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Overcoming Adversity: Violet Cambridge and the Women's Amateur Athletics Association in Inter-War Britain.

Dave Day

During the interwar years, the female body was a central focus of modernity and the topic of debate in a period that witnessed an expansion in women's sports participation.¹ Feminine identity was not only changing but fracturing into multiple constructions² with women's participation in exercise and sport often 'determined more by age, employment, and marital status than social class'.³ Teenage girls, in particular, were subjected to 'attempts by the government, schools, employers and youth organisations to construct and regulate their bodies', initiatives that hinged on the perceived importance of their futures as mothers, wives and wage earners.⁴ As their participation expanded, so notions about the female body as inherently weak were increasingly challenged.⁵ The long-held view was that women had a finite amount of energy that should be saved for motherhood, and that physical exercise for girls was a threat to female fertility,⁶ but ideas emerging from eugenicist and imperial ideology suggested that there was a feminine duty 'to be healthy and fit in view of their role as race mothers'. Both discourses defined women in terms of their biological reproductive function.⁷ In 1922, some biologists were suggesting that a new type of human being, neither male nor female, was likely to develop from the involvement of women in masculine sports.⁸ Two years later, Alfred Page described 'all strenuous sports are the enemies of womanly charm and grace'. He could imagine a 'thick-boned ugly woman' taking part in games like a man and he referred to the 'horrible, ungainly poses' adopted by the athletic girl.⁹ For supporters of female participation, although their anatomy and physiology were similar in many respects, the basic function of men and women was totally different and minor differences in their nervous, skeletal and muscular systems were all necessary adjuncts of the 'great work of parturition'. The task was to find sports that helped develop health and avoid those 'wholly unsuitable for the feminine organism, which is more delicate and should conserve its energy for the great work before it'.¹⁰ In 1925, a Medical Sub-Commission of the Olympic Congress on the 'Participation of Women' suggested that a woman's 'special functions' made it necessary that she should not do anything to injure her special organization so her sports should be carefully chosen. The conditions for women in competition and practice must be reduced considerably from those arranged for men and medical tests were necessary both before and during training. Any sports not fit for women, such as boxing, wrestling, rugby, and probably football, must be avoided, while every nation should introduce clothing regulations to prevent 'regrettable exhibitions'.¹¹

Given these debates, it is little surprise that attempts to establish women's track and field during the 1920s met with several setbacks and it took several strong, resourceful, and committed women to overcome male resistance to the point that women's athletics was accepted internationally by the time of the 1936 Olympic Games. Prominent among these women was Frenchwoman Alice Milliat.¹² She was well educated and fluent in several languages, and after being widowed quite quickly she never remarried leaving her free of family responsibilities and able to focus on advancing women's sports. In March 1921, female representatives from France, Great Britain, Italy, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland competed in an international athletics meeting in Monte Carlo, inaugurated by Milliat, the success of which stimulated the formation of the Fédération Sportive Féminine Internationale (FSFI) on October 31, 1921.¹³ At its first meeting, FSFI started planning for a four-year cycle of Women's Olympic Games, which began in Paris in 1922, when five nations, including a small, enthusiastic band of 'pretty' American girls, took part in a programme of eleven events, including a 1000 metres.¹⁴ Further Games,¹⁵ took place in Gothenburg in 1926, Prague in 1930, and London in 1934,¹⁶ after which the FSFI slowly disappeared from the athletic scene.¹⁷

English athletes competed abroad before a national organisation, the Women's Amateur Athletic Association, was formed in 1922. In 1921, a seven-woman squad competed at Monte Carlo,¹⁸ and an English team beat a French team in Paris in October, the day before the FSFI was formed.¹⁹ Sophie Elliott-Lynn later recalled that she and Major Marchant of the Polytechnic had established the WAAA. An active athlete, holding the high jump world record at 4 feet 10½ inches, as well as a publicist for women's athletics,²⁰ Sophie, whose father was

convicted of her mother's murder and committed to a lunatic asylum in 1898, was a fascinating individual and her life course illustrates the opportunities opening up to women in the inter-war period.²¹ In the 1914-1918 War, she was a despatch rider for the War Office and served in France in the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) before returning to her university studies.²² In the 1920s, she was involved with WAAA administration,²³ and by 1925 she was the only female member of London Aero Club,²⁴ she was appearing on radio talking on 'Athletics for Women', and she was involved in the scientific testing of female athletes.²⁵ She competed in the Women's World Games in 1926, the first year she 'looped the loop' in public.²⁶ After her husband died in 1927,²⁷ Sophie married Sir James Heath, forty years her senior, applied for naturalisation in America and pursued a flying career.²⁸ By 1929, her marriage had been dissolved and she married for a third time.²⁹ After suffering a plane crash, the severity of her injuries caused long term behavioural changes leading to alcoholism, court cases for drunkenness, and imprisonment. She died by falling from a tram when drunk in 1939, leaving only £204 despite once having earned £10,000 a year in commercial aviation.³⁰

In October 1923, another advocate for female athletics, Mrs. Violet Cambridge, was appointed Hon. Secretary of the WAAA,³¹ and a year later she noted that, 'Women athletes have been tremendously on the increase during the last three years'. The association had been formed to 'look after the interests of the girls and to prevent them being exploited' and no team went anywhere unless accompanied by a chaperone'. The WAAA embraced all classes, 'from University undergraduates to employees of retail and wholesale houses, shops and factories'. London Olympiad had a membership hundreds strong, as did the Middlesex Ladies' Club, and both clubs had junior sections which allowed members to join at 17.³² Middlesex Ladies Club (MLC) had been formed in 1923 by, among others, Sophie Elliott-Lynn,³³ to promote 'The advancement of women's athletics'.³⁴ In the 1920s. the club was stable in terms of its administration, with President Violet Cambridge, Hon. Sec. E.H. Knowles, and other officers and committee members being ever present.³⁵ The club used indoor facilities for physical and technical training and developed its headquarters at Horsenden Farm in Perivale, the base for their regular afternoon cross-country runs, which were always followed by tea and a social, including table-tennis tournaments and musical evenings.³⁶ Club members in 1925 included six current internationals, Misses Birchenhough, Hull, Lane, Palmer, and Streater and Mrs Elliott Lynn,³⁷ and members took an innovative approach to athletics, including the filming of runs,³⁸ promoting Britain's first major inter-club competition,³⁹ and in 1926, with the help of 'two well-known persons in the medical world', participating in scientific testing.⁴⁰ Members competed extensively throughout the 'flat' seasons,⁴¹ and reflections on the 1928 track season suggested that club performances had exceeded expectations. Membership had increased and a fine group of youngsters recruited, who 'with proper care and tuition would make worthy successors to the club's leading athletes'. Field events were becoming more popular and road walking had been introduced.⁴²

In the tradition of amateur athletics, the tone of many of the reports emphasized the social nature of members' involvement. In October 1926, for example, members 'journeyed down to General and Mrs. Hoate Nairne's estate at Turville, near Henley, and had a run over three miles of glorious country, and despite a sharp wind a thoroughly enjoyable time was the result. Tea was served in a marquee in the grounds and after a stroll round the gardens, we retired to the drawing room for music etc. and we were all sorry when it was time to mount our charabanc and get back to Henley. Owing to having cut the time very fine, we were unable to partake of the supper which had been arranged for us by our hosts'.⁴³ The club's annual dinner and prize giving was an important opportunity for engaging with influential supporters from the sporting world and the British aristocracy. The success of the club and its profile within the athletic community was enhanced by the contacts it established and maintained with the leading male administrators of the period, many of whom became patrons or vice-presidents of the club and regularly attended club social events, annual general meetings and competitive events. The annual dinner in 1929, for example, was attended by representatives of the British Olympic Association, the athletic Press, and National Governing bodies of sport, who were addressed by several speakers including club President, Violet Cambridge, now Mrs Gordon Wall.⁴⁴

Through her work with the WAAA and Middlesex Ladies, Violet had a significant influence on the development of women's athletics during the inter-war years, although athletics was only one chapter in a life story that demonstrates how some women used their athletic involvement to facilitate their social advancement. Violet Maude Hibberd was born on 24 January 1892 to unmarried mother Susan Hibberd and she had an unsettled early life. In 1901, her mother was living as the wife of William George Neal, editor and proprietor of the *Marine Engineer* newspaper,⁴⁵ whose actual wife of thirty years accused him in court of leaving her and 'misconducting' himself with another woman. She was granted a judicial separation and maintenance for their eight children,⁴⁶ and when Neal was taken to court for embezzlement in 1906, he claimed his manager had run off with the books.⁴⁷ In 1911, nineteen-year-old Violet was described as an 'artist',⁴⁸ and two years later she married chartered secretary Daniel Cambridge.⁴⁹ They had a son William in 1913 and a daughter Susan Mary in 1916 who was subsequently strangled by Violet in an act of infanticide attributed to puerperal insanity ('post-natal depression') exacerbated by war trauma.⁵⁰ Violet apparently suffered from terror induced by Zeppelins, at the mention of which she 'exhibited extreme signs of apprehension and terror and burst into tears'.⁵¹ Understanding of, and dealing with, puerperal insanity was relatively enlightened and there was general agreement that in its acute form it was characterized by behaviour described as 'highly excitable', 'elated', 'irritable', 'furious madness' or 'wildly incoherent, raving and very difficult to control'.⁵² All mothers from all social classes were seen as being susceptible,⁵³ and the consensus was that only 'savage peoples' could drop their babies without effort or danger. 'Civilized' women could not be expected to bear the stress of labour unaided, so postnatal morbidity was something to be expected.⁵⁴ Although Violet was found guilty, she was not considered responsible⁵⁵ and she was subsequently released from Holloway after her recovery.⁵⁶ In 1927, Violet filed for divorce, alleging that her husband had frequently committed adultery with unknown women, with the decree absolute taking effect in 1928.⁵⁷ Violet subsequently married Leslie Edmond Gordon-Wall, formerly of the Grenadier Guards and then the editor of an international publication, in July 1929 with MLC wishing them 'every prosperity in their coming years'.⁵⁸

Working Life

By 1918, Violet was the Assistant Controller to Selfridges, and then she opened and managed a beauty shop with over 80 staff in Bond Street in March 1926, with the 1939 register recording her as the 'Manager of Elizabeth Arden and a 'beauty specialist''.⁵⁹ Violet regarded beauty culture as a branch of physical culture and considered that most women, from all classes, could be made more beautiful.⁶⁰ This transition between athletics and beauty reflected a discourse that emerged from the turn of the century which positioned fitness and health as a prerequisite to beauty. Health and beauty were not seen as contradictory aims, and models of exercise that encouraged the development of a healthy, graceful and beautiful body, such as the Women's League of Health and Beauty, were popular during the 1930s.⁶¹ Violet combined her interest in athletics with her career as a 'beauty specialist' throughout her life and she was one of three judges engaged by the *Daily Mirror* to find the winner of their athletic beauty competition in 1924.⁶² In 1926, Violet, 'famous athlete and beauty specialist' argued that moderate dancing and athletics did not harm the legs. She went on, 'Twenty years ago men never saw a woman's legs; now, when they see them, they grumble.'⁶³

Public Life

Contributing to the debate in 1923 surrounding the Early Closing Association's demand to make Summer Time statutory between April and October, Violet, representing the WAAA, emphasized the recreative advantage to working girls and pointed out that there were more girls working in the shops than there were farmers.⁶⁴ At the inaugural meeting of the National Playing Field Association in July 1925 at London's Albert Hall, Violet, who was a founder member appointed to represent women athletes, spoke to the meeting along with several distinguished male sports personalities.⁶⁵ As a member of the Women's Employment Federation, Violet spoke to them in 1936 about the openings for women in the beauty business, a serious profession which no one under 25 should enter and not without definite training. It was 'not a dumping ground for unmanageable daughters who could do nothing except look lovely'.⁶⁶ When war broke out in 1939, Violet 'did her bit'. In 1940, she was

advertising in *The Times* as the chair of the 'Bond Street buy a fighter Fund' and in 1942 she gave a talk on 'Austerity and Make-up' to the BBC Home Services. Violet was a member of the Westminster WRVS Mobile Canteen and was in uniform on the day of a disaster at Wellington Barracks in which she and her husband died in June 1944 after a flying bomb destroyed the Guards Chapel during a parade.⁶⁷

Athletics Administrator and Women's Advocate

A keen sportswoman, Violet enjoyed skiing and canoeing, she was a member of Middlesex LAC and wrote many articles on alpine sports. In her work with the WAAA and Middlesex Ladies she mixed with all the leading officials from the BOA, the AAA, and other National Governing Bodies. In 1927, for example, the WARA wrote to Violet to welcome her as a vice-president if she would consent to become one.⁶⁸ As president of Middlesex Ladies', she chaired AGMs and regularly attended club events such as the cross country runs and dances as well as presiding over the annual dinner, and members often expressed their appreciation of the way she had assisted the club on numerous occasions, the club being 'fortunate in having such a hard-working president'.⁶⁹ As WAAA Secretary Violet took responsibility for promoting and defending women's athletics. Debates still raged about women's sporting participation in 1924, with opponents arguing that sportswomen ruined their figures, losing grace in the process. In response, Violet contended that notable girl athletes compared very favourably in beauty and feminine charms with girls who preferred to take their exercise in ballrooms. Athletics did no physical harm and it was better for a girl to take part in a cross-country run on a Saturday afternoon after business rather than wander the streets.⁷⁰ In December 1923, the BBC appointed seven individuals from different female constituencies, including Violet as a representative of women's sport, onto a Women's Advisory Committee to offer guidance on its Women's Hour programme,⁷¹ and Violet subsequently appeared regularly on the radio giving talks on various aspects of being an athletics organizer.⁷²

Internal Divisions

The WAAA was 'extremely keen' that 'our girls' should live up to the best principles of amateur sport 'in all its aspects' and Violet constantly reinforced that the WAAA was organized along strict amateur lines and was doing all it could to encourage the 'true sporting spirit'.⁷³ A decision to ban a proposed boxing match between two women in 1926, was applauded by both Sophie, then a vice-president of the WAAA, who said, 'The object of all sport is to increase the grace, and the beauty, and the health of women, and boxing is antagonistic to all these three', and Violet thought there was 'nothing but revulsion in the idea of two women fighting'.⁷⁴ The two women, however, did not agree on everything and Violet's resignation as WAAA Secretary in 1925 was at least partially motivated by her disapproval of events such as shot putting, which she considered harmful and unfeminine. There were many ways in which 'feminine rivalry can be decided without taking up contests of this sort in imitation of masculine athletics'.⁷⁵

In contrast, Sophie, and presumably other members of the WAAA, took a different attitude. Sophie argued that field events, where poise and balance and the art of doing the right thing just at the right second counted for more than strength and sinew, were far less tiring than running, and they accommodated those 'strong, beautifully-built girls who are not, and never can be, first-class runners'.⁷⁶ Although the WAAA advised that shot putting should be barred for young girls, lightening the shot would be the answer⁷⁷ since the event, which was especially good for women in that it encouraged a reaching-up movement, could then not be accused of exerting the slightest strain. Shot putting encouraged close co-operation of the muscles and co-ordination of movement in that the shot putter must not leave a circle of 7 feet in diameter till the throw is finished making her gradually work up from a static position to movement which will ensure the giving forth of the maximum power in this space. The world's record for the best throws of either hand added together was held by Mme V. Morris with 68 feet 10¾ inches and that for one hand by the same lady with 37 feet 9 inches. She was a woman of medium height but very powerfully built, extremely jolly and never seen without a laugh on her face.⁷⁸ When England beat Germany at Birmingham, by 51 points to 49, in July 1930, the poor shot putting standards of the English

team were reinforced when the German winner threw a world record 43ft 6in, the second placed German threw over 42 feet and Florence Birchenough, who was third, threw 26ft 8in.⁷⁹

Resignation from the WAAA did not prevent Violet, who was acting as the editor of the *British Olympic Journal* in 1926, from continuing to speak out in support of women's athletics.⁸⁰ In 1927, after three women (out of a field of 81) collapsed during the first cross-country championships some doctors suggested that the sport was so strenuous it should not be attempted by women. Sir W. Arbuthnot Lane, president of the New Health Society, suggested that women had a 'tremendous physical handicap which men do not have to bear' and that their participation in such sports was 'absurd'. In response, Professor Leonard Hill took the view that with proper training women could compete effectively and Violet, who had been one of the championship judges, vigorously defended women's participation in cross-country.⁸¹ In 1928, she took charge of the British female competitors at the Amsterdam Games⁸² and in 1929 she was a member of the Council of the British Olympic Association. Violet's was involved with the modernizing of the athletic costume throughout the 1920s. In 1924, she designed a new standard outfit consisting of a white tunic, short-sleeved and low necked, reaching midway between waist and knee, woven black knickers which came to within three inches of the knee, and spiked or running shoes. Women would not wear stockings and would wear a cloak or long coat when not actually competing,⁸³ a practice Sophie observed was not borne out of prudery but from experience and athletic knowledge.⁸⁴ Violet subsequently designed the Olympic Female uniform for Amsterdam in 1928,⁸⁵ and she was one of only four British women who appeared in the parade wearing the uniform of Panama hat, blue blazers and skirts of wool taffeta.⁸⁶ She was also instrumental in amending the regulations for athletic dress two years later when, despite the opposition of Lord Decies, a new rule was introduced that allowed girl athletes to wear less dress. Competitors were now required to wear 'a loose tunic or blouse, having sleeves at least an inch long. Dark shorts will be worn reaching at least half-way down the thigh to the knee. A track suit or wrap must be worn from the dressing-room to the point of competition and between the events'. Lord Decies argued that sleeveless tunics and attenuated shorts were not in good taste, but Violet thoroughly approved of the new rule. It was time that English athletes realised their appearance on the track was 'deplorably behind that of girls in other countries'.⁸⁷

Conclusion

By the time of Violet's death, women had claimed a niche position in British athletics. Jack Crump, Hon Manager British Olympic Athletics Team paid tribute to the British women athletes in his post-Helsinki report to the BOA, stating that 'among the very great successes which the 1952 Olympic track and field event achieved, women's athletics played an important part'.⁸⁸ This change in attitudes had been driven by remarkable women like Milliat, Sophie and Violet who climbed the social ladder adroitly playing by the rules of the social world around them. Involvement in athletics and the way in which they used the social contacts they generated as a vehicle for personal advancement is an excellent example of how social capital can be used in stimulating social mobility. In many ways their experiences mirrored those of some of their disadvantaged male counterparts but there was a major difference since it was men controlled and dictated the rules of the game leaving women with little opportunity to initiate change. Male administrators continued to find ways of marginalizing and controlling female participation after 1945 and women would not run more than 200 metres at the Olympics again until 1960.⁸⁹ The IOC General Session minutes from their 1953 meeting declared that women should only participate in 'suitable' sports, and, in the same year the *New York Times* observed that 'There's just nothing feminine or enchanting about a girl with beads of perspiration on her alabaster brow, the result of grotesque contortions in events totally unsuited to female architecture'.⁹⁰ None of which would have impressed Sophie, Violet, or the members of the Middlesex Ladies' Club.

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- ¹³ Mary H. Leigh and Thérèse M. Bonin The Pioneering Role of Madame Alice Milliat and the FSFI in Establishing International Track and Field Competition for Women *Journal of Sport History*, 4 no.1 1977, 74-77.
- ¹⁴ Sophie C. Elliott-Lynn. *Athletics for Women and Girls: How to be an Athlete and Why*. London: Robert Scott 1925, xiv.
- ¹⁵ Thierry Terret 'From Alice Milliat to Marie-Thérèse Eyquem: Revisiting Women's Sport in France (1920s–1960s)' *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 27: 7 2010 pp. 1154-1172.
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- ⁴⁹ BMD. January 11 1913. Daniel Cecil Joseph Cambridge (31) Chartered Secretary son of William Henry Cambridge, Draughtsman, to Violet Maude Neal (20), 8 Packhurst Road, Sutton, daughter of William George Neal, Editor.
- ⁵⁰ *Hartlepool Northern Daily Mail*, Thursday 6 July 1916, 3.
- ⁵¹ Andrea Peterson. *Self-portraits: Subjectivity in the Works of Vera Brittain*; Report of Francis Edward Forward, Medical Officer, 23 June 1916, CRIM 1 161/4 cited in Susan R. Grayzel. *Women's Identities at War: Gender, Motherhood, and Politics in Britain*. 1999, 47-48, 255.
- ⁵² I Loudon. Puerperal insanity in the 19th century, *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* 81 February 1988, 76-79, 76, 78.
- ⁵³ Hilary Marland. Disappointment and desolation: women, doctors and interpretations of puerperal insanity in the nineteenth century. *History of Psychiatry* 2003 14(3): 303–320, 303; Hilary Marland Dangerous Motherhood: Insanity and Childbirth in Victorian Britain. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.
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- ⁵⁵ H.M. Prison. Holloway, June 23 1916. Memorandum to Director of Public Prosecutions in case of Rex v. Violet Maud Cambridge.
- ⁵⁶ *Richmond and Twickenham Times*. Alleged Child Murder. 3 June 1916 page 3; *Richmond and Twickenham Times*. Alleged Child Murder. Richmond Mother Committed for Trial. 10 June 1916, 5; *Hartlepool Northern Daily Mail*, Thursday 06 July 1916, 3; CRIM 1_161_4 COURT PROCEEDINGS National Archives.
- ⁵⁷ Divorce February 8 1927 J 77_2381 DIVORCE COURT National Archives. In the High Court of Justice Probate Divorce and Admiralty Division Divorce. Decree Absolute. 13 February 1928 referring to decree made in case of Cambridge V.M. against Cambridge D.C.J on 31 May 1927.
- ⁵⁸ Woman Athlete to Marry. *Courier and Advertiser (Dundee, Scotland)*, Wednesday, June 5, 1929, 12; Middlesex Ladies' A.C. *West London Observer*, Friday 2 August 1929, 2; *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, Saturday 3 August 1929, 40.
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- ⁶⁰ Culture of Beauty. Lessons in Developing Good Looks. *Portsmouth Evening News*, Friday 12 March 1926, 6.
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