideas and attitudes like this show that in the general public, people expected women to behave according to societal standards and uphold the moral domestic values of the home in every aspect of their lives.

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7 Ibid.
“Teach the Woman to Handle a Gun”

Bisland commented in her piece that women’s bodies could handle firearm usage just as well, if not better, than a man’s. Captain Roy S. Tinney, the associate editor for *Forest and Stream*, published an article in 1918 titled “Teach the Woman to Handle a Gun: ‘For the Female of the Species is More Deadly Than the Male’—Kipling Made a Bull’s Eye with that” where he made a similar argument about a woman’s physical ability to shoot. He began his article with two quotes from a male and female doctor. The first doctor, Dudley Allen Sargent, had been a “pioneer and evangelist in the field of physical education for both men and women, from 1870 until his death in 1924” and left a legacy through physical education. Sargent’s area of study specialized in children’s and women’s diseases and diseases of the nervous system. Once he completed school at Yale University, Sargent moved to New York to study with the “noted authorities Abraham Jacobi, Paul Mund, and Edward Seguin.” During his work with Seguin, Sargent realized the importance of physical activity for human development. With this

![Figure 4 Dr. Dudley A Sargent. Source: Boston University College of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences.](image)

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realization, Sargent became one of the leading advocates for physical education and a powerful influence on the American public.

The first statement from Dr. Dudley A. Sargent claims, “nine times out of ten, woman, from the standpoint of physical endurance, should make as good a soldier as a man.”\textsuperscript{10} Sargent supports his controversial claim by explaining that normal or average women who are in good health are able to endure more pain, discomfort, and fatigue and can expend more muscular energy than the average man of similar condition.\textsuperscript{11} These ideas from Dr. Sargent appear to be the opposite of the prevailing idea that women were physically inferior to men and that their bodies could not handle large quantities of stress. Tinney even argues that it is women, not men, who are “nearer the primitive type” and are “biologically more savage, more barbarian, and she has therefore greater physical endurance.”\textsuperscript{12} Dr. Sargent believes that a woman “can outlast a man” by withstanding any cold, thirst, hunger, or any physical privation.

These ideas not only contradicted the traditional beliefs on the men’s and women’s bodies, but they also challenged ideas from previous physical health and wellness reformers like Higginson and Beecher. Both writers argued in the mid and late nineteenth century that the female body was weaker, feebler, and physically inferior to the male body. Perhaps ideas on gender began to shift to a more progressive way of thinking, as the opinions Sargent held were contrary to the American public view on the physical abilities of men and women. Dr. Sargent’s opinion on female soldiers rested on his belief that the female body had a better resistance to pain, suffering, and discomfort.

\textsuperscript{10} Quote from Dr. Dudley A. Sargent in Roy S. Tinney, “Teach the Woman to Handle a Gun: ’For the Female of the Species Is More Deadly Than the Male”—Kipling Made a Bull’s Eye with That,” \textit{Forest and Stream; A Journal of Outdoor Life, Travel, Nature Study, Shooting, Fishing, Yachting}, April 1918, 226.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
The second opinion came from Dr. Sarah J. McNutt, a female pediatrician, neurologist, and pharmaceutical educator, who focuses not on physical ability, but on mental ability. She states that “the supreme reason why women would make better soldiers than men is because when women set out to do a thing they do it.” Dr. McNutt mentions nothing about physical strength or endurance but focuses on female stubbornness and determination. Though she does not explicitly state her reasoning behind this stance, she supports it by advocating:

“I would allow women to be anything on earth they want to be. I don’t believe in saying: ‘Because you’re a woman you can’t do thus and so.’ If there were anybody to do the fighting most women would not choose it. But when the men fail, women can—and will—step into the breach.”

Dr. McNutt offered an enlightened view of female abilities and believed that women had the capability to become exceptional soldiers, and that women could pursue any profession they wished to pursue. According to these two doctors, women physically and mentally proved equal, or even superior, to men. Captain Tinney explained that he included these doctors’ opinions not for the purpose of “recruiting a Legion of Death or organizing a female platoon of the local Home Guard Company” but to “call attention to the fact that ‘the female of the species is more deadly than the male’; that little sister and friend wife are not inherently the clinging vines they at times appear, but possess potential fighting qualities worthy of cultivation, and teaching them

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14 Ibid.
to shoot is not by any means a waste of time and ammunition.” \(^{15}\) To Captain Tinney, women should be viewed by society as equal, and sometimes superior, to men in terms of marksmanship.

Tinney describes himself as a former instructor for shooting and fencing and explains that he has witnessed firsthand that if women are “given the same amount of time and instruction [a woman] generally outstrips her brother in the use of arms.” \(^{16}\) Tinney understands and believes that women are capable of being successful shooters and he likewise is aware that his beliefs do not align with prevailing societal traditions and customs. According to Tinney, the prevalent idea was that “such skill is excess baggage when included in the list of feminine accomplishments.” \(^{17}\) He argues against this claim by providing several stories where women successfully used firearms for self-defense. One of the more telling examples provided by Tinney describes a young teenage girl who was left home alone. In the story, a group of bandits made their way to an old ranch house where they expected no one would be home. To their surprise and relief, they found only a fifteen-year-old girl at the home. Expecting an easy raid, the bandits entered the residence. Tinney recalls the incident, explaining that that “the youngster had a .22 hi-power Savage repeater and knew how to use it, so she simply got up on the roof and began a vigorous defense. I was one of the party who were attracted by the firing and came to her rescue. We found her with the rifle in her lap and tears in her eyes, tears of anger not fright, mind you.” \(^{18}\) When responders reached the young girl, she expressed her disappointment that one of them had gotten away.

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\(^{16}\) Ibid.

\(^{17}\) Ibid.

\(^{18}\) Ibid.
This narrative helped persuade the reader that women possessed not only the capability of handling a firearm, but they often showed exceptional skill that could match or beat men. The young girl in this story challenged gender roles during this time as she protected herself and her home without a man’s assistance. This story utilizes several prevailing ideas on gender to coax the reader into believing that guns were appropriate for women to have and use. First, the young girl protected herself and her home from potential destruction and harm. Her young age reinforces the idea of the alleged delicate nature of women and helps to prove even the most fragile of women, young women, can handle the rigors of a firearm and use them for a greater benefit. This story also echoes the gradual expansion of the female sphere and shows how firearms slowly became a part of that realm. Some historians might argue that since many 19th-century thinkers believed the home served as a woman’s domain and career, it might be reasonable for a woman to understand how to operate a firearm in case of an emergency when a man was not present to defend the home and their children.

To Captain Tinney, these instances occurred regularly and he claimed that he “could cite a dozen other similar instances, but these three are typical and show clearly just how valuable a thorough training in marksmanship can be in a time of emergency.”19 Tinney did not explicitly comment about his stance on women competing in shooting sports, but it can be inferred from the text he strongly advocated for training women on how to use guns defensively. It appears that his opinion deviated from the dominant perceptions in American society about women using guns. He explicitly set out to dispel some of the most prevailing thoughts about women’s inability to shoot accurately and use guns safely.

19 Ibid.
Another interesting point from Tinney appears to validate his reason for advocating in favor of female marksmanship. He claims that “Until a year ago (1917) we were a nation of ostriches, we buried our heads in the sand and spoke prayerfully of our natural barriers; then came the war and a rude awakening.” Tinney described the US involvement in World War I and believed that the nation needed to better prepare for attack because, to him, the United States had made numerous enemies who were liable to cause trouble. “Now let us carry our preparedness into the home by teaching our women the why and how of the good old shooting game” wrote Tinney. This statement reveals that the gendered spheres remained commonplace after the turn of the 20th century because to bring shooting skill to women, it was simultaneously brought into the home. Women’s presumed domain of the home meant that these writers did not view women separately from the home. Tinney used this to advocate in favor of female marksmanship for the use of protection.

Lastly, Tinney concludes his essay with an anecdote that mentions Annie Oakley. With one last push to argue his views, he wrote “No thug will molest a woman if he knows she has a gun handy— and possesses even a working knowledge of its operation. What hold-up man would ever dream of attempting to rob Annie Oakley?” Since Tinney has a background in teaching people how to shoot and publishes for the Forest and Stream magazine, it can be presumed that his viewpoints are valued and shared by many of his readers. Although many women, like Annie Oakley, proved their talents as markswomen on their own merit, writings from men like Captain Tinney helped dispel some of the prevailing stereotypes about female bodies being unable to handle the physical demands of a firearm.

20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
“Women’s Guns and Gunning”

Even before Captain Tinney published writings on women and guns, others published in monthly sporting magazines on the issue of female participation in shooting activities. Nearly thirty years earlier, in 1890, Alice Stead Binney published “Women’s Guns and Gunning” in *Outing: An Illustrated Monthly Magazine of Recreation* printed in New York. She begins her piece explaining the many sports women already participate in regularly, including croquet, tennis, bowling, and swimming. She regards female participation in these sports as progress but admits “the inborn feminine antipathy to a ‘gun’ is not yet overcome.”23 She speculates that there are two reasons why women have generally not pursued shooting as a sporting activity. Binney explains, “there is a shock in the terrible suddenness of the discharge of a gun that many women can never overcome; and even if they conquer the fear of the weapon sufficiently to fire it off, the recoil is so unpleasant and alarming that the first attempt often proves the last.”24 Binney’s observation echoes the similar idea from Buffalo Bill’s Wild West show where the show’s producers had concerns with the set list and believed moving Oakley to the forefront would ease the women and children in the audience frightened by the loud cracks of the firearms. It seems unreasonable that the only two reasons why women did not participate in shooting activities was because of the loud noise and the physical recoil of the gun. The larger issue seems to have been that many men believed their gender had the right to participate in shooting, but women did not.

Nonetheless, Binney provided a solution for women that seems similar to Margaret Bisland’s. To shoot effectively, according to these women authors, women needed a lighter gun that went hand in hand with their feminine bodies. Unlike Bisland, however, Binney believed

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24 Ibid.
that the smaller firearms were merely a starting point for women. The smaller arms would be quieter and provide less recoil that allegedly deterred women from using them. Binney claims that “very likely a woman once becoming expert with this rifle will soon of her own accord undertake to use a larger weapon, and finding all the old nervous dread vanished feel that the gun is in her power and must do her bidding. In her subsequent anxiety as to the result of her shot she will be apt to quite forget both noise and recoil.”

Although Binney recognizes gendered stereotypical shortcomings of women that may not be all that accurate, she goes a step further than authors like Bisland by stating women can and will get used to the guns and will be able to fire larger weapons once they had learned the basics of the craft.

Writings from women authors like Binney and Bisland show the prevailing thoughts in the late 1800s that women could participate in shooting sports, but not with the same equipment as men. These assumptions derived from the prevailing belief that the female body was physically weaker than the male and that women needed shorter barrels, lighter ammunition, less recoil, and smaller firearms to shoot comfortably and efficiently. Not until the turn of the twentieth century when many people began to realize the potential of women marksmen, did this viewpoint change. Captain Tinney, for example, argued that women not only could shoot and enjoy the sport, but they often proved better at it than men and they even would make better soldiers.

“Women May Now Shoot in The Grand American Handicap”

It appears that perspectives began to shift slowly not just on women using guns, but on women competing in shooting sports in the early 20th century as well. Several writers in popular magazines, hunters, and outdoor enthusiasts alike advocated for women to be included in

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25 Ibid.
shooting activities and, with this advocacy, came a population of women who trained, practiced, and mastered marksmanship. Eventually, these advocates turned their focus towards competition shooting and, with it, women competitors took to the field. Perhaps one of the largest trap shooting competitions in the world even today, the Grand American, made its debut in 1900 at the Interstate Park in Queens, New York. For over a decade, national shooting organizations excluded women from participating in this shooting event. Not until 1916 did the Interstate Association of Trapshooters revise their regulations with six key initiatives. These initiatives included:

1. “Classification of States for championship purposes.
2. Appropriation for the resurrection of defunct gun clubs and to assist new organizations.
3. Permitting the entry of women in the Grand American Handicap.
5. The early closing of entries for the Grand American Handicap.
6. Excellent placing of the Grand American and subsidiary handicap tournaments.”

Peter P. Carney reported these amendments in the *Forest and Stream* sporting magazine and described the first three as being “without question, the most important bits of legislation. The most radical is the letting down of the bars to women, and hereafter the ‘Dianas of the Traps’ may shoot in the trapshooting classic to their hearts’ content. This change had to come.”

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28 Ibid.
This change, however, came not because male organizers believed women as worthy of competing, but because women agitated, according to Carney, to push their way into the once male dominated sport. Carney stated, “Women are demanding their place alongside of the men every day, and while some days things don’t break so well for them they eventually land.”

In this article, Carney described very significant pieces of women’s progressive history. He highlighted how women successfully gained momentum towards physical and political rights in early 1900s and actively participated in other sports like track athletics, swimming, and archery. He made a bold claim, “[now] women have all the privileges in athletic competition that men have.”

Although the organization allowed women to participate in this grand competition and other competitive sports, women did not experience equality to the male participants. Even today, equality between the sexes in sport seems lacking. Such examples of the way shooting officials, organization leaders, and popular printed media treated women in contrast to men in competitive shooting sports will be further explored in the following chapter on female marksmen in the Olympics.

Carney’s analysis of female progress in shooting sports was optimistic and expressed hope for the future of female shooting sports. Carney felt unsurprised by this new doctrine for women to enter the competition since, previously, women had been accepted by numerous associations and clubs to compete in state tournaments and championships. To Carney, this new resolution was “only fair.” This belief comes from his analysis that women pushed and advocated for their way into activities and privileges that previously were the male prerogative. Interestingly, Carney provided a glimpse of the social pressure for some women to participate in

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29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
the sport from a group of markswomen who demanded to shoot at the 1915 Grand American Handicap. “Last summer” he wrote, “there were at least 50 women Trapshooters present, and they threatened to run a blue ribbon event of their own if they were not allowed to enter the Grand American in the future. It is only a matter of time when there will be a Grand American Handicap for Women.”

Although, today, no Grand Handicap for only women exists. However, there are hundreds of female shooters that travel to compete in the tournament every year. In 2018, Summer Gobrecht of Findlay, OH, became the second lady champion in the history of the Grand American High-All-Around Event (HAA). Summer’s score of 397 out of 400 targets was the stand-alone winner at the event. In an interview with Shotgun Sports magazine, Gobrecht explained her background in the sport. “I tried a lot of sports and when my grandfather (Ralph Carlson) taught me how to shoot, I decided I wanted to try a shooting sport. This is my 7th year of trapshooting. My mentor, Everett Burke of Findlay, OH, told me when I was 13 I could be an All-American trapshooter.” In the same interview, Gobrecht explained her emotions after her win, stating that, “It feels wonderful, pure joy and happiness to know I shot that well competing with over 2,400 shooters. It’s an honor to be the second female, along with Lauren Mueller, to have won this event. It’s a big deal for me.” Gobrecht also explained the progress that women have made ever since the first Grand American tournament. “The Grand has been shot for 119 years, and two women have won the Grand HAA in the last seven years. I find that compelling

32 Ibid.
33 “Local Sharpshooter Could Make Hancock History.” Courier, The (Findlay, OH), October 20, 2018.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
and exciting for women shooting in this sport. I also hope to see more women have the chance to
win this award, and I would not be surprised to see this happen in the future.”  

The significance of this milestone in the history of women in competitive shooting sports ought not be overlooked. The Grand American tournament today is the largest in the world and
has found its permanent residence in Sparta, Illinois. Since its founding, the Grand American
tournament has swelled from a mere 20 competitors in 1900 to more than 5,800 participants in
2006.38 In 1925, Annie Oakley shot in her first and last Grand American where she broke 97 out of 100 clays just one year before her death in 1926.39 Today, the Amateur Trapshooting
Association, the largest clay target shooting organization in the world, manages and owns the
event.40 For women to be accepted into this major competition represents a great achievement for
the future of women in competitive shooting sports. Additionally, this progress in female
shooting sports during the early 20th century helped the longevity of Annie Oakley’s legacy as
one of the best shooters in the world.

Annie Oakley’s Legacy

The legacy of Annie Oakley appeared in print popular culture long after her death in
1926 and persists even in today’s culture and media. Many of these representations of Annie
Oakley, however, deviate from the facts of her real life and follow a more desirable narrative for
the time in which media produced the work. Perhaps the most popular, though inaccurate, story
of Annie Oakley may be found in the script of the 1948 Broadway hit Annie Get Your Gun.
According to historian Mary Lou LeCompte, “Its authors and lyricists ignored the

37 Ibid.
American/History-of-the-Grand-American.
39 Ibid. Also included in the Amateur Trapshooting Association Hall of Fame article on Annie Oakley.
https://www.traphof.org/inductees/details/1/122-oakley-annie
40 Ibid.
accomplishments of the real Annie Oakley, who defeated Frank Butler at sharpshooting and went on to become his wife and lifelong companion. In the musical, Annie lamented that ‘You Can’t Get a Man with a Gun,’ and lost the match to win Butler. The message was unmistakable." For a woman to have a husband, according to gender norms, she must not outshine the man in marksmanship. Writers of the play, Dorothy Fields and her brother, Herbert, altered the storyline of Oakley’s early life to create a gender appropriate narrative for the time. Not only did they correct the message, but the costumes worn by the actress who played Oakley did not accurately the conservative, modest, and humble character of the real Annie Oakley. In fact, the show did not intend to portray Oakley’s reality at all. Instead, it echoed the gendered mindset the writers of the play shared with American society in the 1940s and 1950s about a woman’s physical abilities and her primary domestic responsibilities as a woman.

Recall the photo below from chapter two which shows Annie Oakley’s full stage costume from Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show. Her stockings were long and fully covered her ankles, her gloves concealed her hands and wrists, and she had her dress neatly pressed and covered her chest and body. In Oakley’s performances, she used a simple firearm, undecorated, and she used it plainly as a tool to put on a great show. Figure 6 below shows an image of Ethel Merman as Annie Oakley in the 1946 Broadway showing of Annie Get Your Gun. This image depicts a hyper-feminized version of Annie Oakley that, as writers of the play Dorothy and Herbert Fields, believed would be more appealing to the American audience.

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In Merman’s costume, a cropped bolero revealed a sequined midsection of the dress which was highly decorated with fringe and embroidery. Her dress was embellished with embroidery and fringe that was far more detailed than what the real Oakley wore in the late nineteenth century. Another detail that reveals a fantasy-like representation of Oakley was her footwear. The real Annie Oakley favored “heavy-soled, tan shoes that laced to the ankle,” but Merman’s character sported calf-length decorative cowboy boots that reinforced the perception of the wild west that the American people so adored.⁴² Another important distinction in Merman’s portrayal focuses on her firearm. The stock and action plate were highly embellished to match the embroidery on her dress and hat; the photograph of Annie Oakley, however, shows an undecorated firearm. Though these differences of costume may appear to be subtle tweaks to

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make the play more visually appealing, they express a larger narrative that embodied gendered concepts of women’s physicality in American society.

In the play, Merman’s character was as highly femininized, according to historian Glenda Riley, this deliberately helped the audience escape to “simpler times, before mass death, war camps, and atomic bombs, and who also longed for such traditional values as honesty and hard work.”

“Annie Get Your Gun” premiered after World War II and people in American society often clung to temporary escapes from their harsh cultural reality. Recall Annie Oakley’s role in her performances in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show where her act appeared as one of the first in the set list to intentionally calm the audience’s anxiety about the loud guns and reenactments of violence in the west. Writers of the Broadway musical used Oakley’s character in the same way. Merman’s portrayal of Oakley likewise created a sense of security in the theatre and allowed the audience to escape the harsh realities of everyday life in the 1940s. Along with Merman’s appearance, the storyline in the musical takes liberties with the truth about the match that took place between Oakley and Butler. Oakley’s loss to Butler on the Broadway stage reinforced the traditional gendered idea that men showed superiority to women in shooting sports and that men should reign victorious against women in any competition, regardless of the fact that Oakley won the actual match. Furthermore, this historically inaccurate loss also echoed the idea that, if a woman desires a husband, she should never excel past his own skills and abilities because, as written in the play, “you can’t get a man with a gun!”

Despite the historically inaccurate memory of Oakley through the 1940s Broadway production, Oakley directly impacted the future

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43 Ibid.
of women in competitive shooting sports in the 1920s through her coaching and mentoring of young girls interested in the sport.

Annie Oakley’s Impact on Women in Competitive Shooting Sports

Annie Oakley’s long-term impact on women in competitive shooting sports seems immeasurable and, despite her seemingly conservative personality, she advocated for women to learn how to shoot which many Americans viewed as controversial. On many of her travels to state fairs and conventions, Oakley would instruct women on the proper handling of a firearm and taught them how to shoot. Editors of the Evening Star in Washington D.C. published an article in 1922 about Oakley’s visit to the Mineola, Long Island, New York Fairgrounds. The article included a photograph of Annie Oakley instructing Peggy Stone, the daughter of the comedian Fred Stone, on how to hit a bull’s-eye. In figure 8, Oakley is pictured holding up the barrel and stock for Stone to help her align a shot. At 62 years old, Oakley continued to perform in small shows and instructed many young women to operate firearms during her lifetime. Oakley’s legacy undoubtedly caught the attention of young girls across the country and many women, in turn, advocated for firearm education for women.
After Oakley retired from active participation in professional shooting competitions, she spent the winter seasons at Pinehurst in North Carolina and the summer seasons at Portsmouth, New Hampshire.45 She often used her time at Pinehurst to teach others, especially young women, about firearms and how to shoot them. In 1918, a trapshooting tournament took place at Pinehurst and, according to the editors of *The Washington Herald*, the success of the event boosted the popularity and interest for the game.46 The shooting complex at Pinehurst grew through the years and *The Washington Herald* editors described it as an “institution, with acres of ground for parking space, roadways, arena, instruction in shotgun, rifle, and pistol shooting, and a house built to accommodate not thirty but 200 shooters.”47

Prior to 1918, the organizers at Pinehurst added perhaps one of the most innovative features to the shooting complex which they reserved for ladies to shoot. “An entire wing is devoted exclusively to Annie Oakley’s pupils, and to the increasing number of women entering the annual big shoots or participating occasionally in the sport.”48 According to Oakley, she never charged her students because she had a goal in teaching women to shoot. “I have been teaching women to shoot for many years at Wentworth in the summer and Pinehurst in winter, without compensation because I had an ideal for my sex. I have wanted them to be capable of protecting their homes.”49

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45 Peter P. Carney, “Annie Oakley Showing Soldiers How to Shoot,” *Trench and Camp*, June 5, 1918, p. 3.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
Figure 8 Annie Oakley instructing Peggy Stone how to shoot a firearm. Source: Evening star (Washington, D.C.), 29 June 1922. Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers. Library of Congress.

Figure 9 “Annie Oakley (III) Teaching the Younger Set to Shoot with the Scatter-gun,” ca. 1920. Source: MS 6 William F. Cody Collection, McCracken Research Library.
Annie Oakley’s competitive shooting and coaching careers sparked many people to advocate for women to own, operate, and eventually compete with firearms. Oakley likely understood the influence she exerted on women and used it to teach and advocate for female marksmanship. Other women, however, advocated in different ways to support the effort for women to shoot. Some women published articles and essays to advocate in favor of female marksmanship. Authors like Margaret Bisland and Alice Stead Binney voiced what many women interested in shooting likely had on their mind: women were capable of shooting and could shoot accurately. Female authors, though, needed to write in a way that seemed relatively uncontroversial because they ran the risk of being dismissed entirely or mocked by male writers. Bisland and Binney proved cautious in their advocacy for women shooters and admitted that the female stature was weaker and thus required lighter firearms.

Along with female authors, men also published articles that fought on the side of women for the right to shoot. Unlike the female authors, the men could speak more freely on their thoughts on female marksmen without the risk of being entirely dismissed. Authors like Captain Roy S. Tinney and Peter P. Carney wrote strong articles supporting female marksmanship, female soldiers, and advocated for women to learn how to use firearms for self-protection for both herself and her family. Carney reported a significant event in the history of women in shooting sports with the admission of women in the Grand American tournament. He made an important statement regarding female progress by pointing out how women had taken significant strides towards equality with men and would continue to become more involved in activities and events that once excluded them.

In many ways, Carney’s prediction was correct. Women continued to advance in the sport, but faced harsh controversy, sexism, and gendered conflicts stood as major obstacles along
the way. As the number of female marksmen in the United States grew, the demand for women to compete at the highest level in the Olympic arena rose with it. The following chapter will explain these barriers and the ways in which women overcame them to achieve Olympic success.

Conclusion

The life and professional career of Annie Oakley marked the real beginning of female participation in competitive shooting sports. Shooting enthusiasts in society needed to see a woman like Oakley perform in the arena without denying or violating her role in society as a woman. Oakley walked the line between femininity and exceptional shooting skill perfectly which, as Richard W. Etulain said, “opened the tightly shut door of respectability for women as users of guns.”

Oakley’s fame exploded across the globe and, with it, stories and tales emerged to keep her name alive and thriving. However, her historical memory was often altered to appeal to American society at times. Recall Ethel Merman’s costume for the Broadway musical, *Annie Get Your Gun*. Her hyper-feminized version of Annie Oakley provided an escape from the World War II dim reality that surrounded American citizens. Merman’s attractiveness and flashy costumes provided the audience with a beautiful performance that contrasted with their reality outside the theatre. Producers of the show sexualized and over-feminized Oakley’s character while changing almost nothing about Butler’s character. Butler appeared on stage as a typical man of the period and did not appear overly masculine or exaggerated. This change in character embodies the gendered differences between men and women and the ways shooting advocates in society wanted to view them.

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CHAPTER 5
Different Sports, Similar Struggles:
American Olympic Markswomen and Their Path to Olympic Stardom

“Some officials are still bothered by seeing a woman do anything. They feel this is a man’s sport.”1 -Margaret Thompson Murdock

Introduction: Shooting as an Olympic Program
The pinnacle sporting competition that many high-level athletes strive for is, undoubtedly, the Olympic Games. The top competitors from around the globe compete to win gold medals in their sport of choice for their home country and for pride. Olympic leaders introduced competitive shooting for men to the Olympic Games in 1896 in Athens.2 The shooting competition there consisted of five events, two rifle events and three with pistols, at a sportsman range in Kallithea, Greece. Although officials added shooting to the Olympic games in 1896, women would not be permitted to participate in Olympic level competition shooting until seventy-two years later. Shooting competitions remained on the Olympic schedule for only male competitors until 1968.3 In 1967, at the 66th International Olympic Committee Session held in May in Teheran, committee members decided that the International Shooting Union could include women in Olympic shooting teams.4 Three women, Nuria Ortiz (Mexico), Gladys Baldwin Lopez (Peru), and Eulalia Rolińska (Poland) competed alongside men in shooting sports at the Games of the XIX Olympiad in Mexico City in 1968 which marked the beginning of Olympic markswomen.5

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2 “Shooting: History of Shooting at the Olympic Games” (Olympic Studies Centre, 2017).
3 Ibid.
5 “Shooting: History of Shooting at the Olympic Games” (Olympic Studies Centre, 2017).
In 1976, at the Olympic games in Montreal, Canada, Margaret Thompson Murdock became the first woman to join the United States Shooting Team and became the first woman to win a silver medal in shooting at the Olympic Games. Murdock had previously attempted to make the team in 1968 and 1972 but claimed “there must have been some kind of jinx hanging over me. I’ve beaten it now, just like I’ve beaten everybody in every international competition I ever entered.” Although several women competed as Olympic markswomen before Murdock, it appears that many people were taken back by Murdock’s success at gaining a spot in the Montreal Summer Olympics. “Some people were shocked at my making the team. I don’t understand their attitude,” Murdock explained. “I’ve been shooting competitively for twenty-three years, and no dark horse ever made it to the Olympics. You have to be good.”

Despite Murdock’s athletic confidence in herself and her ability as a rifle shot, she faced the same reality of other professional female athletes during the latter half of the twentieth century: sexism, gender inequality, and unfair treatment by Olympic male officials, media, and even fellow athletes. Although women could participate in Olympic shooting sports after 1968, the Olympic games did not offer an all-women’s shooting event until 1984 at the Summer Olympics in Los Angeles, California. Not until 1996 did the men’s and women’s Olympic shooting programs become completely separate. Some shooting events such as trap and skeet, however, remain classified as “mixed” competitions to the present day, which means both male and female participants compete alongside each other. The woman’s fight for equal access and participation in the Olympic games was not exclusive to only shooting sports. Leaders and

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7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
10 “Shooting: History of Shooting at the Olympic Games” (Olympic Studies Centre, 2017).
11 Ibid.
organizers in a wide variety of sporting events often undercut, devalued, and sexualized female athletes and purposefully kept them from competing on an elite level, especially at the Olympic level.

**Historical Issues of Gender Inequality in the Olympic Games**

The initial organization of the Olympic games started in 1894 under Baron Pierre de Coubertin who wished to develop an international sporting festival for young athletes from all over the globe. Coubertin based his vision on the ancient Olympic Games that began in Greece. The first Modern Olympic Games in 1896 achieved unanticipated success in which caused the founders and organizers to reconsider their goals, obligations, and logistics of maintaining the Olympic Games. In the earliest stages of development, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) faced a chaotic beginning as they worked to establish committees to organize and even make decisions about the program’s events. According to historian Sheila Mitchell, the committee’s responsibilities were “not carefully guided and the games of Paris and St. Louis contained a conglomerate of highly disorganized events.” This general lack of organization unofficially permitted women to participate as athletes in the games without the consent or comment from the IOC.

Women from various countries experienced their Olympic debut in 1900 in the events of golf and lawn tennis and, in 1904, Olympic organizers added tennis and archery to women’s sports. Olympic officials deemed non-combat sports appropriate for women but required strict guidelines for female costumes. According to historian Patricia Campbell Warner, “By

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13 Ibid.
14 Ibid, 212.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
being prohibited from wearing adequate, functional clothing for specific sports, American women literally were prevented from entering events, let alone excelling in them.”  

As years went on, women fought and gradually succeeded for more sports for women to be included in the Olympic Games. Although women were allowed to compete in limited sporting events in the early Modern Olympics, their participation remained unequal to their male counterparts. Olympic officials excluded women from more events than they did with those in which women could compete. Even in approved women’s events, coaches, Olympics officials, and the media dictated and micromanaged nearly every aspect of a female Olympian’s competitive experience. Reporters rarely focused on a woman for her athletic ability and, if they did, it was unlikely to come without any mention of her physical appearance or highlighting the fact she was a stellar athlete, despite being a woman. Historian Susan Cahn argues that “The media regularly described young Olympic hopefuls as cute, blond, little, and fair. Or in a slightly altered version, articles like Parade magazine’s ‘Watch this Housewife Jump!’ complimented older athletes for their domesticity.”

To understand the way gender impacted American markswomen in their quest to compete in the Olympics, it is important to analyze other sports to provide context and show the ways that societal standards and gendered traditions kept women from participating in Olympic sports. Female athletes faced countless barriers and challenges based on their sex that often ignored, mocked, or dismissed their abilities as competitive athletes. The following section explains how women in a different sport, swimming, faced similar obstacles and discrimination based on sex during their journey to the Olympic games. Although swimming is a very different sport from

that of shooting, these examples of women’s sports give a deeper understanding of people’s attitudes in American society about women participating in the Olympics.

**Gender Impacted Other Sports for American Female Athletes**

One sport that women from across the globe fought hard to compete in at the Olympic level was swimming. Interestingly, women could not initially compete in Olympic swimming despite the consensus in American society that women and men physical educators and leaders believed that swimming was appropriate and healthy for women. Many doctors and leading health and wellness authors wrote to encourage women to swim and keep their physical bodies in good health to better care for their families. Reflecting many of their views, renowned American swimmer Charlotte Epstein publicly advocated for female physical health through swimming. She believed the sport provided both safety and health benefits for women. Epstein stated that “It is the primary object of our organization to advocate swimming for self-protection and lifesaving, and for these purposes endurance is essential.” To professional female swimmers, there appeared to be a glaring contradiction between the opinions of health professionals and the unfair realities they faced in competition.

In 1912, women swimmers from the United States became infuriated by a long skirt code that U.S. officials placed on the rule books for American female competitors. According to the American officials, they prohibited women from competing in swimming events unless they wore long skirts to conceal their bodies, even while in the water. This rule did not apply to

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21 Ibid.
other countries, however, and many women from other countries competed against the American girls in the Olympics.

One American swimmer, Elba Whittaker, spoke out in a Chicago newspaper, *The Day Book*, in 1912 against the American Olympic Committee. Whittaker argued, “‘Sweden has placed events for women swimmers and divers on the Olympic program and European countries will enter competitors. Why doesn’t the United States, most progressive in everything else, recognize us?’”22 Whittaker exposed the inconsistencies between America’s progressivism in society and their attitudes towards female athletes. Interestingly, Whittaker already held numerous victories in swimming and the editor of *The Day Book* described her as a “champion woman swimmer of the middle west.”23 It is likely that many Americans already recognized Whittaker’s name and, once reading her opinions on women’s Olympic swimming, understood her frustration. Whittaker, however, did not leave just an opinion for her fellow American citizens to ponder. She challenged the American Olympic Committee to allow women to swim with functional swimwear and challenged her male counterparts by a guarantee she could defeat many of them in competition. “I’ll swim any man in the United States outside of Champion Daniels and a few of the stars in his class, any distance from 50 yards to a half a mile, on even

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23 Ibid.
terms” wrote Whittaker. “I don’t want [a] handicap or sympathy. I believe I can outswim any of
the men save a few at the top of the list, and I am prepared to support my belief.”

Whittaker’s opinion that American women should be allowed to compete alongside their
European counterparts was a belief shared among many female athletes. Many American women
spoke out against the restrictive and potentially unsafe costuming for female swimmers.
Charlotte Epstein, often referred to as the “Mother of American Swimming”, was instrumental in
achieving the goal that many professional female athletes shared which was to compete in
Olympic competitions for their sport. Historian Linda Borish describes Epstein’s impact on
women’s Olympic swimming in her article ‘The Cradle of American Champions, Women
Champions ... Swim Champions’: Charlotte Epstein, Gender and Jewish Identity, and the
Physical Emancipation of Women in Aquatic Sports. According to Borish, Epstein “altered the

Figure 10 Image from The Day Book, February 22, 1912.

24 Ibid.
sporting landscape for women nationally and internationally by battling the United States Olympic Committee to allow girls from the swim club she founded, the Women’s Swimming Association (WSA) of New York in 1917, to compete in the 1920 Olympics in Antwerp, Belgium.”

For many sporting competitions in the United States, the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) created common standards for amateur sports. Leaders of this organization worked closely with the United States Olympic Committee to prepare athletes for the Olympic games.

In many ways, the AAU was problematic for female athletes since some of their policies on female sports often put women at a disadvantage. For example, historian Linda Borish explains the regulation of women’s athletic swimming attire by the AAU and the ways it targeted and restricted their bodies in their swimming competitions. Borish stated that “Women needed to wear proper bathing costumes to secure physical mobility in the water.”

Rules created by the AAU, however, required women to cover their legs with long stockings that often exhausted the wearer and burdened her movements in the water. According to the New York Herald, “Undoubtedly, water soaked stockings tire the legs, interfere with a natural, free movement of the muscles, and cause distress to the wearer.” These bathing suits gave women an extreme disadvantage in the water and this experience was exclusive to female athletes. No such rules

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concerning modesty existed for the male swim teams and this exemplifies the ways female athletes endured arbitrary gendered regulations administered by the United States Olympic Committee. This issue of swim costumes initially restricted American women from entering the Olympic Games. Since no such rule existed for the men’s team, this reveals gender norms at play and shows one of the many ways that women faced obstacles when competing in the Olympics due to their sex.

“Battle of the Sexes” and the Women’s Liberation Movement

As women athletes began to experience new opportunities in sports like swimming and archery, perhaps one of the most significant and progressive periods for women in competitive sports took place between the 1960s and 1980s and is known as the Women’s Liberation Movement. Social and political change emerged because of this feminine push for equality. Historian Allen Guttmann argues that, in the mid-seventies, a convergence of views took place and old attitudes eroded away and, because of this, women’s sports were radically transformed.  

Although women’s sports did experience dramatic progress, sports were not the primary concern and, instead, the progress derived from “angry women who demanded equality at home and on the job.” Guttmann explains one sport, karate, actually gained feminist backing due to the desire for self-defense instead of female progression in the sport professionally. Nonetheless, Guttmann believes that the convergence of ideas in the mid-seventies grew as more feminists discovered the importance of sport and that “no one did more to bring about this convergence than Billie Jean King.”

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30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
Countless women took part in the advancement of the Women’s Liberation Movement, but Billie Jean King stands out in sports history for her advocacy for female athletes both on and off the tennis court. Historian Susan Ware states that, “In 1973 Billie Jean King was the right feminist in the right sport at the right moment in American history. What she proved that night in a courageous performance of physical prowess and nerves of steel was that women did not choke, women were not frail and weak, women could face pressure and take it—live on national television, with no second takes. In just under two hours, she forced a reexamination of what it meant to be female and an athlete…” The “courageous performance” Ware refers to is the famous tennis match between top women’s player, Billie Jean King, against Bobby Riggs, a champion tennis player who earned the rank of No. 1 professional in the world in 1946 and 1947. The match took place on May 13, 1973, Mother’s Day, in Ramona, California.

Robert Larimore Riggs enjoyed a challenge, but he particularly loved to gamble as a hustler. Riggs claimed that “‘If I can’t play for big money, I play for a little money. And if I can’t play for a little money, I stay in bed that day.’” Riggs often won and, to keep his challenges up with the changing tides of professional tennis, he plotted to challenge a top female tennis player. As Rigg’s first choice, Billie Jean King declined the match several times as she believed there was nothing for her to gain through the challenge. However, after Riggs brutally defeated Margaret Court, the Australian player then ranked number one in the world, King felt the legitimacy of women’s tennis was now in question.

34 Ibid.
35 Ibid., 3.
36 Ibid.
Prior to the match between Court and Riggs, journalists worked swiftly to interview popular names in tennis to get their opinions on the upcoming competition. Overwhelmingly, every participant in the *New York Times* survey in the article “Riggs vs. Margaret Court: A Mismatch?” unanimously agreed that Riggs would win the match. Carole Graebner, a ranked tennis player, argued that “if he’s fit, Riggs should win. After all, he’s a man.” Additionally, two-time United States Champion, Sarah Palfrey Danzig, agreed that Riggs would win the match, however, she added, “if [Billie Jean] King were playing, I’d pick her to win because she has more quickness and anticipation. But I’d have to pick Riggs over Margaret.” It appears their predictions on the match proved correct. Bobby Riggs defeated Margaret Court 6-2, 6-1 in what became known as the Mother’s Day Massacre since the competition landed on Mother’s Day in 1973. According to Ware, “As soon as Billie Jean King heard the results, she knew that she had to play Riggs to uphold the honor of the women’s game she was fighting so hard to promote.”

Soon, news of this match spread across the United States and Riggs stirred the pot by releasing flagrantly sexist statements about female athletes. Admittedly, Riggs later stated that his remarks were all for show and that he really knew “nothing” about the Women’s Liberation Movement. However, if Riggs had won the match against King, perhaps his response to his earlier remarks would have been different. Historian Susan Ware provided some examples of Riggs’s sexist comments on female athletes:

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38 Ibid.
“I plan to bomb Billie Jean King in the match and set back the Women’s Lib movement about another 20 years”; “The best way to handle women is to keep them pregnant and barefoot”; and “Women play about twenty-five percent as good as men, so they should get about twenty-five percent of the money men get.”

Even if Riggs intended these comments for show and publicity, he must have understood how damaging his words could have been for the future success Women’s Liberation Movement. If Riggs won, many Americans likely would have believed his remarks on female athletes and his victory may have truly set the women’s movement back the twenty years as promised. Thankfully, however, Riggs did not get a taste of victory during his match with Billie Jean King.

Billie Jean King planned to play Riggs in the same way she built her tennis career, with a strong serve-and-volley game. However, after entering the court, she adjusted to a different plan that would tire Riggs who was about twenty years past his prime. Prior to the match, King spoke confidently about the upcoming competition and, when confronted about Riggs’ previous match with Court, King reminded the journalists, “I am not Margaret Court. She was doing nothing right. She couldn’t handle the pressure.”

With a twenty-four-year age difference and numerous championships under her belt, King believed she had the stamina, energy, and skill to defeat Riggs. She believed that Riggs might not be strong enough to go a five-set match and decided to make him run. Ware explains that King “decided to prolong points by running him around the court and hit balls softly so that he would have to generate all the pace.” By the end of the first set, King could see fatigue sweep over Riggs. The game switched repeatedly to deuce, and many

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41 Ibid., 4.
wondered why King could not finish Riggs. However, at the third match point, Riggs netted a backhand and it was “finally game, set, match, Billie Jean.”

Historian Susan Ware described King’s decision to play Riggs as a “conscious political act” where she [King] “always realized that the match was much bigger than just tennis, and she was willing to put her hard-won credibility on the line to prove the point that women deserved just as much respect as men.” King viewed her win against Riggs as a step in the right direction for the future of professional female sports. “I think you’ll find in the next decade that woman athletes will finally get the attention they’ve deserved through the years, that people will respect us as athletes and not just whether we’re good looking and whether she’s cute,” King predicted.

By defeating Riggs, King earned herself a check for $100,000 through prize money alone and the total sum she received through private bets and advertising made her the highest paid female athlete at that time.

The match between King and Riggs drew so much publicity that her success further aided her belief that female athletes should be worth investing in and they represented a marketable form of sports entertainment. “We’re changing, you know, and I think people and in particular businessmen, are realizing that we’re marketable, that we can help them make money for their companies, and that we’re professional athletes,” King argued.

The impact of this match on American society and the Women’s Liberation Movement seems difficult to measure, but King’s victory challenged gendered thinking and dispelled all of Riggs’ sexist comments towards women and female athletes. The match known as the “Battle of the Sexes” embodied a revolutionary success in women’s sports that had been slowly gaining

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44 Ibid., 7.
45 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
momentum. According to Ware, “One of the main catalysts was the passage of Title IX in 1972. Another was the revival of the broad-based social movement called second-wave feminism in the 1960s and 1970s. And the third was the charismatic figure of Billie Jean King to bring the two together.”

Not only did King’s victory over Bobby Riggs prove that women had the physical prowess to defeat a man in sport, but it gave King the political clout and backing she needed to continue the fight for women’s equality in sport. King’s win also helped Americans better align their thoughts and beliefs with the recent passing of the Title IX legislation in 1972. According to King, she realized the importance of this one tennis match against Riggs and stated “My job in the match, and I remember this being very clear, was to change the hearts and minds of people to match the legislation of Title IX and what we were trying to do with the women’s movement. It was to validate it, to celebrate it, and to get going toward changing a world where we had equality for both genders.” King’s victory in the Battle of the Sexes undoubtedly changed minds of spectators watching. Those who believed prevailing gendered assumptions about the athletic capabilities of the female body were proven wrong by King who exerted impressive endurance and stamina in her match against Riggs. The Battle of the Sexes provided a step of validation for the Women’s Liberation Movement and set up a solid example of why Title IX truly mattered for the futures of American sportswomen.

**How Title IX in 1972 Opened the Way for American Sportswomen**

As a federal law banning sex discrimination in federally funded education programs, Title IX was an instrumental piece of legislation that made participation in the Olympics more

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50 Ibid., 43.
attainable for many female athletes in the United States. The U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights enforces the Title IX statute in the Education Amendments of 1972.\textsuperscript{51} Title IX protects people from discrimination based on sex in education programs or activities that receive federal financial assistance.\textsuperscript{52} Title IX states that:

“All person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.”\textsuperscript{53}

Although President Richard Nixon signed Title IX into law in the summer of 1972, American women did not experience many of the effects of the legislation until years after its signing. The initial passing of the Title IX legislation proved to be a small victory won for feminist activists and female athletes alike, yet many educational institutions still failed to honor and recognize their gendered policies and notions that treated female athletes differently than the male athletes.

A famous protest from members of Yale University’s Women’s Rowing Team exposed this discrepancy between the Title IX legislation and the actual reality for many female athletes in the United States. Historian Deborah Brake described in her book \textit{Getting in the Game: Title IX and the Women’s Sports Revolution} the many conditions at Yale that led to the team’s outrage against the university.\textsuperscript{54} According to Brake,

“[They] endured appalling and humiliating conditions for the privilege of rowing for Yale, including restricted access to facilities, meager funding, and grossly

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{52} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{53} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
unequal treatment compared to the male rowers. After each practice, in the bitter cold winters of Connecticut, they waited in their wet sweat suits on the freezing bus while the men took hot showers and dressed in the boathouse because the only bathroom and shower facilities at the river were reserved for men. Waiting on the bus, wet and cold, the women hatched a plan.”

This plan drew national attention and was featured in news outlets across the United States. On March 3, 1976, nineteen members of the Yale University Varsity Rowing team assembled a protest to voice their frustrations about the unequal treatment between the men’s and women’s teams. These women stripped off their clothing in the office of Joni Barnett, the Director of Physical Education at Yale to expose the words “Title IX” written across their bare backs and chests. Standing at attention, the captain of the team read a three-hundred-word statement which included this powerful statement: “These are the bodies that Yale is exploiting. On a day like today, the ice freezes on this skin. And we sit for a half hour, as the ice melts and soaks through to meet the sweat that is soaking us from the inside.”

57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
This protest had a much deeper meaning for this collegiate rowing crew and the words “Title IX” painted across their bare bodies drew the attention that was needed to spark a change. According to Brake, not long after the protest, the women’s crew team had access to showers and better facilities. The team achieved their short-term goal with the protest, but likely did not anticipate its future impact on female athletes. One team member, Anne Warner, recalled ten years after the protest, long after her college career at Yale, running into a woman who attended Princeton University. “I was on a party boat in the middle of San Francisco Bay when I was introduced to a woman from Princeton. When she made the connection that I was on the ‘76 crew, she threw her arms around me and couldn’t thank me enough.”

It appears that the further time marches away from the initial signing of the Title IX legislation, the more women benefit from it.

Undoubtedly, Title IX greatly impacted the future of female athletes and aided them in becoming star Olympians. The 2016 United States Olympic Committee CEO, Scott Blackmun,
believes that Title IX was the “tipping point” for American female athletes, saying that the law fostered equal opportunity for members of both sexes to compete in college sports and develop the skills that could eventually secure their place in the Olympic games.\textsuperscript{60} Blackmun stated in an USOC briefing for the 2016 Rio Olympics that “our women got a great head start in the United States because of the support they got in schools and colleges growing up. So, if you look at what started to happen ten years, twenty years after the passage of Title IX, it really began to have a huge impact. And you combine that with the great collegian structure that we have and the support that we get from NCAA.”\textsuperscript{61} Blackmun’s statement accurately summarizes the impact of Title IX on female participation in the Olympic games as athletes. Without Title IX, American women would still be at a disadvantage in gaining the skills and athleticism that is in other countries often fostered at the high school and college levels of competition.

\textbf{Gendered Messages, Publicity, and Olympians}

Although the passage of Title IX helped clear the previously muddy path to the Olympics for American female athletes, women still had to fight their way towards equality in all aspects of Olympic sport. The unknown author of a \textit{Harvard Law Review} article titled “Cheering on Women and Girls in Sports: Using Title IX to Fight Gender Role Oppression,” argued that, although women are competing in the Olympic Games in record numbers, it appears the American public has not yet become comfortable with the ways in which female athletes challenge traditional notions of femininity and masculinity.\textsuperscript{62} The author argues three forms of social backlash that female athletes face from men while participating in sports stems from a

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\textsuperscript{61} Ibid.

desire to “‘preserve an ideology of male superiority that women threaten by invading the domain of the ‘strong’ sex.’”\textsuperscript{63} The three points are as follows:

First, women’s sports continue to be minimized and trivialized by unequal media coverage and community support. Second, female athletes are increasingly sexualized by the media, local communities, and even themselves in an effort to minimize the threat they pose to traditional concepts of femininity and masculinity. Finally, female athletes are increasingly portrayed as gaining sports opportunities only at the expense of funding for male athletes.\textsuperscript{64}

By the 1990s, women could compete in most sports, but female competitions typically did not receive the same level of professional attention and recognition as the male programs in the Olympics. In fact, sports journalists consistently published articles on the beauty, attractiveness, and impressive physique of professional female athletes rather than reporting on their athletic accomplishments in Olympic competition.

In 1932, during the Summer Olympics in Los Angeles, CA, editors of the \textit{Red Lodge Daily News Combined with Carbon County News} published several updates on the Olympic games in their column titled, “News of the Day in Pictures.” In this article, the editors described a great accomplishment by Leo Sexton, a track and field Olympian from the United States. Editors praised Sexton in reporting that he “tossed the shot 52 feet, 6 3-16 inches at the Olympic games at Los Angeles, excelling the Olympic record and winning for the United States.”\textsuperscript{65} On


the same page, however, editors featured three female Olympians who they believed were particularly attractive and provided no mention of their accomplishments as professional athletes.

Figure 12 above reveals the gendered mindset that many male newspaper editors expressed when they reported on female Olympians. Once again, journalists ignored the actual accomplishments of the female athletes and, instead of focusing on their talents, editors drew the reader’s attention to the physique and physical beauty of the women. In the small paragraph under the women’s photographs, it appears the editor is attempting to dispel a gendered thought from American society that beauty and athletic ability typically do not mix. This claim, however, was not well supported since, out of 126 female participants in the 1932 Olympics, only three are
credited with “upsetting” this theoretical polarity between beauty and ability. Moreover, it would be difficult to find an article that described male Olympians in this same way. Journalists often did not focus on male athletes for their physical bodies, whereas most publicity about female Olympians almost always mentions a fact about the woman’s physical appearance whether it be honoring her beauty or pointing out a lack thereof. This is not to say that journalists never mentioned the athletic accomplishments of female Olympians: they did often. However, an outstanding number of these articles include physical descriptions or mentions of their attractiveness which seems irrelevant to their athletic ability.

It appears that, even decades after the publication of “Olympic Champions” in Red Lodge Daily News Combined with Carbon County News, male journalists and editors still had the same mindset when reporting on female Olympians. In a 1956 article in The Evening Star from Washington, D.C., author Trevor Armbrister reported on three female Olympians and their promising skills that would likely result in gold medals for their home countries. Armbrister titled this article “Queens of the Olympics” and began the piece by posing the question: “Did you think all girl athletes were muscle molls? Look at these Melbourne-bound belles.” According to historian Susan Cahn, “the most frequently used derogatory term for women athletes was ‘Muscle Moll.’ In its only other usages, the word ‘moll’ referred to either the female lovers of male gangsters or to prostitutes.” To Armbrister, these female Olympians did not qualify as “muscle molls” because of their attractiveness, and he continues to refer to these star athletes as “belles” which refers to their beauty.

Moreover, Armbrister reported on the promising skill of the Canadian shot-putter Jackie MacDonald and described her as statuesque, blonde, and shapely. Apparently, her greatest rival was Russian champion Tamara Tyshkavich who he labeled “Russia’s chubby (224 pounds) champ.”⁶⁹ These types of gendered descriptions of female athletes by male journalists were common and appealed to a male audience. Male writers and journalists constantly undercut professional female athlete’s skills and athleticism by focusing on unrelated topics such as the athlete’s hair color, weight, physique, smile, charm, and femininity. Although many articles did cover the athletic accomplishments of women, there is a consistent discrepancy between the way men’s Olympic programs and women’s Olympic programs received coverage in the media. This proved especially true for the competitive female marksmen since they competed in a sport traditionally categorized as masculine.

**The First American Olympic Markswoman: Margaret Thompson Murdock**

The first woman to compete for the United States in Olympic shooting sports was Margaret Thompson Murdock. Born in Topeka, Kansas, Murdock learned to shoot rifles at an early age from her father who often took her to shooting ranges to practice with him where he shared his passion for shooting with his young daughter.⁷⁰ When Murdock got older, she attended Kansas State University where she majored in analytical chemistry, joined the ROTC, and eventually the varsity rifle team.⁷¹ After graduation, Murdock officially joined the Army and was stationed at Ft. Benning for about five years where she climbed the ranks to captain.⁷² At Ft. Benning, Murdock joined the Army’s rifle team and took part in numerous competitive matches all over the country. At these matches, she kept running into another expert rifleman, Gilmer

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⁷² Ibid.
Murdock, who was a Marine. Eventually, the two married and supposedly ended the “myth that a Marine and an Army officer can’t exist harmoniously together.”

In Murdock’s Army career, she continuously proved herself as a professional markswoman. In 1965, Murdock entered the National Matches and won the Navy Cup Match, something a woman had never done before. She also won the Woman’s Service Rifle Championship and the Woman’s Small-bore Position Championship. At twenty-three years old, she caught attention from the European shooting world when she won the World Rifle Championship for Woman in Wiesbaden, Germany. In 1967, Murdock competed in the Pan American Games in Winnipeg, Canada where she won a gold medal in small-bore rifle matches and became the first woman to win a rifle match in the history of the Pan American Games.

As Murdock continued to win in national competitive shooting matches, her confidence grew, and she competed in the 1968 Olympic trials for a spot on the United States rifle team. Admittedly, Murdock claimed that she “‘goofed’” in 1968 and did not make the U.S. Olympic rifle team, but she did become an alternate. In 1971, Murdock gave birth to a healthy baby boy but, unfortunately, the Army had a regulation against women officers having babies and discharged her from service. Later, however, the Army amended this regulation and reinstated Murdock as captain, this time in the Army reserves.

Interestingly, the newspaper writer for The Atlanta Constitution, Sam Hopkins, published the information about Murdock’s early life in an article titled “This Army Captain is Some Straight Shooter.” He includes several of Murdock’s athletic accomplishments in shooting, but it

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73 Sam Hopkins, “This Army Captain Is Some Straight Shooter,” The Atlanta Constitution, February 7, 1972, 8.
74 Ibid.
75 Ibid.
76 Ibid.
77 Ibid.
comes only after he describes her physical appearance in the opening paragraph of the article. Hopkins wrote that:

“Our looks are deceiving, as they say. And so, it is with Margaret Murdock. She is an attractive, brown-eyed, mild-mannered housewife who likes to stay home and look after her son Brett, who will be one year old on April 8. But there is a certain deadliness in her eyes at times that can make a man or woman tense with anticipation. It just so happens that Mrs. Murdock is unquestionably acclaimed as the best woman rifle shot in the world and is ranked among the top three or four among both men and women.”

As mentioned previously, women consistently received critical comments on their physical appearance. Newspaper articles, like the one written about Margaret Murdock, provide further evidence of the gendered nature of language in sport. In 2016, Cambridge University ran a study to examine what words are commonly used to describe female athletes in the press compared to male athletes. According to the study, “Notable terms that cropped up as common word associations or combinations for women, but not men, in sport include ‘aged’, ‘older’, ‘pregnant’ and ‘married’ or ‘un-married’. The top word combinations for men in sport, by contrast, are more likely to be adjectives like ‘fastest’, ‘strong’, ‘big’, ‘real’ and ‘great’ – all words regularly heard to describe male Olympians.” This study confirms what has already been shown through newspaper articles on female athletes and how women receive unequal coverage and treatment in media. As the Cambridge study shows, “language around women in sport focuses disproportionately on the appearance, clothes and personal lives of women, highlighting

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a greater emphasis on aesthetics over athletics.” As a 2016 study, this is a reality that is far too close to present day than is comfortable to admit. While Murdock was in her prime shooting career, she endured countless articles that nitpicked her appearance rather than focusing on the revolutionary path she was creating for future markswomen and Olympians.

Finally, in the summer of 1976, Margaret Murdock earned her place on the U.S. Olympic shooting team. “Another male sports barrier was broken this year when Margaret Murdock, a nurse by profession, punched enough holes in the bull’s-eye to make the U.S. Olympic shooting team.” At the Olympic tryouts at the Black Canyon Range in Phoenix, AZ, Murdock defeated Jack Writer, the 1972 Olympic 3-position smallbore champion, for second place in the June tryouts. Many people, however, seemed shocked to see a woman on the team, but Murdock had been training and competing for over two decades. She was ready for the Olympic Games.

![Image of Margaret Murdock](Image)

**Figure 13: Margaret Murdock. Source: TheOlympians.com.**

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80 Ibid.
82 Ibid.
At the 1976 Olympic Games, recall that Lanny Bassham accepted the gold medal with mixed emotions for the small bore, three position competition. With a score of 1162/2000. Bassham’s score matched his teammate, Margaret Murdock’s score of 1162/2000. Bassham figured both he and Murdock should receive gold or go into a shootoff, but the Olympic committee studied the targets and declared Bassham the winner of the gold. With her silver medal and a heavy heart, Murdock became the first woman ever to win in an Olympic shooting competition.

Many people, including Bassham, outwardly expressed their disapproval of Murdock receiving a silver medal rather than the gold. When the Olympic officials announced the three-position rifle medal winners, Bassham pulled Murdock onto the first-place platform and the two American shooters stood together in protest of the international method for breaking ties. Bassham sympathized with Murdock as she too deserved a gold medal. He understood her frustration since, in the 1972 Olympics, Bassham had to settle for a silver medal in a similar situation. He called the ruling giving only him the gold medal this time “rubbish.” According to Murdock, most shooters shared the belief that ties should be awarded with the same medals. Murdock stated that “We want the awards to be presented on the basis of skill, not one series of shots.” The United States Olympic Committee requested that two gold medals be presented to

84 Ibid.
86 Ibid.
Bassham and Murdock. Surprisingly the International Olympic Committee agreed that both shooters should have the gold. However, the International Shooting Union vetoed the request.87

Murdock participated in the game long enough to understand this decision ran deeper than just a rule book. She believed that prejudice may have entered the game this time. Murdock explained that “some officials are still bothered by seeing a woman do anything. They feel this is a man’s sport.”88 With those two sentences, Murdock accurately summarized one of the main reasons that women often faced discrimination and unfair treatment in shooting sports: their

87 Ibid.
presence threatened the idea that shooting was a man’s sport and women had no place behind the barrel. It appears that Bassham did not comment, at least publicly, on Murdock’s sex being a contributor to her downgraded medal win. However, he did make it known that he did not agree with the decision and that his teammate should have taken home a gold medal as well. “She had the same score I did and should have the same medal, not a silver one,” said Bassham. “As far as I am concerned, we tied, and I won the medal in a totally arbitrary manner.”

**Olympic Markswomen after Margaret Murdock**

Margaret Murdock’s success in the 1976 Olympic games blazed the trail for the creation of three separate women’s events at the 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles, California. Added to the Olympic program were women’s air rifle, three position rifle, and sport pistol competitions. Separate men’s and women’s air pistol events were added in the 1988 program and the first women’s shotgun event in double trap took place at the 1996 Olympic games in Atlanta, Georgia only to be cut from the sport listing after the 2004 Olympic games. In 2000, the Olympic Committee added women’s skeet and trap to the official lineup.

American air rifle shooter, Pat Spurgin, was the first markswoman in history to win an Olympic gold medal in women’s air rifle competition. An 18-year-old All-American shooter at Murray State College Team in Kentucky, she shot two points below the world record at the 1984 Olympic games. Elliott Almond reported Spurgin’s win in the *Los Angeles Times* and claimed that “although she [Spurgin] is still a teenager, she has the poise of someone older. For example, with only fifteen minutes left in her match Tuesday, she set her gun down to regain her composure after shooting a nine on her 35th shoot. She left herself twelve minutes to complete

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89 Ibid.
91 Ibid.
her final five shots.” This brief pause in Spurgin’s game proved successful as she scored four 10s and a nine which was good enough to beat silver medalist, Edith Gulfer of Italy, and Wu Xiaoxuan of China who earned bronze.

Another famous Olympic markswoman is three-time Olympian, Ruby Fox, who competed for the United States in women’s air and sport pistol. Fox set a record for herself at the 1984 Olympics where she shot 387 out of a possible 400 targets, beating her previous record of 386. In the sport pistol competition where she took the silver medal, Fox slashed the women’s competition with a 582 out of a possible 600. Today, Ruby Fox is heavily involved with the National Rifle Association and has manifested into a voice of advocacy for women to learn how to use firearms for both sport and self-defense. Fox was one of the first instructors for the “Refuse to Be a Victim” program designed by the NRA for women. The purpose of this program is to teach women to carry pistols for self-defense purposes. Aside from concealed carry advocacy, Ruby Fox served for three years as the coach of the Junior Pistol Team at the Olympic Training Center.

Kim Rhode Draws International Attention

Perhaps one of the most well-known female marksmen today is Kim Rhode. Most recognize her for her impressive feat of earning the title of six-time Olympic medal winner. Although Rhode became well-known after her latest gold win, that is not where her Olympic success began. She won her first Olympic gold medal in 1996 in shotgun shooting which was a relatively “unwatched” sport compared to other programs. Rhode competed in double trap and,
when she stood atop of the podium in Atlanta, the world noticed her, not only because of her gold medal, but for her youth. Rhode started her senior year of high school shortly after the Olympic games were over in 1996. Rhode became officially the youngest female gold medalist in the history of Olympic shooting. Twenty-four years later, Rhode emerged into an even greater spotlight. She took home bronze in 2000, gold in 2004, silver in 2008, a gold in 2012 and a bronze in 2016.

Figure 15: Six-time Olympian, Kim Rhode. Source: Winchester.com

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Conclusion

It took seventy-two years from the start of the modern Olympic games for the International Olympic Committee to allow women to compete on the shooting program. It took seventy-eight years from the start of the modern Olympic games for the first American woman to compete on the U.S. Olympic Shooting team despite her long track record for championship wins in shooting competitions across the United States and the globe. Olympic female athletes faced obstacles and challenges that simply did not exist for their male competitors. Male leaders, sport officials, journalists, reporters, and even fellow athletes devalued, sexualized, and mocked female athletes and often ignored their impressive athleticism in favor of their looks, lifestyle, or occupation in American society.

Tennis star and advocate Billie Jean King faced harsh ridicule leading up to her most famous match against Bobby Riggs in 1973. The “Battle of the Sexes” fostered a new way of thinking about female athletes and provided a victorious triumph that undoubtably encouraged the Title IX legislation into the limelight. Without women like King, or the passage of the Title IX education amendment, professional female marksmen would not have experienced the collegiate levels of opportunity that so often led them to the Olympic Games. Today, many colleges and universities have competitive shooting as a sport which provides a valuable steppingstone from high school level competition to a more serious and intense competitive sporting opportunity.

Originally, female Olympians struggled to even gain access to compete in the Olympic Games. Once on the program, many of them experienced the unfair, sexist publicity by reporters that appeared in newspapers and media stations. Male journalists seemed to care more about a woman’s figure, beauty, or hair color than their record-breaking athletic achievements. The
founder of the Olympic Games at Athens in 1896, Pierre de Coubertin, fought against the admission of women into the Olympic Games for over thirty years. According to Allen Guttmann, “it was not that Coubertin was wholly opposed to women’s sports, it was just that he disapproved of women’s involvement in public competitions, ‘for the spectators who gathered for such competitions don’t show up to look at sports.’”97 Unfortunately, even almost a century later, Coubertin’s comment about the true motive of female sports spectators is often still true. Female marksmen endured judgements that were often based upon gendered beliefs and the fact that many men viewed shooting as a masculine activity that was inappropriate for women. The repercussions of this gendered way of thinking remains visible today in some small sectors of society and in Olympic competitions.

Margaret Thompson Murdock championed the way for markswomen to compete in the Olympic Games and, through her great success, many women followed in her footsteps to even greater accomplishments for women in shooting sports. Although not every Olympic markswoman was mentioned in this work, their efforts and significance should not be overlooked or ignored. Information on other female shooters and their incredible accomplishments in marksmanship is housed at the USA Shooting Association and appears in their official hall of fame.98 Some of these women include Launi Meili who won a gold medal at the 1992 Olympic Games, Ruby Fox who won a silver medal at the 1984 Olympic Games and numerous national and world championships in Women’s Air Pistol, and Pat Spurgin who won a gold medal in the 1984 Olympic Games and several other championships.99

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98 Visit: https://www.usashooting.org/about/alumni-association/hall-of-fame
99 Ibid.
CHAPTER 6
Conclusion

“Men didn’t like having a woman beat them.”

-Margaret Thompson Murdock

The above quote from Margaret Murdock from an interview in 2006 remains a true statement. Many American sports enthusiasts are pleasantly surprised when a female athlete defeats a male counterpart. Female victory and success are still surrounded with an aura of taboo that is often used to make insulting and backhanded comments towards men. Comments such as “You got beat by a girl,” “You’re going to let a girl beat you?” “You play like a girl” do not exist as compliments for men; rather, they serve to belittle a man by comparing him to what, in comparison, is a lesser individual, a woman. Gender inequality is woven deep within the roots of American society and sporting culture in this country. Gender unfairness has no geographical, cultural, or religious boundaries. The female sex, throughout history, has continually been oppressed, sexualized, and severely underestimated. The gendered hierarchy that existed and, in some ways remains, in the United States has had a long-lasting impact on the course of sporting culture and, more specifically, on the progress of American women in shooting sports.

Female marksmen faced unique challenges and barriers that male shooters did not experience since most people in early American society viewed shooting as a masculine pastime and sport. Many of these gendered views can be explained through studies from historians such as Joan W. Scott, Nancy Cott, Anthony Rotundo, Linda J. Borish, and Allen Guttmann. These scholars developed various methods of utilizing gender as an analytical tool to study American

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1 Eileen L. McDonagh and Laura Pappano, Playing With the Boys: Why Separate Is Not Equal in Sports (NY: Oxford University Press, 2009), 12.
history and culture. Applying these gendered methods of study to shooting sports allows a more complete history of the sport to emerge in which women finally become part of the narrative.

The beginning of professional female marksmanship began in the latter half of the 19th century with the rise in popular culture surrounding the American West. With remarkable and unusual talent, Annie Oakley gained popularity in American society, and, by the end of her life, it would have been difficult to find an American who did recognize her name. Annie Oakley’s shooting career actually kicked the doors of opportunity wide open for women to participate in shooting sport and activities. After Oakley, women like Lillian Smith and Calamity Jane continued to wow American audiences with their impressive shooting abilities by performing in exciting shows as their main avenue of their shooting career.

Despite the popularity and undisputed talent of women like Oakley, many preconceived gender barriers stood in her way as she sought a profitable career as a professional markswoman. Male show owners and journalists had concerns about too much female involvement in Wild West shows such as the physical limitations of the female body, exposing women to the loud and violent nature of the shows, and the appropriate costumes that the women performers should wear. Despite the gender limitations that existed, early professional markswomen helped the American public get used to seeing women holding a firearm. As a result, women shooting guns became less scandalous, showing American women that they need not be afraid of the power of a firearm. Annie Oakley advocated for and taught women how to shoot not only for sport, but also to protect their families. Images of women like Annie Oakley, Lillian Smith, and Calamity Jane flooded American media and, as a result, many Americans got used to seeing women operate firearms. The success of these first female marksmen sparked the true beginning of women in
competitive shooting sports. However, these women needed to balance their femininity with participating in a male dominated sport.

Annie Oakley could walk the line between maintaining her femininity while participating in the masculine sport of shooting. It took a woman of Oakley’s conservative nature to convince Americans that women could participate in shooting sports and that their femininity would not be overtaken by the masculine nature of shooting. Through Oakley’s success, health and physical fitness experts of the time began to advocate for female participation in shooting sports. Dr. Dudley A. Sargent believed that female bodies and minds could outlast the male in any extreme condition and that women’s bodies had characteristics that better suited them for shooting sports and operating firearms. Arguments like Dr. Dudley Sargent’s challenged most prevailing viewpoints on female bodies at the time and likely altered the way many people perceived the physical capabilities of women. Of course, Dr. Sargent’s analysis also likely angered many people since it went against traditional gendered ideas of the female prowess. Regardless of reader’s responses to his work, Dr. Sargent got people thinking and forming their own opinions on female ability that, later, would be challenged or proven.

In the early 20th century, women began making progress in sports equality and participation. Recall Peter P. Carney’s observation about female participation in the Grand American Trap Shoot. He stated, “Women are demanding their place alongside of the men every day, and while some days things don’t break so well for them they eventually land.”\(^2\) In many ways, Carney’s prediction proved correct. As time continued, more women became interested in shooting sports and these women insisted they should have the opportunities and experiences to

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excel in their sport professionally. It is likely that men across the United States felt a lack of excitement, or even outright distain, about women progressing in their opportunities in society and sports. Works by Sargent and Carney altered the ways male journalists, sports writers, and reporters spoke of female athletes and the ways they covered them in the media.

Over the years, women interested in shooting sports pressed on to receive training and coaching from family members, friends, and, occasionally, a professional female marksman. Annie Oakley served as a shooting coach after she retired from the traveling shows towards the latter half of her life. She trained young girls and women to operate firearms and become comfortable around them. Oakley believed women needed to learn to shoot to protect the home and family but also believed that women could make stellar marksmen. Oakley’s advocacy for female shooters spurred on her legacy which likely encouraged future generations to keep the momentum for markswomen.

Eventually, female marksmen experienced an exciting new opportunity in 1968 when the Olympic Committee decided to allow women to participate in the Olympic shooting program. Although the first American markswoman did not compete until 1976, this marked a significant improvement in the history of women in competitive shooting sports. As the first American woman to compete in Olympic shooting, Margaret Murdock made a significant impact on the future of the sport for women by pioneering a new professional path for female marksmen. Murdock stood firm against prevailing gendered mindsets and traditions in American society and challenged preconceived notions about her sex through her remarkable shooting abilities.

Murdock did not experience this inequality alone. Regardless of the sport, female athletes across the country experienced the same type of slanderous comments about their physical appearance, their perceived athletic limitations as women, and their appropriate role, according
to society, as women. Sexist and inappropriate comments alone do not represent nor explain the deep-rooted historic inequality between male and female athletes. Rather, such comments serve as verbal evidence to what stirred in the hearts and minds of the male dominated sports enterprise. What Americans had internalized about gender stereotypes and the separation between men and women’s cultural participation in sports could be found in media coverage, family dynamics, occupations, religions, education, leisure time activities, and much more. Often, unspoken rules and expectations existed for women that did not exist for men and, when broken, backlash erupted, and gender inequality reared its head.

Despite the obstacles and inequality professional female marksmen faced, they eventually prevailed and reached Olympic status which broke down major barriers based on their sex. Although, even today, women athletes face uneven spectator numbers and ratings. Gender inequality remains still relevant today, but it is not found so directly on the surface as it once existed. Women continue to face sexism, unequal treatment by media, and often unequal pay for their sport compared to men in athletics. The issue of pay inequality has deeper roots since much of the reason for this is a lack of spectators and viewers at female sporting events. The American public, in many ways, continues to view female sports as a less interesting version of male sports in which women underperform, appear too “manly” or muscular, or are simply not interesting or attractive enough to watch.

Understanding the overall impact of gender on the history of women in competitive shooting sports proved valuable because sport is both a social and cultural process in which social constructions of masculinity and femininity play a significant role. This historical study provides yet another example of how female athletes, regardless of the sport, had to continuously prove their athleticism to create a professional athletic career for themselves, or even to carve the
path for the women centuries after them. Additionally, the study of gender through this topic provides more evidence of the traditions established for men and women in sporting history early in the United States. Although this study does not provide an encompassing history of all women who participated in precision sports, it does mark the beginning of a topic that must be further explored. Scholarship on the history of women in competitive shooting sports is sparse and deserves further study into other groups of women beyond the American starting point. Women of indigenous backgrounds, African American women, and immigrant women should all be points of interest for further study about women in shooting sports. In the mid-1800s, American women, like Annie Oakley, stole the spotlight as the first professional markswoman and that is where this study began. That, however, does not mean other women of diverse backgrounds did not shoot competitively in their own way within different cultures in the United States or internationally. Additionally, other factors such as geography, ethnicity, religion, economic status, and social class undoubtedly had a large impact on women in competitive shooting sports.

This history of shooting sports is, generally, unexplored and warrants new scholarship that can incorporate women, of all backgrounds, to the narrative. Just as women have benefitted from the Title IX Education Amendment fifty years ago, their successors emerge today taking aim at their shooting careers by pursuing Olympic dreams and aspirations in shooting sports.
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