



# women's history of physical fitness

**It is only recently** that physical fitness has become a part of many women's daily regimen. In fact, for many years, it was erroneously believed that active physical labor would harm a woman's reproductive system! One wonders how the male physicians (and they were only men then) came up with that? Fortunately, that point of view has clearly changed; women are now encouraged to exercise so as to reap the mental and physical benefits it provides. In keeping with the theme of physical fitness, we are delighted to present some important women's accomplishments in athleticism. This month, we profile swimmer Gertrude Ederle, marathoner Joan Benoit, Iditarod champion Libby Riddles, and soccer player Mia Hamm.



The first woman to swim across the English Channel, **Gertrude Ederle** had already won a gold medal in the 400 meter freestyle relay and bronze medals in the 100 meter and 400 meter freestyle races in the 1924 Paris Olympics. She conceived of the idea of swimming across the English Channel in 1925, but did not succeed in her first attempt as the water was too rough. In 1926, she was successful. Although not everyone believed that women could swim the Channel, her time of 14 hours, 31 minutes for the 35-mile distance broke the

previous record (held by a man) by almost two hours. In addition, her time stood as the women's record for the next 35 years. Her endurance, athletic strength and skill were at the time quite unexpected for a woman. Sadly, as a result of her Channel swim, she suffered back injuries and permanent hearing impairment.

Ederle had begun swimming as a young child; she began competing as a teenager. Over her lifetime, she achieved twenty-nine U.S. and world swimming records. After her active swimming days were over, she took up a career in fashion design. She also developed breakthrough techniques for teaching people with hearing impairments how to swim. Ederle's swimming accomplishments were a significant milestone; they expanded opportunities for women in athletics. She has been inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame.

Another noteworthy expansion of opportunities for women in athletics was the addition of the marathon as an event for women in the 1984 Summer Olympics. **Joan Benoit**, from the U.S., was the first gold medalist in that event. She began running at the high school that she attended in Maine when she was recovering from a broken leg and wanted to get back into shape. She found that she liked it. She was an All-American in cross country and track at Bowdoin College and while in college she won the Boston Marathon in 1979. This win set an American and course record.

When Benoit won the Boston Marathon in 1983, she broke the world record. She was 27 years old when she won her 1984 Olympic gold medal. After her Olympic medal, she set a world record when she won the Chicago Marathon in 1985. Benoit is still running marathons, in the age 50 and over class, as a way of demonstrating her commitment to life-long fitness. In 2009, she was inducted into the Olympic Hall of Fame.

Another significant athletic accomplishment for women occurred the year after Be-







noit won her gold medal in the Olympics. In 1985 **Libby Riddles** became the first woman to win the Iditarod Sled Dog Race in Alaska. “LIBBY DID IT!” was the newspaper headline heralding her win of the incredibly grueling, and often deadly, 1,049-mile race. She was named the 1985 Sportswoman of the Year by the Women’s Sports Foundation. In addition, Riddles was honored by the Iditarod veterinarians with the 1985 Leonhard Seppala Humanitarian Award for

her exceptional, humane treatment of her dogs.

Riddles has been a musher since 1976. She has also written three books. Today Riddles breeds dogs, still competes in races and serves as a motivational speaker. Shortly after Riddles won, she raised money to help pay the expenses of supporting a racing team of dogs by selling tee shirts with the statement: ALASKA: Where men are men and women win the Iditarod.

From swimming, to running, to sled dog racing, to soccer, women have clearly demonstrated the love of sport and the competitive spirit to win! **Mia Hamm** is cited as the world’s best all-around women’s soccer player, anchored by her contributions to the U.S. women’s soccer team’s gold medal in the 1996 Olympics. Hamm was the youngest player ever to play for the U.S. National Team (at age 15). She retired from competitive soccer in 2004 after 17 years, 2 World Championships, and 2 Olympic Gold medals. Her records in appearances and goals, MVP awards and overall performance put her at the top of the sport. She has scored more international goals than any player of soccer – male or female. Hamm has been inducted into the Soccer Hall of Fame as well as the Alabama and Texas Sports Halls of Fame.



During Hamm's team soccer years, she always worked to motivate her colleagues. There are many many quotes that have been attributed to her that demonstrate her incredible push to succeed. There are two that have been quite encouraging to us. The first is when Hamm said:

*I've worked too hard and too long to let anything stand in the way of my goals.*

*I will not let my team down and I will not let myself down.*

Another Hamm quote is even more direct. She has said:

*The person who said that winning isn't everything, never won anything.*

We both marvel and are inspired by these women's accomplishments. They all personify what we have continued to stress—that the keys to personal success are passion, determination, and persistence. YOU can achieve your physical fitness and other goals as well, by keeping in mind these three personality traits. And, remember to take your 10,000 steps today; keep yourself in good physical shape!



**Charlotte S. Waisman**, PhD, co-author of *Her Story: A Timeline of the Women Who Changed America* (HarperCollins), is a national champion and advocate for women as a professor and keynote speaker. As an executive coach, Waisman coauthored *50 Activities for Developing Leaders* and *The Leadership Training Activity Book*. She is a principal with a consulting company specializing in leadership and workforce excellence initiatives.

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