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# Women Make History:

## Stories we should have learned in school



***"Margaret Abbott possesses a natural talent for the game...[She will become] one of the best women golfers in the United States."***

**The Inter-Ocean Newspaper, 1898**

**A Shout Out** to Chris R. for forwarding a link to Alice Look's, [Remarkable Women](#), on the subject of this issue, Margaret Ives Abbott.

### **Margaret Ives Abbott: First American Woman to Win Olympic Gold**

At the Summer [Olympics](#) in Paris, 1900, 22 year-old golfer Margaret Ives Abbott became the first American woman to win the Gold Medal. Although she continued to play amateur golf throughout her life, she died not [knowing](#) of her groundbreaking achievement.

[Born](#) in 1878 to a wealthy merchant family living in India, Abbott was a child when her father died. Her mother moved the family to Boston and then to Chicago where Abbott's mother, an author, became the literary editor for the *Chicago Herald*.



Margaret Abbott, c. 1898



At the time, women were [barred](#) from most sports because it was feared that rigorous physical activity would harm their reproductive organs and interfere with their ability to have children. In addition, corsets and other restrictive clothing severely limited a woman's ability to move freely. Golf, however, was considered acceptable for upper-class women since it didn't require vigorous movement and women could remain modestly dressed. Women, however, were required to have a male escort at golf clubs and on the course.

Family friend, [Charles Blair MacDonald](#), introduced Abbott and her mother to the sport. The first U.S. Amateur Golf Champion and renowned architect of golf courses, MacDonald instructed both women. According to Abbott's biographer, Dr. Paula Welch, at 5 feet, 11 inches tall, Abbott was a natural who "could hit the long ball." Soon, Abbott was competing in and winning local tournaments and she had the extremely low handicap of only two.



1900 Olympic Games. Photo: USGA Museum

Accompanied by her mother, Abbott moved to Paris in 1899 to study art with Auguste Rodin and Edgar Degas. She also continued to play golf.

In 1900, Paris became the host city for the six-month long World's Fair or Exposition which included the Olympic Games as one of the attractions. These Games marked only the second time in modern history that the games were held. [According](#) to historian Bill Mallon, the competitions were regarded more as a "sideshow" or an "afterthought" to the grander World's Fair. Olympic events occurred over a period of several months, without the festivities and fanfare that we associate with the Olympics today.



Portrait by Charles Gibson, c. 1903

This all contributed to confusion about Abbott's gold medal. Apparently, when she and other women entered the golf tournament, they believed they were participating in a World's Fair event, not the Olympics. The error was compounded by the *Chicago Herald's* inaccurate reporting about Abbott's win.

The 1900 Games also marked the first time that women were allowed to compete in the Olympics, although their participation was restricted to "ladylike" sports such as golf, tennis, and equestrian events.

Abbott's tournament took place Oct. 3, outside of Paris at the Compiègne Golf Club. Both she and her mother were among the 10 American and French women who played. To this day, Abbott and her mother remain the only mother-daughter pair to have competed in the same event at the same time.

Abbott [scored](#) a winning 47 on the nine-hole course with distances ranging between 68 to 230 yards. Her mother scored a 65 tying for seventh place. Two other Americans, Polly Whittier and Daria Pratt, won the Silver and the Bronze.

After the 1900 Paris Games, women's golf was removed as an Olympic event until 2016, making Abbott the reigning champion for more than 100 years.



Abbott [attributed](#) her success to the French women wearing high heels and tight skirts, inhibiting their ability to play well. Unlike the medals awarded today, she received an antique porcelain bowl. In 1902, she also won the French Femina Cup, the forerunner of the French Women's Championship.

Abbott married soon after her return to the U.S. in 1902 and settled into domestic life. She continued to enjoy golf, but when she [died](#) in 1955 at the age of 76, she was unaware of having made history.

Abbott's story remained unknown until the 1980s when [Paula Welch](#), then a student of sports history, noticed Abbott's name on a plaque at the U.S. Olympic Committee's headquarters. Welch inquired about Abbott, but couldn't find additional information. She first published an account about Abbott in a 1982 issue of *The Olympian*, but continued her [research](#) for the next 10 years. Eventually, Welch located Abbott's son who had no idea that his mother was the first American woman to win Olympic gold.

Abbott's story began to trickle out mostly in history publications but in 2018, [The New York Times](#) included her in its "Overlooked" series. In 2023 Abbott was inducted into the Illinois Golf Hall of Fame and with the 2024 return of the summer games to Paris, news organizations picked up her story.

Abbott may not have known about her achievement, but her accomplishment opened doors for others. Since 1900, female athletes have continued to push through questions about their physical and mental stamina. By the end of the recent 2024 Paris Olympics, American women had [won](#) twenty-six gold medals—57 percent of Team USA's 126 medals.

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**Ask a Friend:** Similar to Paula Welch, have you ever come across the name of a woman credited with an achievement, but been unable to find information about her?

**Ask Yourself:** What would I be willing to undertake to uncover a such a story?

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[Sharon Spaulding](#) discovered the hidden story of



Mary Ware Dennett, suffragist, sex education and reproductive rights activist, when she married one of Dennett's great-grandsons. Today, she curates the family's archives.

Sharon has spent twelve years researching first-wave feminism, the battle for reproductive rights, and Mary's life in the context of politics and social mores from 1914–1947. She received a grant from Radcliffe College's Schlesinger Library to support her research and the creation of a manuscript. Her essays about Dennett have appeared in [Ms. Magazine](#), [Smithsonian](#), and [New Hampshire Magazine](#).

Sharon is a popular speaker at women's and civic groups, and also book clubs. She is available to speak on the forgotten stories of remarkable women and the history of the suffrage and reproductive rights movements of the early 20th century. [Schedule](#) a talk with your group!

Sharon lives near Salt Lake City with her husband and two dogs, Gus and Hank.

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Help reclaim the lives of remarkable women. Please share the newsletter and invite others to subscribe. Follow me on social media. [www.SharonSpaulding.com](http://www.SharonSpaulding.com)

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