

# Ladies



# First

**Ken Rappoport**

WOMEN ATHLETES WHO MADE A DIFFERENCE

# **ladies first**

WOMEN ATHLETES  
WHO MADE A DIFFERENCE



# **ladies first**

WOMEN ATHLETES  
WHO MADE A DIFFERENCE

**Ken Rappoport**



PEACHTREE  
ATLANTA



Published by  
PEACHTREE PUBLISHERS  
1700 Chattahoochee Avenue  
Atlanta, Georgia 30318-2112

*www.peachtree-online.com*

Text © 2005 by Ken Rappoport

First trade paperback edition published in February 2010

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Printed in February 2010 in the United States of America by RR Donnelly Book Publishing Services, Bloomsburg, PA

Cover design by Maureen Withee  
Book design by Melanie McMahon Ives  
Photo research by Ana L. Parker

Photo credits: pp. 3, 8, 13, 23, 27, 35, 39, 59, 65, 71, 78, 81, 86, 91, 95, 101, 106, 111, 115, 121, 124—Associated Press/World Wide Sports; p. 44—Al Brodsky; pp. 49, 55—Shirley Muldowney; pp. 131, 138—Orwell Moore.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 (hardcover)

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 (trade paperback)

#### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Rappoport, Ken.

Ladies First : women athletes who made a difference / written by Ken

Rappoport.-- 1st ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-56145-338-2 / 1-56145-338-2 (hardcover)

ISBN 978-1-56145-534-8 / 1-56145-534-2 (trade paperback)

1. Women athletes--Biography--Juvenile literature. 2. Sports for women--History--Juvenile literature. I. Title.

GV697 .A1R325 2005  
796'.082'0922--dc22

2004026979

*For Bernice, my North Star, the light that leads me home*

*My thanks to Lisa Banim  
for bringing me in to Peachtree Publishers,  
to Kathy Landwehr for her warm welcome,  
and to Vicky Holifield for her professional and sensitive editing.  
And, as always, thanks to my favorite editor at home, Bernice.*



# Contents

Introduction .....	1
1—Gertrude Ederle “Against All Odds” .....	3
1920s: <i>Swimming</i>	
2—Babe Didrikson Zaharias “The Other Babe” .....	13
1930s–50s: <i>Track and Field, Golf</i>	
3—Susan Butcher “The Magnificent Musher” .....	27
1990s: <i>Dog Sled Racing</i>	
4—Julie Krone “The Horse Whisperer” .....	39
1990s: <i>Horse Racing</i>	
5—Shirley Muldowney “Driving into History” .....	49
1970s–80s: <i>Drag Racing</i>	
6—Billie Jean King “Serving One Up for Women’s Rights” ...	59
1970s: <i>Tennis</i>	
7—Wilma Rudolph “The Clarksville Comet” .....	71
1950s: <i>Track and Field</i>	
8—Joan Benoit Samuelson “Marathon Woman” .....	81
1980s: <i>Marathon Running</i>	
9—Sonya Henie “The Ice Queen” .....	91
1920s–30s: <i>Ice Skating</i>	

10—Althea Gibson “The Jackie Robinson of Tennis” .....	101
<i>1940s–50s: Tennis</i>	
11—Nadia Comaneci “The Perfect Gymnast” .....	111
<i>1970s: Gymnastics</i>	
12—Manon Rheaume “Manon the Warrior” .....	121
<i>1990s: Hockey</i>	
13—All-American Red Heads “A Team of Their Own” .....	131
<i>1930s–1980s: Basketball</i>	
Conclusion .....	141
Bibliographical Note.....	145
About the Author.....	147

# INTRODUCTION

In the 1800s, most sports were off-limits to women. People believed that engaging in strenuous sports was just plain unladylike. In addition, they thought that girls' bodies were much too fragile to withstand the rigors of athletics, and their "nerves" or mental capacities were too weak to handle the pressure of competition. When the first modern Olympic Games were held in 1896, the organizers decided that women should not be allowed to participate.

A great many women did not agree with this attitude. More and more of them had already begun to challenge the traditional roles assigned to females; they had worked to gain voting rights for themselves, and they were entering the work force in growing numbers. The time had come to challenge the traditional roles of women in sports, too.

The turn of the century began a new chapter in women's athletics. In the 1900 Olympic Games in Paris, France, eleven women were allowed to participate in tennis and

## LADIES FIRST

golf. Charlotte Cooper, a tennis player from England, was the first woman to become an Olympic champion.

Pioneering twentieth-century athletes like Gertrude Ederle, Susan Butcher, and Julie Krone proved that sports was no longer a “man’s world.” Ederle was the first woman to swim the English Channel, Butcher was among the first of her sex to compete in the Iditarod dog sled race through the Alaskan wilderness, and Krone was one of the first important female jockeys.

This book tells the stories of women who made a lasting impact on sports and society. These First Ladies of Sports all defied the general thinking that women are the “weaker sex.” With their amazing achievements, they all forged their special place in history.

And they all shared the same qualities that define any great athlete, male or female: courage, perseverance, and dedication.

# GERTRUDE EDERLE

## Against All Odds

**S**tanding on French soil at Cape Gris-Nez, her heart pounding, Gertrude Ederle surveyed the gray skies and turbulent water. Back in America, a nation waited and wondered. Could she do it?

It was the Roaring Twenties, and a time for great individual expression. Anything went, from flagpole sitters to plucky pilots performing death-defying stunts—and swimmers attempting to cross the English Channel.

But in the 1920s, a female swimmer crossing the Channel seemed to be one of the most outrageous stunts of all. Few people believed the “weaker sex” had the strength or stamina to do it.



Ederle at a beach on Long Island, NY, in 1923

## LADIES FIRST

*Only five swimmers had mastered the Channel up to that point—all men. In 1923, Enrique Tiraboschi had set the world record in 16 hours, 33 minutes. Women swimmers had tried the crossing, but they had come up short time and again. In 1925, Ederle had been one of the failures. Now she was about to try it again.*

*When Ederle prepared to take the plunge on the morning of August 6, 1926, the treacherous water was rough and choppy, so bad that steamboat crossings were canceled. Nevertheless, nineteen-year-old Ederle was determined to make it across. It was a minimum of 21 miles from the French shore to Dover, England—probably longer on this day. She knew she could be tossed off-course by the rough conditions. But not even she could imagine the harrowing challenges that the Channel would present.*

*She covered her body with olive oil, lanolin, and lard, a mixture designed not only to keep her warm but also to protect her from stinging jellyfish or Portuguese men-of-war. Wearing a daring two-piece black silk suit with a tiny American flag sewn over one breast, a red rubber cap, and amber-glass goggles, Ederle waited impatiently to make the plunge.*

*Finally, she shouted, “Cheerio,” and dived into the cold, dark water. It was a little after seven o’clock in the morning...*



Whether spending summers as a kid at the family’s riverside bungalow in Highlands, New Jersey, or paddling around in the Tenth Avenue horse troughs in Manhattan, Gertrude Ederle had always felt comfortable around water.

## Gertrude Ederle

Gertrude grew up as a water baby. One could see the Shrewsbury River from their summer home in New Jersey. “Her father would lower her into the water with a rope around her little waist, and she would paddle about and laugh up at him, entirely unafraid,” Gertrude’s mother said. As a young girl she was a daredevil; she loved to roam the streets of New York or hitch rides on the back of ice trucks.

The third of six children, Gertrude was inspired by her older sister Margaret, a good swimmer, to take up the sport. After years of swimming together, the two joined the Women’s Swimming Association of New York.

Gertrude first grabbed national attention in 1922 at a race in the New York area. A total unknown, she finished the 3<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>-mile Joseph P. Day Cup at Manhattan Beach ahead of fifty-one other swimmers, including U.S. swimming superstar Helen Wainwright and British champion Hilda James.

Ederle, the bashful, broad-shouldered daughter of a New York butcher, was on her way. She spent the next couple of years destroying just about every woman’s swimming record in the books—from the 50 yards to the half-mile. She won more than two dozen trophies and set twenty-nine world and national swimming records. She was rapidly becoming a swimmer of international repute. At the 1924 Olympics in Paris, Ederle added to her reputation by winning a gold medal and two bronzes. The next year she was the first woman to complete the traditional 21-mile race from the docks of New York City to Sandy Hook, New Jersey. She was proud to be the first woman to do it,

## LADIES FIRST

but prouder still to break the men's record with a time of 7 hours, 11 minutes, and 30 seconds. She liked breaking down stereotypes about women and breaking records, particularly those held by men.

In 1925, the coach of the Women's Swimming Association of New York selected Margaret instead of Gertrude to try to swim the English Channel. But Margaret deferred to her younger sister. She knew that "Gertie," as the family called her, was the faster swimmer.

When Gertrude Ederle announced her intention to swim the English Channel, there was hardly an outcry of public support. Even though many people regarded her as one of the world's great swimmers, they just didn't think a woman could accomplish such a feat. Reported the *London Daily News*: "Even the most uncompromising champion of the rights and capacities of women must admit that in contests of physical skill, speed and endurance, they must remain forever the weaker sex."

The newspaper's prediction seemed to be fulfilled when, after nine hours out, Ederle became seasick and overwhelmed by the treacherous currents. Her trainer, Jabez Wolffe, ordered her to quit. She refused and he had to pull her kicking and screaming from the water. Ederle had lost a chance to reach her goal. And her father, Harry, had lost \$5,000, the sum he had bet on his daughter to finish.

The irate swimmer dismissed Wolffe. She made up her mind to come back the next year for a second attempt. She

## Gertrude Ederle

found a new trainer, William Burgess, who had swum across the Channel in 1911 after thirty-two attempts. Gertrude's father promised that this time he would not allow anyone to pull her from the water without her permission.

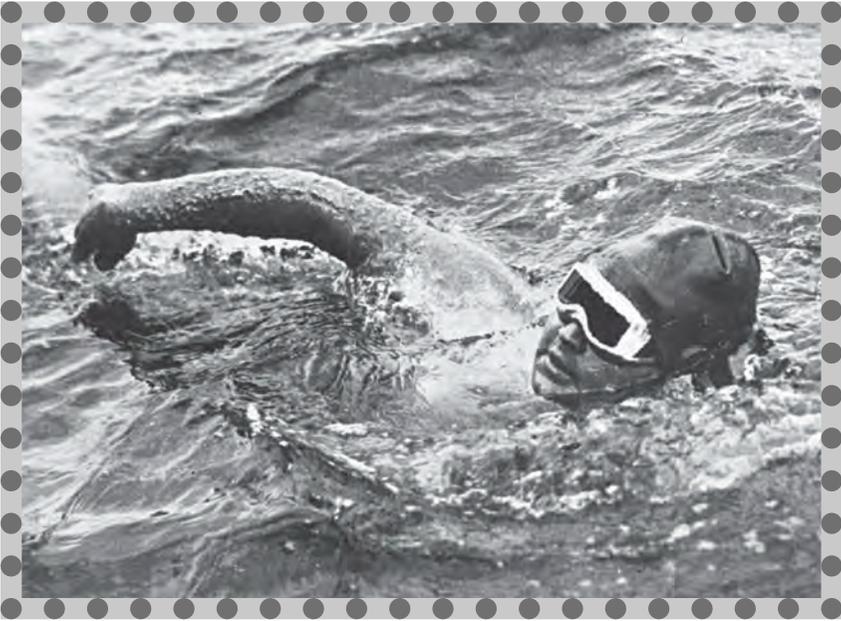
Gertrude Ederle wasn't the only woman with designs to swim the Channel. Three days before Ederle's attempt, Clarabelle Barrett of New Rochelle, New York, was lost in the fog for an hour or so before giving up 2 miles from the French shore. And Lillian Cannon of Baltimore was also getting ready for the swim.

Ederle's second crack at the Channel drew a bit more attention than the first. By now she had become a symbol of the American ideals of courage, spirit, and determination. She signed a contract to tell her story to newspapers. Hardly a day passed during her training period when the press did not mention her or when her words didn't make headlines. "Trudy," as she had been dubbed by journalists, had become a media darling.

Ederle's father made news himself when he bet \$25,000 on his daughter to pull off what many thought to be impossible. That princely sum represented the sale of a lot of hamburgers, hot dogs, and cold cuts at the family butcher shop on Amsterdam Avenue. Harry Ederle stood to gain \$175,000 with his long-shot bet with world famous insurance company Lloyd's of London.

Bringing glory to the United States and proving critics wrong about female athletes would have been enough

## LADIES FIRST



*Ederle becomes the first woman to swim the English Channel in 1926.*

motivation for Gertrude, but her father provided another incentive. He promised her a “roadster”—a popular car of the day—if she mastered the Channel.

On that blustery August morning in 1926, the young swimmer was ready. She surveyed the bustling scene at Cape Gris-Nez. Two tugboats were going to follow her on her great adventure. One boat carried her father, her sister Margaret, and her trainer Burgess. The other one was full of reporters and photographers.

“Please, God, help me,” Gertrude said under her breath. Then she plunged into the surly water.

Burgess had planned for Ederle to drift on the tide for a

## Gertrude Ederle

good part of the trip, conserving her energy for four hours of hard swimming at the end. The Channel, however, would not cooperate. The water was turbulent, and the strong crosscurrents pulled Ederle around like a limp rag doll. Because of the rough swell, Ederle nearly quit seven minutes after starting. But she swam on, blithely timing her strokes while singing "Let Me Call You Sweetheart." Finally Burgess told her to stop singing so that she could save her breath.

She needed every lungful. The waves pushed Ederle in every direction, at times out of sight of the tugboats and leaving her with "an eerie feeling" that she was stranded at sea. When the tugboats finally caught up with her, the reporters and photographers tried to keep up Ederle's spirits by reading cables from her mother (some of which they made up) and singing another hit tune of the time, "Yes, We Have No Bananas." There may have been no bananas, but there were plenty of sugar cubes, pineapple juice, chocolate, and chicken legs. To help Gertrude keep up her strength, people on the boat extended food to her on a pole. If she touched the boats, her Channel attempt would be nullified.

In the afternoon, vicious squalls kicked up and rocked the tugboats. The water was so choppy that many aboard became ill. Ederle was sick, too. Burgess begged her to quit.

Not missing a beat, Ederle yelled back over her shoulder, "WHAT FOR?"

Courage, spirit, and determination, indeed.

## LADIES FIRST

Her body ached as she fought through gales. But she continued with a fierce, almost inhuman dedication. Chew another sugar block. Eat a piece of chocolate. Down another shot of pineapple juice. “About eight hours out I knew I would either swim it or drown.”

Day turned into night. The strong currents swept her off her intended course. But Ederle kept going, and now she could finally make out the bonfires on the English shore. Thousands of people had gathered there, waiting to give her a heroine’s welcome.

After swimming more than fourteen hours and many miles out of her way, Ederle was feeling the strain. The final 400 yards were brutal, every stroke an agony and every part of her body aching as she headed toward shore.

At last it was down to the final 50 yards.

Flares filled the night sky and a spotlight illuminated the white foam that Ederle was kicking up behind her. Machine-like, she headed toward the shore’s promised land.

At 9:40 P.M., she dragged herself onto land at Kingsdown, a couple of miles north of her intended destination of Dover. Thundering cheers went up for Ederle, although she seemed more dead than alive. She keeled over, doubled up by cramps for an hour—too sick to immediately enjoy her magnificent achievement.

What Ederle had done, though, was past human understanding. Not only had she completed the journey across treacherous, life-threatening waters, but she had also—in spite of going an estimated 14 miles out of her way—broken

## Gertrude Ederle

the world record by a full two hours! Her time: 14 hours, 31 minutes.

Suddenly, America had a new sports hero bigger than life. The newspapers were full of praise for this extraordinary woman. Ederle, with her indefatigable spirit, became a legend in her own time. In at least one 1926 poll, she finished ahead of Babe Ruth as the most popular athlete in America.

If all that acclaim was hard for the modest Ederle to believe, even more unbelievable was the hero's welcome that greeted her in New York on her return. Ederle might have been ready for the Channel swim, but she was certainly not ready for this: two million screaming people lined the route for a riotous ticker-tape parade through the city.

Nor was she ready for the numerous stage and screen offers, swimsuit endorsements, and proposals of marriage that followed. Irving Berlin, one of the most popular songwriters in the U.S., wrote a song—"Trudy"—in her honor.

Wholesome. Unspoiled. Thoroughly natural. That's what they wrote about her in the newspapers. All she had wanted to do was swim the English Channel and prove something to the world, and to herself.

"When somebody tells me I cannot do something," Ederle said, "that's when I do it."

She certainly did.