



ALUMNI PROFILE

WHO IS ABBY HOFFMAN?

Abby Hoffman's entry into the world of competitive sports came at the age of nine. Cutting her hair made it possible for her to join a boys' hockey team as Ab in 1956. Her team did so well that they made it to the playoffs where players were required to produce their birth certificates. When it was discovered that Ab was really Abigail, the league was outraged. This was to be her first experience of the limitations placed on females who want to participate in sports.

While her team was pleased to have her, Abby gave up organized hockey after her team lost. She then tried other sports including swimming before she found her place in track and field. The 800-metre event became her specialty as a middle-distance runner and from the age of 14, she competed in track events including four Olympic Games in 1964, 1968, 1972 and 1976. The 1976 Games, where she was chosen flag bearer for the Canadian team, proved to be her last competitive run.

Hoffman competed in the 880-yard event at the 1962 and 1966 Commonwealth Games. She won a gold medal in 1966.

Also a competitor at the World Student Games and the Maccabiah Games, she won gold for the 800-metre race at the 1971 Pan American Games as well as bronze for the 1967 and 1975 Games, for the 800-metre and the 1500-metre distances.

The early resistance from hockey officials was not to be the last time Abby Hoffman encountered opposition in her sports career. Already an Olympic veteran, while a student and athlete in training, she was thrown out of Hart House at the University of Toronto when she tried to use its indoor track, the only one in the province. Such events may have fuelled her determination regarding the right of women to participate in sports.

Abby Hoffman taught political studies at the University of Guelph for three years before joining the Ontario government as a sports consultant. She later became executive secretary of the Ontario Human Rights Commission and later supervisor of sports services for Ontario. In July 1981 she became the first woman to serve as director general of Sport Canada since the post was created in 1961. While no one questioned her athletic credentials, memories of her remark at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City that "the trouble with Canadian amateur sport is that it's not run by professionals" led some to wonder how she would handle the political demands of the position. This proved not to be a problem as she gained government support for funding athletes' training with a near doubling of the agency's budget and the creation of the Best Ever program for elite athletes. Hoffman wrote a fitness column for *Chatelaine* from 1980 to 1982 and eventually left Sport Canada for the Women's Health Bureau. Today she is still with Health Canada, as a senior advisor.

Hoffman's struggle for women's role in sports was paralleled by her concern that athletes were not properly represented on athletic decision-making bodies especially when it came to team selection. In 1985 she became one of the first two women elected to the executive council of the International Amateur Athletic Federation (IAAF) and was awarded the IAAF medal in 1998. Recognition of her work in sport and in the volunteer sector led to her being granted the Order of Canada in 1982.

Source: Library and Archives Canada.