

## Jewish + Female = Athlete: Exhibition and Historical Perspective

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**American Jewish History Biennial Scholars’ Conference,  
Charleston, SC, June 6, 2006**

The important story of Jewish women in American sport remains scarcely explored in American Jewish history, women's and gender history, sport history, and popular culture. American Jewish women, as participants, pioneers, and professionals in sports and sports-related career, have shaped and expanded sporting opportunities for American Jewish women and girls and other groups in America. The historical reality rather than the stereotypes about Jewish women in sport reveals the substantial roles of Jewish women in American sport over time. As Edna R. Seligman reported in the American Hebrew 1917 that although, "The field of athletics is one of the last that the Jewish woman has entered" yet in the last year or two they have come to the front in this field too."<sup>1</sup> In the exploration of Jewish life, historians of American Jewish women will gain knowledge of Jewish experiences in athletics with this “*Jewish + Female = Athlete*” exhibition in conjunction with the Jewish + Female = Athlete calendar for the Jewish New Year. This companion traveling exhibition and calendar are the culmination of a two-year project by the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute (HBI), a research center at Brandeis University that develops fresh ways of thinking about Jews and gender worldwide.

Hadassah-Brandeis Institute’s “*Jewish + Female = Athlete*” exhibition and calendar provide visual and historical evidence about the achievements and roles of Jewish women in sport. When people discovered that the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute of Brandeis University was producing a calendar and accompanying exhibition about significant Jewish women in sports, many were surprised to learn there were enough athletes to fill an entire year – and then some. In past, HBI produced calendars’ on Jewish women rabbis, scientists, and leaders to demonstrate nontraditional gender roles, but this is the first exhibition and it has generated notice with a wide audience given interest in sport by many men and women in American culture.

In fact, due to the number of important Jewish women shaping sport in the United States and in other countries, some Jewish women athletes did not make the “cut” for the calendar/exhibition in this first calendar produced. However, because of the increase in

contemporary athletes and the significance of historical athletes in my research additional Jewish women athletes are to be included in the 2006-2007 Jewish New Year calendar, for this third year of the project. The 2006-07 calendar features 33 athletes increased from 27 in the initial calendar and the exhibition features the core Jewish Female Athletes to highlight the range of sports and countries in which Jewish women competed and excelled in sport. In addition, historical Jewish sportswomen, some beyond the space available for the exhibition, appear in this pamphlet and timeline about *Jewish Women and Sports*, especially the highlights in Jewish women's sport history with a focus on American Jewish women in sport.

The "Jewish + Female = Athlete: Portraits of Strength from around the World" profiles 14 current sport heroines and 13 sportswomen from the past in lively photography in a stirring tribute to the accomplishments and various ways Jewish women have influenced sport. The images of female athletes portrayed provide a sharp contrast with that stereotype — Zhanna Pintusevich-Block, a sprinter from Ukraine, in mid-stride, arms pumping, and Jillian Schwartz, a pole-vaulter from the United States, soaring over the bar, nothing but blue sky above her muscular body. "When we're looking at these women, we're looking at their bodies, for sure," said Shulamit Reinharz, HBI Founding Director. "It's also important for us that you look beyond the picture and see people who have accomplished so much, as humans who have a history, using their minds to figure out what's required to achieve success, using their emotions to go the extra mile." <sup>2</sup>

While many Jews are hard-pressed to name a prominent Jewish female athlete, the reality is that Jewish women can be credited with many sports milestones, and the record of their accomplishments continues to grow. "Jewish + Female = Athlete" encourages a new understanding of feminine strength and beauty while exploring the rich, often-overlooked history of Jewish women in sports. The calendar and exhibition bring to light both the achievements made by individual athletes and the pivotal role Jewish women have made in the advancement of women's sport – from basketball to marathons.

The exhibition features Israel's professional tennis star, Anna Smashnova (appropriate name for a tennis player). It also explores the "herstory" of Angela Buxton, the only Jewish woman in history to win at Wimbledon. Buxton overcame pervasive anti-Semitism in the tennis

world. She teamed with the black player Althea Gibson, winning the women's doubles championships at Wimbledon and the French Open in 1956. Buxton went on to become the co-founder of the Israel Tennis Centres.

Featured in the exhibition and "cover girls" for the 2005-2006 calendar are Sada and Emily Jacobson, sisters and saber fencers from Atlanta, Ga., who both competed in the 2004 Olympics. Sada Jacobson, who attended Yale University, won a bronze medal, and each of the sisters have each won NCAA championships. In the photograph the two sisters are shown fencing in an open field. "You can't win just by being the strongest and the fastest. You also have to be the smartest," said Emily Jacobson, in a quote accompanying the picture.<sup>3</sup>

In my work as historical advisor for HBI on the Jewish + Female + Athletes projects I detailed that Jewish women not only played but were often leaders in their sports. The Jewish + Female = Athlete exhibition/calendar adds to the historical documentation about Jewish women seeking opportunities in sport and society. Especially for the material on female historical athletes in American Jewish history, the timeline shows some of these impressive feats of the athletes, and also some will appear in the new calendar.

One of the most compelling sportswomen of the past is that of Charlotte "Eppie" Epstein, who founded the famed New York Women's Swimming Association in 1917 and led the way for the recognition of U.S. women's swimming as an Olympic sport in 1920. Her swimming champions, known as "Eppie swimmers," set 51 world records and won 30 national relay championships. She battled for women's suffrage staging "suffrage swim races" with her teammates, as well as battling for emancipation in women's sports campaigning for bathing suit reform, distance swims, and other competitive events. Eppie, too, served as the team leader for Olympian Gertrude Ederle, who learned to swim at Eppie's Women's Swimming Association, and the first woman to swim the English Channel in 1926, smashing the men's time by over two hours. On Epstein's leadership and major role in women's swimming, Gertrude Ederle stated, that Epstein and her Women's Swimming Association were "The Cradle of American Champions, Women Champions ... Swim Champions."<sup>4</sup> Eppie represents a legacy of the success of American women's swimmers in national and international competitions, including, such Jewish swimmers as Marilyn Ramenofsky, Olympic medalist and Maccabi champion, in the timeline and recently retired Olympic champion Dara Torres, both in the new calendar.

Ramenofsky, truly is a Jewish female scholar-athlete, now as a Professor in the Department of Biology at University of Washington. In communicating with Ramenofsky about my research on American Jewish women and swimming, she remarked, “I find this so fascinating to think of these women so long ago caught up in a sport I loved and still love. I can’t imagine doing what they did without the expert coaching and guidance I was so lucky to have. They were true pioneers.” Ramenofsky added, “Preserving history is so important keeping our lives in true perspective.”<sup>5</sup> Yet in historical perspective about American Jews and sport, “Many people know the story of American Jewish athlete Marty Glickman, a sprinter, being denied the opportunity to race at the 1936 Olympics in Berlin,” Borish said. “In 1936, Eppy resigned as assistant manager of the U.S. Women’s Olympic Swim Team and from the U.S. Olympic Committee in protest of Nazi Germany’s persecution of Jews.”<sup>6</sup>

Track and field engaged the athletic ability of Jewish females at Jewish Ys and the Olympics. In the 1920s Jewish American Lillian Copeland attended the University of Southern California, and became an outstanding track and field athlete winning nine national titles and setting world records in the javelin throw and the discus toss. Copeland competed for the American women’s Olympic team in the summer 1928 Olympic Games earning a silver medal in the discus. At the 1932 Los Angeles Olympic Games in the discus throw Copeland won the gold medal, setting another world record.<sup>7</sup> Another track and field star at the 1935 Maccabiah Sybil Koff contributed to American victories. Sybil (Syd) Koff Cooper of New York was a star at the first Maccabiah in 1932 at nineteen years old and in the 1935 Maccabiah Koff excelled again; Koff won seven gold medals in these first two Maccabiads. Track and field stars Copeland and Koff, in the 1935 Maccabiad led the American team to win “the Manischewitz Trophy, symbolic of supremacy in track and field events.”<sup>8</sup> Koff in 1936 boycotted the Nazi Olympics although she qualified for the track team with other Jewish athletes.<sup>9</sup>

“What we discovered as we worked on this project was that the challenge would not be finding enough athletes worthy of recognition, but deciding which ones we would have to leave out,” said Shulamit Reinharz, HBI’s founding director. “We hope to help expand the understanding of Jewish women’s lives, interests, and accomplishments and encourage the Jewish community to rethink traditional gender definitions.”

This exhibition along with the calendar adds to the historical record about Jewish women seeking opportunities in sport and society. The history of American Jewish women in sport

reveals that American Jewish sportswomen have a significant place in American culture and history, in local communities and in communities of sportswomen in national and international contexts.

Featured athletes include:

- Charlotte “Eppie” Epstein, who fought to have women’s swimming recognized as an Olympic sport and guided a long line of champion swimmers from her swimming association and in national swimming.
- Senda Berenson, a physical education teacher at Smith College who wrote the rules for the game of women’s basketball.
- Judo star Yael Arad, who won Israel’s first Olympic medal.
- Limor Mizrachi, the first Israeli to play pro basketball in the United States.
- Fencer Sada Jacobson and marathoner Deena Drossin Kastor, who last summer in Athens became the first Americans to win Olympic medals in their sports in more than two decades.

Athletes included in “Jewish + Female = Athlete”:

#### Contemporary Athletes

Name	Country	Sport
Zhanna Pintusevich-Block	Ukraine	Track and Field (sprint)
Myriam Fox-Jerusalmi	France	Kayaking (slalom)
Emily and Sada Jacobson	USA	Fencing
Deena Kastor	USA	Track and Field (marathon)
Keren Leibovitch	Israel	Swimming
Sara DeCosta-Hayes	USA	Ice Hockey
Daniela Yael Krukower	Argentina	Judo
Anna Smashnova	Israel	Tennis
Nicole Freedman	USA	Cycling
Tal Karp	Australia	Soccer
Hagit Oz	Israel	Kitesurfing
Limor Mizrachi	Israel	Basketball
Jillian Schwartz	USA	Track and Field (pole vault)

#### Historical Athletes

Name	Country	Sport
Irena Kirszenstein-Szewinska	Poland	Track and Field (sprint)
Eva Szekely	Hungary	Swimming

Ildiko Ujlaki-Rejto	Hungary	Fencing
Fanny “Bobbie” Rosenfeld	Canada	Track and Field
Judith Deutsch	Austria	Swimming
Carina Benninga	Holland	Field Hockey
Yael Arad	Israel	Judo
Angela Buxton	Great Britain	Tennis
Lillian Copeland	USA	Track and Field
Thelma “Tiby” Eisen	USA	Baseball
Charlotte “Eppy” Epstein	USA	Swimming
Senda Berenson	USA	Basketball
Agnes Keleti	Hungary	Gymnastics

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1. Edna R. Seligman, “Versatility of Jewish Women,” *American Hebrew*, 102, (14 September 1917), 526.
  2. Richard Asinof, “History of Jewish Female Athletes celebrated in brand new calendar,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, Boston, September 12, 2005.
  3. Asinof, “History of Jewish Female Athletes celebrated in brand new calendar,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, Boston, September 12, 2005.
  4. Linda J. Borish, “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 International Journal of the History of Sport*, Vol. 21, 2 (March 2004): 197-235.
  5. Personal Correspondence, Email, Linda Borish and Marilyn Ramenofsky, February 2, 2006.
  6. Borish, quoted in Asinof, “History of Jewish Female Athletes celebrated in brand new calendar,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*.
  7. Linda J. Borish, "Lillian Copeland," in The Encyclopedia of Ethnic Sports in the United States, ed. George B. Kirsch, 110; "Lillian Copeland, 59, Dies; Won Olympic Medal in 1932," The New York Times, July 8, 1964, 35; “Miss Copeland Sets Mark in Shot-Put,” The New York Times, August 13, 1928, 12: 4.
  8. Linda J. Borish, “Women, Sports, and American Jewish Identity in the Late Nineteenth and Early

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Twentieth Centuries,” book chapter in *With God on their Side: Sport in the Service of Religion*, Tara Magdalinski and Timothy J.L. Chandler, Eds. (London: Routledge Press, 2002), pp. 71-98. See also

Miss Koff Scores in Jewish Games,” New York Times (April 1, 1932); “Jewish Sportsmen on Parade,” 94; “Jewish Who’s Who – 1935, Sports,” *American Hebrew*, 192, 193.

9. “Sybil Cooper, Track Star, 85,” Forward (May 29, 1998): 10; Steve Cooper, “The Story of Sybille – True and Complete,” Sybille Gallery Newsletter, (Premiere Issue Summer 1998): 1-2; “Miss Koff Scores in Jewish Games,” New York Times (April 1, 1932); Lou E. Cohen, “Sport Chats: Syd Koff-She Suddenly Became An Athlete and Rose to Champion,” Brooklyn Daily Eagle (August 22, 1934), articles and news clippings courtesy of Steve Cooper.