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'For Those Who Like the Life Nothing Could Be Better': The Games Mistress in 1920s Britain †

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Abstract: During the Edwardian period, women's physical education colleges were graduating significant numbers of gymnastics and games teachers, the demand for whom had increased rapidly following an expansion in the playing of team sports in girls' schools. Much of the subsequent development of women's physical activity in the 1920s can be credited to the passion and commitment of these women, who were not only key role models within the school setting but who also coached and organised women's sport at club, regional, and national level. Given that the education sector operated a 'marriage bar' until 1944, the critical juncture in their careers was the decision to marry or not, and several of these women decided to remain single. This, and the strong bonds they often formed with other practitioners, has resulted in a great deal of unsubstantiated speculation about their private lives. Combining evidence from a variety of primary sources, including newspapers, census returns, college records, literature, girls' annuals, specialist periodicals, photographs, and local and family histories, this paper illuminates some of the biographies and experiences of these women and questions the stereotypical image of the games mistress as an unfulfilled spinster.

Keywords: games mistress; Britain; inter-war; sporting girl; new woman; coaching; spinster

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1. Introduction

While sports coaching has almost exclusively been framed in the historiography as being a man's world, the critical part played by the female physical educator and coach, the 'Games Mistress', particularly in the first half of the twentieth century, is a reminder that women have never been truly absent from the coaching narrative. Systematic exercise programmes had become an important feature of the curriculum at many British girls' schools by the Edwardian period and women's physical education colleges were graduating significant numbers of gymnastics and games teachers, in response, at least in part, to the demand generated by an expansion in the playing of team sports by girls and women. Headmistresses often placed greater importance upon the character of their games mistress than any other member of staff because she interacted with pupils in a more informal setting than the classroom, enabling a connection between them that was reflected in the literature of the period, as when schoolgirls referred to their 'ripping games mistress' (Sherriff and Bartlett 1930).

The working environments and practices of some of these women in the 1920s are explored in this paper in order to illustrate the roles that these coaches played, to consider the impact that they made, and to address some of the stereotypes that have been associated with their private lives. Combining evidence from a broad spectrum of primary sources, including newspapers, the 1921 England and Wales census, the 1939 National Register, school and college records, literature, girls' annuals, specialist periodicals, local and family histories, and photographs, the author illuminates some of the biographies and experiences of the women who stimulated the development of sport and physical activity for girls, inside and outside of the school environment. The focus here is not on the national leaders, as they are relatively well covered in historiographies that chronicle the women involved

in setting up the Women's Cricket Association in 1926 (Threlfall-Sykes 2015; Nicholson 2018) and those who formed the first committee of the Netball Association in the same year (Oldfield 2017). This paper instead considers some of the more humdrum foot soldiers working as games mistresses who have rarely received recognition for the impact that they made on many women's lives.

To help in identifying the women working in this field in the 1920s, the paper incorporates a prosopographical methodology that draws on the data collected by the census enumerators in the 1921 census to analyse the characteristics of anyone who described themselves using the term 'Games Mistress'. It is pertinent at this point to remember that how individuals describe themselves says something about what they value about their lives and how they interpret what they do. While the formal job titles designated by their employers may have dictated the terminology that many of these women articulated there remained considerable fluidity in the self-descriptors that were used and not everyone who was, in reality, operating as a 'games mistress' described themselves as such. Dorothy Mary Last, for example, who was then employed by Middlesex County Council and working at the County School in Twickenham, hedged her bets by including both 'Instructress' and 'Teacher' in her self-description in the census.[1] The thirty-two-year-old, single teacher had been trained at the Physical Training College in Southport and her Teacher's Registration Council record details her continuous employment as a 'Teacher of Gymnastics and Games' in four different schools between 1908 and 1925.[2] In another time, and in another place, it is quite possible that she would have described herself as a 'Games Mistress'. Inevitably, therefore, although it provides some important clues as to the characteristics of this cohort, concentrating on the term 'games mistress', as recorded in the 1921 census, means only scratching the surface with respect to the numbers of women pursuing this line of work as a career after the end of the First World War.

2. The Inter-War Period

Harold Perkin described inter-war society as being in a 'transitional stage, a sort of halfway house in which remnants of Victorianism. . .co-existed with harbingers of the future' (Perkin 1989, p. 218), a vision of Britain in these years that applied to all the aspects of social, cultural, political, and economic life that affected women. The Education Act of 1918 raised the school leaving age to 14 and the Sex Disqualification Act of 1919 made it easier for women to go to university and then follow professional careers as teachers, nurses, and doctors, although it certainly did not end workplace discrimination. London County Council, for example, denied a pay award to female teachers on one occasion while granting it to men (Simmonds 2012, p. 298). Increasing numbers of middle-class women began to get jobs in the civil service, though these were mostly at clerical and administrative grades rather than the technical and professional jobs that were still dominated by men, and by the end of the 1920s about one third of British women over 15 worked outside the home, although only one tenth of married women were similarly employed. The civil service, the education sector and the new professions operated a 'marriage bar', which meant that women were pressured to resign their posts when they got married, a process supported by several male-led trade unions who were always concerned that women would be employed as cheap labour (Bingham 2004, p. 227; Anitha and Pearson 2013).

Throughout the 1920s the average age of first marriage among women never fell below 25 so paid work was a feature of their early years and young, single women aged between 18 and 24, made up over 45 per cent of the female workforce (Todd 2004, p. 84). In January 1923, there were 250,000 women and girls seeking work and nearly 180,000 were registered at the Labour Exchanges. Unemployment was especially prevalent among those not covered by the Unemployment Insurance Act of 1920, which provided for lower rates of unemployment benefit for women who, unlike men, were refused benefit if they refused to work in domestic service (Anitha and Pearson 2013). In the early 1920s there were retraining courses designed to convert ex-industrial workers into domestic servants because 'Many people have little patience with girls being out or work when there is room for them all in

domestic service but the raw factory hand with little or no experience of family home life is quite unfitted for such work without training'.[3] Domestic service remained the largest occupational group in 1931, accounting for 24.3 per cent of the young female workforce,[4] so it is little wonder that the 'sporting girl' looked around for alternative career opportunities more suited to her tastes.

3. Participating in Sport

The move to dismiss women workers from munitions began after the collapse of the Eastern Front at the end of 1917 (Bruley 1999, p. 60), and the 1919 Restoration of Pre-War Practices Act forced many women to give up their wartime employment, limiting their access to the sports they had become used to. Within a year of the Armistice almost 750,000 women had been forced out of work (Simmonds 2012, p. 298), and in the Spring of 1919 more than half a million women were registered as unemployed (Hargreaves 1994, p. 112). Having gone to work in a large factory at the start of the war, one munitionette admitted that she had been a bit of a 'weakling' who had not enjoyed her few games of tennis as a girl and that she had initially resisted playing football with her 'rough and rude' co-workers. Although she eventually quite enjoyed playing in a trial game, she found the game too brutal so she took up hockey and 'fell in love with it'. Having improved her fitness, she began playing tennis again in the summer and ended up 'acting as unofficial coach' to some of the other girls. She was missing her sport now that she had been 'demobilised' and asked whether there would still be provision for the 'physical recreation of woman' now that the sports facilities that had been provided by factories and workshops were no longer available.[5] *The Times* also made the point in 1922 that,

> . . .during the days of war services many women achieved a degree of good health that had not been experienced before. This happy change was also evidently related to the increased amount of exercise they were getting so that the idea of 'training to be fit' became established in the feminine mind. . .in consequence physical culture is becoming as widely prevalent among women as among men.[6]

During the 1920s there was a noticeable increase in the popularity of all kinds of sports played indoors and outdoors, stimulated by the foundation of the National Playing Fields Association in 1925 (Macdonald 2013, p. 269). More women were earning independent incomes and this, combined with a reduction in working hours, enabled new constituencies of women to participate. Large numbers of women from a variety of social backgrounds joined athletic, physical culture and fitness organisations while swimming, and outdoor pursuits such as camping, hiking, and cycling, boomed. These relatively affordable leisure activities were particularly popular among younger working-class women (Zweiniger-Bargielowska 2011, p. 301), but class dynamics, age, and marital status always exerted a powerful constraint on working class participation (Skillen 2012, pp. 750–51), which was generally limited to the involvement of 'respectable' working class women in fulltime employment between leaving school and getting married.[7] Particular activities remained beyond the reach of most working-class women, given that most participation occurred in private subscription-based clubs and that municipal provision in the UK was limited until 1937, restricting working-class women's access to golf courses, hockey pitches, and tennis courts.

While activities such as flying and car racing emerged for the very rich, and others such as horse racing and hunting continued, it was activities which could be played by the middle classes in the new suburbs, within easy reach of the home, such as golf and tennis, that increased most significantly. Participation in sports such as golf, tennis, and motor racing, was considered appropriate for 'ladies' because none of them involved physical contact, and they remained the preserve of affluent women who used the sports club as a safe social space in which women of equal social standing could meet and socialise. Hockey provided an opportunity to experience playing a team sport as well as socialising with one's peers, and, as with tennis, there was a substantial increase in both levels of active participation and levels of provision. The number of clubs, schools, and colleges

affiliated with the All-England Women's Hockey Association grew from 89 to 2100, while the 1830 clubs affiliated with the Lawn Tennis Association in 1926 increased to 2874 by 1938. The expansion in both tennis and hockey reflected their importance to the games tradition that had become a central feature of the curriculum of girls' schools. The 1919 Syllabus of Physical Education included suggestions about games, in 1921 the Board of Education's Chief Medical Officer wrote about the value of games in girls' secondary schools and in 1926 the Hadow Report stipulated that schools should be divided into primary and secondary at the age of 11, stated that girls should have the same freedom as boys to organise their own games and that new schools should have gymnasia and playing fields. In practice, though, and in contrast with the provision for games in many private schools, facilities in the state sector were generally limited, although small-sided games such as netball and rounders were always popular.[8]

4. The Games Mistress

There was general agreement in the newspapers throughout the 1920s that the position of 'games mistress' provided a 'well-paid attractive career, suitable for girls who have excelled in school games and gymnastics', and who were 'enamoured of an active out-of-door life'.[9] There were regular references to these games mistresses in one form or another. In 1924, a Miss Spear of Springfield, Entry Hill was advertising for a games mistress to coach girls in netball on Thursday afternoons.[10] Four years later a report on the Sheffield High School hockey team observed that they were making great strides under the coaching of Miss Bryant, the games mistress, who had played in the English team which had visited Australia a couple of seasons previously. They had a full list of fixtures, including games with schools in Sheffield, Rotherham, Leeds, and Huddersfield.[11] Pictures of games mistresses such as Miss Bryant appeared regularly with their teams in the newspapers (See examples in Figures 1 and 2).



TEMPLE SCHOOL HOCKEY TEAM.

Back row (left to right)—Misses Dorman (Games Mistress), Minnie Holt, Doris Saunders, Joan Hickman, Edith Crook, G. Fellowes, and Beryl Strong.

Front row—Misses O'Neil, Beryl Mead, Jean Hewitt (captain), Phyllis Wheeler, and Hilda Reeve.

Figure 1. *Bucks Herald*, 19 April 1929, 5.



The Team from Ballymena.—(Sitting) left to right—Misses Robinson, Cameron, Stevenson, Boal, and M'Elfatrick. (Standing)—Misses Stewart (Games Mistress), Houston, Ruddell, Allen, Andrews, Barbour, and Dunlop.

Figure 2. *Northern Whig*, 17 February 1925, 12.

Girls who viewed themselves as 'sporty' were often encouraged by a particularly enthusiastic physical education teacher who had access to good sports facilities and could nurture their talent (Macrae 2012, p. 768). When Patricia Hughesman, born in 1918 and an elite British squash and tennis player of the 1940s and 1950s, attended a private boarding school in Torquay in Devon, she was introduced to a range of sports, including cricket, hockey, netball, and tennis, and her games mistress, recognising her talent, played tennis with her every lunch break (van Someren and Wagg 2019, p. 18). In 1929, one observer noted that a leading English headmistress,

> . . .placed greater importance upon the character of her games mistress than upon the character of any other single member of her staff, because, while the other mistresses only handled girls in the classroom and at times when they were under a sort of automatic discipline, the games mistress had the children in their more spontaneous and unguarded moments; hers was the exceptional opportunity of helping them to play in a manner to show not merely proficiency in games, but character as well.[12]

The Games Mistress in the 1921 Census

The prosopographical method involves collecting data on a large group of individuals in order to identify the characteristics of a specific population, particularly one that has been previously hidden from history. In 1920, it was being reported that there were around 700 young women, 'well trained and scientifically equipped', earning a decent living in England and Scotland teaching games and gymnastics. Demand was growing throughout the Empire and opportunities were becoming available as organisers and inspectors working with government and local authorities.[13] Clearly, not all of these women described themselves as games mistresses if an analysis of the census returns a year later are anything to go by. Of the 89 women who used 'Games Mistress' in their self-description in the 1921 census, 5 referred to themselves as a 'Drill and Games Mistress', 42 as a 'Games Mistress', and 42 as a 'Gymnastic and Games Mistress' (Table 1).

Table 1. Women using the term 'Games Mistress' in 1921.[14]

Job Title	N	18–19	20–29	30–39	40+
Drill and Games Mistress	5	0	3	1	1
Games Mistress	42	2	33	7	0
Gymnastic and Games Mistress	42	0	33	9	0
	89	2	69	17	1

In terms of class origins, where the occupations of fathers could be identified they included clergymen, army officers, engineers, architects, and merchants, suggesting that the role of games mistress was seen as an acceptable career path for their daughters by a range of middle-class patriarchs. These women were operating around the country, and, while nearly half were working in London and the Southern Counties, 13 were based in Yorkshire. The majority were employed in private schools or in schools run by Local Education Authorities but, interestingly, Ellen Casey and Gwendoline Stevens were employed as games mistresses by the Stoke Park Colony, a home for 'mentally defective children' in Bristol, Fylgia Kennedy was working as gymnastic and games mistress for Clark's Shoe factory in Somerset, Elsie Johnson was games mistress for Bank W and T Avery's weighing machine company in Birmingham, and Hilda Hughes was gymnastic and games mistress for Reckitts Ltd., a long established cleaning products company in Yorkshire. Opportunities in paternalistic companies like these had existed since firms like Cadbury's had employed games and swimming mistresses in the late nineteenth century (Bromhead 2000; McCrone 1991).

With increasing employment opportunities and income, many young women took the decision to venture out on their own to live in rented accommodation and boarding houses in this period. A large number of this sample (28) were recorded as 'boarders' in the census while 13 were living in at their schools and 12 were noted as 'visitors'. Of those recorded as living at home, 13 of the households were headed by a father and 10 by a widowed mother. Nine women were heading up their own household and two were inmates in institutions. Not surprisingly, the ages were skewed heavily towards those in their twenties, but it is also evident from the numbers of women continuing to work in this field into their thirties that several individuals were approaching this role as a long-term career.

5. Working Lives

In February 1920, H.M.K. Nield observed that the work of the games mistress had developed since before the war and been given new impetus by an Education Act that required proper physical training to be given in all schools. The games mistress needed to be an intellectual woman with plenty of commonsense as well as physical strength, the sort of woman who could 'win' girls and exert a good all-round influence. She must have 'moral fitness' in order to develop character.[15] Others thought that a 'wise and sympathetic tact' was an essential factor in adequate supervision by the games mistress (*The Educational Times 1922* 1922, p. 382), who should have a genuine love of children, endless patience and, most important of all, the ability to enforce discipline, 'not so much by means of strict punishment as by means of strength of personality'. Good health was essential because the work during term time was often very tiring physically. In addition to taking gymnastic classes, giving remedial exercises where needed, organising the various school sports and 'coaching' the girls, she would probably also be required to be 'on duty' one or two nights in the week while the girls prepared their homework and to take the school 'crocodile' for the daily walk after breakfast.[16] She might also have been required to teach folk dancing and ballroom dancing as well as leading a Girl Guide troop.[17]

Formal training was important but expensive, with 1922 training fees costing 14 guineas a term and 33 guineas a term for accommodation, and Nield was disappointed that more scholarships were not being made available, presumably because some poorer young women were being prevented from entering the profession. By 1929, the fees at the better training colleges varied from about GBP 130 to GBP 165 per year.[18] Training courses covered dancing, swimming, fencing, gymnastics and remedial gymnastics, massage, first aid, physiology, pathology, hygiene, psychology, school conditions and child health, voice production, and games such as netball, cricket, lawn tennis, and lacrosse. The trained games mistress 'of the right temperament' was in demand at both private and public schools while there were also an increasing number of good posts available as organisers of physical training with local education authorities. The salary for a fully qualified games mistress was fixed by the Burnham Committee in 1922 with graduate salaries for assistant non-resident specialist teachers in London starting at GBP 375 per year and increasing annually by GBP 15 up to GBP 440. The non-graduate scale for those who had had three years' training started at GBP 210 per year and rose by GBP 12 10s a year up to a maximum of GBP 360.[19]

Contemporary reports on physical training for girls recommended not only a medical examination, but 'constant supervision by skilled and trained mistresses', although one observer argued in 1922 that girls really should be encouraged to regulate themselves because, upon leaving school, they would join clubs in order to continue playing their sport and were at that stage 'under no external control apart from their mothers' (*The Educational Times 1922* 1922, p. 396). Two years later Dr Catherine Chisholm reiterated this argument. While suggesting that communal organised games were particularly useful to girls, who 'tended to be more individualistic than boys', she felt that it was 'educationally better for the organisation of the games to be largely in the hands of the girls themselves', as it was in many boys' schools, rather than too much in the hands of the games mistress as it tended to be in some girls' schools. The good games mistress should keep a 'watching eye', but

allow the girls to 'get up the matches and arrange the games' (Chisholm 1925, pp. 38–39). This was a philosophy that penetrated some of the most prominent sporting girls' schools and in 1936 *The Queen Magazine* observed of St. Leonards that,

> Organised games are played for one and a half hours every afternoon, lacrosse and hockey in the winter and cricket in the summer. General coaching and superintendence is given by two games mistresses but the games are largely in the hands of the girls themselves, each house voting for its own captain and the captains being responsible for choosing and coaching their teams.[20]

As Jane Claydon has noted,[21] this was a sporting tradition that had been heavily influenced by Norah Strathairn and Olive Andrews, the two women who were pivotal to the continued development of the games tradition at St Leonards in the 1920s and whose lives and careers were typical of the experiences of private school games mistresses in the inter-war period (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Norah Strathairn (left) and Olive Andrews (reproduced with the permission of St Leonards School).

6. Norah Strathairn

Norah, whose father was Rector of Morrison's Academy, in Crieff, a co-ed boarding and day school in Perthshire, was born in 1890. She attended St Leonards from 1905 to 1910 and went to train at Dartford where, after gaining First Class Honours in hockey, lacrosse, and cricket, and First Class in gymnastics and teaching, Madame Bergman Österberg invited her to join her staff at the end of her two-year course, her position being variously described as assistant games coach and games tutor. She played in the first lacrosse international for Scotland in 1913 and in autumn 1917 Norah was appointed as gymnastics instructor at the Boys' Grammar School, Berkhamsted. Two years later, she was invited to return to St Leonards to take on the role of senior drill and games mistress. Norah was described as a motivating and successful teacher and a gifted games player, playing hockey for Scotland and cricket for the Women's Cricket Association (WCA). In 1929, Norah became housemistress of the Waiting House at St Leonards and in 1936 she was appointed housemistress of St Nicholas House. She remained in post until her retirement in 1951. After Norah died in 1963, two former captains of school who contributed to her obituary

in the *St. Leonards Gazette* observed that, in her work and personality, she had been 'an inspiration to us all'.

7. Olive Maud Andrews

Olive Andrews, whose father had attended Cambridge and was the organist at New Romney Church, was born in 1896. She entered Bedford Physical Training College in 1916 and her report graded her lacrosse and cricket as excellent, and swimming as good, as was her teaching, although her academic work was not very strong. On leaving Bedford she was appointed as assistant games and drill mistress at St Leonards, starting work in September 1918, on a salary of GBP 180 a year.[22] Olive and Norah became close friends and played international hockey and lacrosse together and were both involved with the Women's Cricket Association. Until Olive arrived at St Leonards, seventeen girls wishing to pursue a career teaching games and gymnastics had gone to train at Dartford by 1918, but Olive was considered a 'star' by the pupils and subsequent aspirants followed her to Bedford Physical Training College. Although she was reported as being a rather shy and secretive person, the girls admired Olive's prowess on the games field and the considerable number of informal photographs of Olive in the albums and House Books donated to the school museum at St Leonards highlights the significant following that she had amongst the girls. One pupil from the late 1930s recalled that she 'was a very good teacher and, unusually for that era, was very keen on bird watching. She was very thin and masculine. In cricket circles she was known as Bill' (Macpherson 2002). Olive became the Senior Games Mistress at St Leonards in 1929 at a salary of GBP 350 a year, after Norah was appointed a Housemistress.

Because they were trained specialists who taught and coached others, games mistresses often came under suspicion from their male counterparts as to whether or not they were really pure amateurs. However, as Joanne Halpin has argued, women physical education teachers earning their living from teaching or coaching sports like hockey in educational settings and clubs would never have been able to conform precisely to the men's strict interpretation of amateurism regarding paid coaching (Halpin 2019, pp. 81–82). In 1919, J.L. Low, Chairman of the Golf Rules Committee, questioned the amateur status of games mistresses in relation to golf, causing 'disquieting emotions in the breasts of lawn tennis, hockey and lacrosse players'. Leading woman golfer Miss May Leitch had come under particular scrutiny, but it was pointed out that she had never been paid for teaching golf. She had been a medical gymnast in Watford before the War and before that she had taught Swedish drill, lacrosse, and cricket, but never hockey, lawn tennis, or golf. She had been trained at Dartford and she was at that point part of the Military Massage Services as head masseuse at an orthopaedic hospital, so she was clearly regarded as an amateur according to any definition that might be employed. The general response to Low's comments in the press was supportive of the women and a secretary of one leading London golf club was quoted as saying he would unhesitatingly admit to membership of his club a games mistress who taught golf to schoolgirls in term time.[23] In contrast with those concerned about professionalism, one tennis commentator argued that, because of the generic nature of her training, the games mistress lacked the specialist expertise necessary to develop the sport. While tennis was included at almost all girls' schools, the instruction was left to the gym or games mistress who 'in nine cases out of ten could not hit a ball herself'.[24]

8. Spreading Their Wings

In 1929, one writer observed that one of the drawbacks of having a career as a games mistress was that 'retirement must come rather early in life' because younger women were always preferred and in any case the work was 'too hard for any but the young and strong'. It was suggested, however, that a successful physical training mistress could usually build up a second career in remedial gymnastics after retirement,[25] although some chose to take on one of the many managerial posts that were becoming available. In 1927, for example, the education committee of the Neath and Port Talbot boroughs appointed Miss M. Ceri

Hughes, the only daughter of the Rev. D. and Mrs. Hughes, as organiser of physical training. She had been trained at Anstey Physical Training College and after three years, 'in which she showed brilliant promise', she had been appointed first as gymnastic and games mistress at Edgehill College, Bideford, and then as senior gymnastic and games mistress at Arley Castle, near Bewdley. She was apparently an 'all-round sportswoman and a very capable equestrienne'.[26] In another example, Miss Margery Ann Smith, at that stage gymnastics and games mistress at the Bradford Belle Vue Girls' Secondary School, was appointed as organising instructress of physical training for Somerset in 1928 at a commencing salary of GBP 170 a year, rising by annual increments of GBP 10 to a maximum of GBP 210 a year.[27]

Several adventurous games mistresses chose to take advantage of opportunities abroad. The United States Women's Field Hockey Association invited English hockey coaches to help them in the early 1920s and a number of Dartford graduates travelled to America to teach physical education. Rita Surrell, who sailed back and forth from the USA to England almost every year, was teaching at a girls' boarding school, Ashley Hall School in Charleston, in 1922. Five years later she was the Health Director for the YMCA in Charleston. British games mistresses could be found all around the world in the 1920s, especially within the Empire. Olive Daniell was teaching at Woodhouse School, North Island, in New Zealand while Muriel Moir went to South Africa in 1921 and spent the rest of her career teaching at Wynberg School in Cape Town. Zoe Sanderson, who had been teaching in New Zealand, and Sheila Mitchell were in Toronto, Canada teaching at Haverford College, a girls' boarding school. Christina Booth, who had been at Dartford from 1912–1914, when Norah Strathairn was on the staff, also taught in Canada, at Bishops Strachan School in Toronto. A description of her from the time was fulsome in its praise,

> Miss Booth was the Games and Gym Mistress. She was English and had bronzy, red hair, parted in the middle and done in braids that were in a figure eight at the back of her head. You couldn't see any hairpins or bobby pins but I never saw her hair that was swept back in anything but perfect order. She was trim, she had gorgeous legs, she always had a tunic and a white shirt and black shoes that were some kind of soft leather with a rubber sole, just like a pair of pumps, instead of wearing a running shoe. She had tremendous influence, not only on the boarders but on the day girls.[28]

9. The Games Mistress in Literature

Admiration for the games mistress and her influence as a role model was reflected in the literature of the 1920s. In Angela Brazil's *The Luckiest Girl in the School*, published in 1922, the school games captain, Winona, wanted to study at a physical training college, and qualify to become a drill and games mistress, but this seemed to her to be as unattainable as taking a medical course or going to Girton or Newnham, given the training that would be necessary and the expense involved. Winona nevertheless worked hard to pass her college examinations and was rewarded for her efforts by her Aunt Harriet, who had been so impressed by her 'capacity and perseverance' and by her 'conduct in coaching your friend through all these weeks' that she offered to pay for her to go to college to qualify as a games mistress.[29] In another example from literature, recent school leavers 'were still at the stage of talking incessantly about the girls at school, and showing one another their letters, and making plans for going together to the next Old Girls' Reunion. It was all, still, tremendously important, especially the games-mistress—each of us had a "'crack" on her—and the hockey matches' (Delafield 1927, p. 257).

Not all of the literature that referred to the games mistress painted a particularly rosy picture, however. One character was described as having 'some mighty scheme of self-immolation' working as a games mistress, 'the worst-paid she could find'. At some 'monster day-school in London—in one of the desert parts that you see from the train, going to Scotland. She thinks the girls in those parts can't be getting half the games they should. So she must see to it. And, once she starts, she'll work there till she dies', that is,

unless she got married (Montague 1926, p. 171). In *The Mortimers: A Novel* by John Travers, published in 1922, the life of a games mistress was portrayed as a rather mundane existence from which marriage was the only escape,

> She. . .was to be content with a new hat at Easter, and the little dressmaker who would make up your own material for thirty shillings. She was to accept as adequate independence the small salary she earned as games mistress at a suburban school for girls. She was to know her aunt's friends and find them interesting. She was to. . .occasionally go up to London to see a matinee, or the Academy, as a lawful excitement; and, for change of air, spend a yearly fortnight by the sea at Hastings. If she did not spoil herself by two lines between her brows—wantonly caused by sheer discontent and temper—she would marry and settle down as 'a good wife' (Travers 1922, p. 71).

10. Personal Lives

Some references to the games mistress in the literature hinted about her attraction to the young females surrounding her. One author described a student teacher who spent 'seven weeks in a succession of adorations', and how she was 'happy to gaze across the table at the games mistress, young also, mannerless, a monstrous bugbear to Miss Nightingale's respectable pieties'.[30] Noel Coward had a character recall that her 'sex experience to date had consisted of little more than an unavowed and beautiful passion for Miss Hilton Smith, our games mistress at St. Mary's, Plymouth, and a few daring kisses from a young man at a hunt ball in Bodmin' (Coward 1939, p. 282). It was a concern that did not go unnoticed in the training colleges and, when revisiting Shiela Fletcher's 1984 text, *Women First*, in 2016 Patricia Vertinsky noted that 'college instructors tended to discourage their students from fraternizing or spending long periods of time together in pairs' in an effort to avoid suspicions about lesbianism that 'enveloped physical educators in a shroud of oppressive silence' (Vertinsky 2016, pp. 3–4).

It is a silence that has been perpetuated on occasions by those who come after. In the mid-1970s, Olive Andrews always wore a skirt suit with a tie, and she had a very close friendship with Vera M.M. Cox, an older lady, a hockey international who also played cricket for the WCA (Macpherson 2002). Olive and Vera shared a house in St Andrews after Vera gave up being chair of the WCA in 1964 and when Jane Claydon went to Olive's house following her death in order to collect St Leonards related material, she came across letters which indicate that Vera and Olive had had a relationship. However, as is so often the case following a death, these letters were thrown out by an older lady who had been asked to help with the management of Olive's possessions.[31] The result of this kind of culling of what is often regarded by survivors of sensitive material is that we can rarely be sure about the nature of some of the close relationships that saw women sharing a house or moving schools together over the course of several years. When we see on the 1939 register, for example, that three single women, Ame E Woodall, 60, retired kindergarten teacher; Kathleen G W Scott, 52, retired gymnastic and games teacher; and Jessie Littlewood, 43, kindergarten teacher were living together at Mouth Mill Cottage, Clovelly, Bideford, in Devon, we might make assumptions about their relationships, based purely on conjecture and with no concrete evidence, that actually have no substance at all. Even within conventional marriage there was an increasing emphasis being placed upon 'companionship' in this period (Bingham 2004, p. 231), and Claire Langhamer argues that there were distinct differences in understandings of love across the mid-twentieth century, with Mass Observers who had reached maturity before 1939 offering definitions of love which foregrounded respect and affection, and downgraded sex (Langhamer 2012, p. 282).

The games mistress community may have been an attractive environment for many gay women in this period, but the deep nature of female friendship and close companionship associated with the later lives of many games mistresses may or may not have had any physical component. It might instead, have represented an essentially pragmatic arrangement in that the sharing of meagre financial resources would have made life easier,

not least in the hiring of domestic help for example. Avowedly heterosexual couples and coaches are never subjected to the same intense scrutiny about their physical relationships and, at the end of day, researchers need to consider carefully to what extent they need to explore this aspect of these women's lives. All that the author and the reader really need to know is that these games mistresses, collectively operating as a body of professional coaches, fundamentally altered the nature of female sport between the wars and laid the groundwork for the acceptance of women as athletes and coaches.

11. Reflections

Male concerns about women playing competitive sport never went away and their engagement in competitive sport was still regarded negatively by those who considered that women's exercise should be restricted to 'moderate exertion' (Macdonald 2013, pp. 270–71). At the end of the 1920s one commentator observed that the problem associated with athletics for women was the tendency of these women toward greater masculinity and argued that sports and athletics should be planned to 'develop feminine qualities, including gracefulness in speech, dress and character'.[32] According to Harry Stanley Scrivener, the lawn tennis referee, women tennis enthusiasts had one 'danger to guard against—the tendency for good looks to be spoiled'. Speaking in 1929, he said that the constant strain of looking either at the ball or your opponent the whole time undoubtedly developed 'a fixed and hard expression, which was only too apparent in the case of many women players'. There were cases of first-class players who, 'starting as really pretty girls, had become so strained in their expressions that they were now positively plain looking'.[33]

Nevertheless, women participated in sporting activities in greater numbers and with greater enthusiasm in the inter-war period, and much of the expansion of women's sport in these years, can be credited to the passion and commitment of games mistresses, who were not only key role models in the school setting but also worked tirelessly in the committee room to create and sustain national and club organisations. Every life-course reflects the context in which it is lived but, for an increasing number of women from the lower middle classes who were prepared to challenge existing masculine norms, the games mistress became a career choice. Writing in 1907, Annette Meakin, commenting on the stereotype of the old maid, had observed that 'remove the stigma of idleness and emptiness from a woman's life, and no reproach will be attached to her spinsterhood' (Meakin 1907, p. 80). The games mistresses of the first half of the twentieth century were not the old maids of previous generations, women who were often victims of circumstance. Instead, they were part of an independent, focussed, and supportive community whose members had made deliberate lifestyle choices. The critical juncture in these careers was the decision of whether to marry on not. As the prosopographical data presented here show, these women were almost exclusively single. The marriage bar was only ended for teachers by the 1944 Education Act, the same year that local authority bans were relaxed for women doctors and nurses. For working women like female bank clerks, however, an engagement continued to be followed by her resignation in the immediate post-Second-World-War period because it was still assumed that married women would rather be at home looking after husbands and children, and would not be properly committed to their work. It is no surprise then, that, for many games mistresses, the advantages of marriage were not enough to outweigh its constraints.

Looking back from 1962, leading medic Adolphe Abrahams reflected positively on the quality of the games mistresses appointed by the girls' schools, women who, in addition to their 'necessary academic attainments,' had received a diploma after an 'admirable comprehensive course of physical training extending over three years'. He had inspected the chief training colleges in London and in Bedford and could 'testify to their efficiency of preparation and to the quality of the diplomates' (Abrahams 1962). Most of these women have left little trace in the historical record, but that should not dissuade the historian from making the effort to uncover their life courses using a range of different biographical methods, including prosopography, and collective biography, which has been usefully em-

ployed previously in considerations of female physical education teachers in Copenhagen and the influential women involved with Anstey physical training college (Poulsen 2004; Benn 2017). Just as important is the individual biographical method, and biographies need to be constructed from a broad spectrum of key primary sources, such as newspaper and periodical archives, photographs, trade directories, census material, contemporary maps, travel documents, and local and family histories, in order to highlight the continuities and changes in the roles these women adopted and to collate key characteristics regarding their origins, economic class, family connections, social networks, and daily practice. This will not be an easy task and the subsequent narratives may lack evidence in parts, but, as John Bale has pointed out, these biographies do not need to be 'stuffed with truth' (Bale 2004, p. 26) to enable us to interrogate in more depth some of the stereotypes that have been assigned to the figure of the Inter War Games Mistress.

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Notes

1 1921 England and Wales Census RD128RS2ED10.

2 Teachers Registration Council: Dorothy Mary Thomas (nee Last) Register Number: 70756. Dorothy went on to marry physician John Thomas in 1925 at the age of 36 and then to have a daughter in 1929 at the age of 40.

3 'Unemployed Women. Home Gossip'. *Stratford-upon-Avon Herald*, 12 January 1923, 6.

4 Census of England and Wales, 1931, Occupation Tables, 1934, Table 3.

5 An Ex-Munition Girl. 'More Outdoor Games for Women', *Daily Mirror*, 16 April 1919, 7.

6 'Health Culture for Girls', *The Times*, 3 March 1922, 9.

7 Hargreaves, *Sporting Females*, 139, 144.

8 Hargreaves, *Sporting Females*, 121.

9 'Our Ladies' Corner. An Attractive Career', *Market Harborough Advertiser and Midland Mail*, 14 March 1922, npn.

10 *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*, 19 January 1924, 4.

11 'International Games Mistress', *Sheffield Independent*, 31 October 1928, 10.

12 *The Christian Science Monitor*, 21:132, 2 May 1929, 3.

13 'The Games Mistress. Fine Profession for Healthy Educated Women', *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 6 September 1920, 3.

14 1921 England and Wales Census.

15 H.M.K. Nield. 'The Soul of the Hive. The Games Mistress'. *Daily News*, 25 February 1920, 4.

16 N.V.H. 'Do you want to be a games mistress? Career for the Girl who Excels in Sports'. *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 8 November 1929, 2.

17 H.M.K. Nield. 'The Soul of the Hive', 4; 'How to Become a Games Mistress'. *London Daily Chronicle*, 22 November 1922, 11; 'The Games Mistress. How to Become One'. *Kentish Independent*, 15 December 1922, 16.

18 N.V.H. 'Do you want to be a games mistress?', 2.

19 H.M.K. Nield. 'The Soul of the Hive', 4; 'How to Become a Games Mistress', 11; 'The Games Mistress', 16; Clark (2024), suggests that Average Annual Nominal Earnings in 1922 were GBP 139.51.

[20] *The Queen Magazine*, 26 November 1936, 26.

[21] My thanks to Jane Claydon for providing biographical information on Norah and Olive.

[22] St Leonards School Council Minutes 1918; St Leonards School Staff Salaries Book.

[23] 'Misplaced Sympathy', *Dundee Courier*, 26 November 1919; 'Golf and Golfers', *The Yorkshire Post*, 29 November 1919, 18; 'Women at Play', *The Hampshire Advertiser County Newspaper*, 29 November 1919, 2.

[24] F.W. Last. 'Lawn Tennis for Girls. How to Improve the Playing Conditions', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 6 April 1920, 10.

[25] (See note 18).

[26] 'Physical Training. Organiser Appointed for Port Talbot', *Western Mail*, 14 November 1927, 9.

[27] 'Education in Somerset. Physical Training Instructress', *Taunton Courier and Western Advertiser*, 28 March 1928, 8.

[28] My thanks to Jane Claydon for this quote, which she sourced from the Bishop Strachan School Archive, and for details of Dartford graduates abroad.

[29] Brazil (1922, pp. 224, 291); As one of the reviewers for this paper kindly pointed out, Enid Blyton's school stories also contained several characters who wanted to be games mistresses. See for example Margery in *The O'Sullivan Twins* (1942) and Amanda in *Last Term at Malory Towers* (1951).

[30] (*The Educational Times 1922* 1922, p. 109).

[31] Jane Claydon email correspondence.

[32] 'The 1929 Woman in Sport', *Daily Express* 9 March 1929, 6.

[33] '"Danger" to Women Tennis Players', *Alderley and Wilmslow Advertiser*, 5 April 1929.

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