

Search for Margaret Abbott

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Paris 1900, during the Olympic Games : two competitors on the same tee.

The names of some of the earliest sportswomen who were champions in another era are obscured by those who have received more consideration from contemporary media.

Among those whose names seldom appear in sport literature is that of Margaret Abbott, the first American woman Olympic champion. In the early 1970's I learned that Margaret Abbott was an Olympic golf champion and that she was a member of the Chicago Golf Club. The sketchy information was so interesting that I was inspired to search for more information about her.

On 13th March, 1973, I visited the United States Olympic Committee's (USOC) headquarters which at that time were located in New York City. The MacArthur room displayed wall plaques bearing the names of all American Olympic champions. The first woman champion, Margaret Abbott, was credited there. I could not find anyone who knew Margaret Abbott or her relatives.

The last two years I have devoted additional time to the Margaret Abbott project. On two different occasions I went to Chicago. The first trip to Chicago served to eliminate possibilities of ascertaining where Miss Abbott lived and went to school. I visited the Chicago Golf Club in Wheaton, Illinois. The club has very few of its early yearbooks and no one there had heard about Margaret Abbott. In the meantime I read issues of *The Chicago Tribune* published in the 1890s. I learned a great deal about the

central figure of my research from the sports pages and society columns of *The Tribune*.

Then I decided a second trip to Chicago would be beneficial. While at the Chicago Historical Society I referred to city directories and bluebooks. Mary Abbott, Margaret's mother, was listed in the directories and bluebooks. A key clue came from the occupations of Chicago residents which were recorded in the directories. Mrs. Abbott was registered as a literary editor. Because she was a successful literary editor and writer. Mary Abbott was included in *Guide to Periodical Literature* and *Who's Who*. According to *Who's Who*. Mary Abbott resided in New York City with Margaret Abbott Dunne, wife of the famous Finley Peter Dunne who had created « Mr. Dooley ».

The New York Times Index and *Personal Name Index* provided additional information. Biographies about Finley Peter Dunne supplied data about the Dunne family. Two of the four Dunne children were traced from the biographies of their father. Philip Dunne resides in Malibu, California, and Finley Peter Dunne, Jr. lives in Washington. Both have provided invaluable information.

Additional credence to Margaret Abbott's accomplishment was found in a government document. AG. Spalding, also of Chicago, and Director of Sports for the United States at the Paris Exposition of 1900, issued an official report which was published by the United States Government Printing Office. He listed

Margaret Abbott as the winner of the women's golf competition. Two other American women, Miss Polly Whittier and Mrs. Hugar Pratt, placed second and third in the same event according to Spalding's report.

Two women tennis players from the United States also participated in the Games of the IInd Olympiad.

Perhaps the significance of these findings lies in the fact that these golfers and tennis players were the first American women to enter international sports competition.

Margaret Abbott, the first American champion

4th October, 1982, the 82nd anniversary of the first Olympic American woman's championship, recalled one of the most obscure sports achievements of this century. Margaret Abbott, accompanied by her mother, Mary Ives Abbott, made her Olympic debut at the ladies singles golf tournament during the Paris Olympics in 1900. Miss Abbott, a socialite from Chicago, defeated nine women in the final round. A member of the Chicago Golf Club, she had been coached by some of the best male amateurs of the day. She began playing golf in 1897 and a year later was known as a "fierce competitor".

In the fall of 1899 Mary and Margaret Abbott were settling into Paris social life. The Abbotts were accustomed to a busy schedule of activities in Chicago. Their apartment at the Charlevoix, in fashionable northside Chicago, was always open to a host of friends.

Mary Abbott had arranged the trip abroad so that her daughter could study art. She had planned an extended European visit to allow time for touring and to attend the Paris Exposition. Margaret Abbott had learned of a ladies' international golf tournament in Paris and decided to enter.

Golf in the United States during the 1890s was largely a pastime of the well-to-do. A few public links dotted the landscape in some large cities. Society endorsed golf for women because it was a non-contact sport and participation did not call for an "extreme departure" from daily dress. Prior to each golfing season newspaper and magazines advertised the latest apparel for the links. Fashion-conscious men and women having the means to finance their recreational pursuits willingly purchased the trendy attire.

In 1896 members of Chicago's high society were so captivated by golf that intense rivalry

divided the clubs at Wheaton and Onwentsia. The red and white of Wheaton and the blue and yellow of Onwentsia were proudly worn on hatbands and ties. The competition was so fierce that families were split and members of the clubs were not on speaking terms. By 1900 the extreme rivalry subsided because club allegiances were spread among 22 clubs within 30 miles of Chicago.

Mary Abbott was a member of the Chicago Golf Club and persuaded her daughter to take up the game.

Sprague Abbott, Margaret's younger brother, was a student at Harvard and sometimes entered mixed foursome contests with his sister.

Mrs. Abbott's association with the Chicago Golf Club probably occurred because her friend, Charles Blair MacDonald, invited her to join. MacDonald, a Scottish-American, is credited with introducing golf to Chicagoans. He ordered six sets of golf clubs from a friend in Liverpool to start the Chicago Golf Club in 1892. In his cablegram, MacDonald requested prompt delivery of the clubs. The packages containing the clubs were shipped on board the *Majestic* within six hours on the same day the order was received.

Margaret Abbott established an impressive record during the fledgling years of women's golf. She was associated with the Chicago Golf Club in 1897 and 1898. As the end of her first golf season approached Miss Abbott had finished second in the MacDonald contest and won the subscription contest on the Wheaton links. On 2nd June, 1898, the first "ladies day" of the season at the Chicago club, Margaret Abbott, whose handicap was two, won the Deering Cup contest with a score of 61 (9 holes). In the playoff for the Hamlin prize on the same day, Miss Abbott carded a 60 (9 holes) and was awarded a gold belt for her first-place finish. A week later she finished second in the ladies handicap event and on 10th June, 1898, won the S.H. Graves contest on the Wheaton course.

During the remaining summer months of 1898 Miss Abbott entered no fewer than five ladies and mixed foursome matches. Her highest finish in those contests occurred with Charles MacDonald when they placed second in the Cramer contest.

Early in the fall of 1898 Abbott won the driving contest at the first four-day tournament for women in the midwest. Tall for her generation, Margaret Abbott was 5'-11". and was known to have a "classy backswing". The inaugural



four-day tournament was held at the Onwent-sia Golf Club and drew 45 entries.

In 1899 the Abbotts sailed for France. The much-publicised Paris Exposition of 1900 was nearly a year away but the Abbotts were looking forward to reunions with their Chicago friends who were making reservations on steamships bound for the exposition. Finley Peter Dunne, creator of the popular political satire, "Mr. Dooley", whose name had been linked with Miss Abbott's, was contemplating a trip to Europe. Paris had become a favourite destination for the "Steamship Set" from America's "windy city".

Mary Ives Abbott, widow of Charles Abbott, a Calcutta merchant, was a prominent literary editor for *The Chicago Tribune* and later *The Chicago Times-Herald*. She was the author of two novels which had been favourably reviewed in *The Nation*. While Margaret Abbott was pursuing her art studies and playing golf Mary Abbott was planning to write a third novel. She had considered calling it *A Woman in Paris*. Meanwhile, the Games of the Second Olympiad and the Paris Exposition shared the attention of European visitors and French citizens.

Much to the disappointment of Baron Pierre de Coubertin, architect of the Olympic Games revival, the Paris Exposition overshadowed the 1900 Olympics. Some people were unaware that they had attended the Olympic Games. The competition lasted several months and because the sports events coincided with the Exposition, the Olympics were classed as Games of the Exposition or as international contests.

Although Margaret Abbott's participation in the Olympic Games was coincidental with her prearranged trip to study art, she became America's first woman Olympic champion on 4th October, 1900.

No one is certain how women became involved in tennis or golf during the second Olympiad. Coubertin was committed to conducting the Olympic Games in much the same way as did the ancient Greeks. Women had not been permitted to participate or witness the ancient Olympics. Nevertheless, Miss Abbott defeated nine other contestants in the final round of the ladies singles championship. She carded a 47 in the nine-hole tournament.

The British publication, *Golf Illustrated*, referred to the international tournament held at Compiègne, near Paris, as a "fashionable and successful gathering". Miss Abbott's final round with Mrs. Hager Pratt (sometimes spelled Huger) attracted the largest crowd. The women had difficulty making some of their shots because the on-lookers pressed the golfers closely. Before returning to the United States, Margaret Abbott won the women's golf championship of France. According to Philip Dunne she later explained to her family that she won the tournament "because all the French girls apparently misunderstood the nature of the game scheduled for that day and turned up to play in high heels and tight skirts".

In the absence of fanfare the Abbotts returned to the United States and changed their residence to New York City. Finley Peter Dunne had proposed to Margaret Abbott and he had also moved to New York City.

The Chicago newspapers printed stories of Miss Abbott's golf triumph at Compiègne. However, her reputation as a golfer was soon forgotten because she did not return to Chicago to live. Records of her ties to the Chicago Golf Club were burned when the clubhouse was destroyed by fire in 1912.

On 10th December, 1902, Margaret Ives Abbott was married to Dunne at her mother's home in New York City. She continued to play golf while she and Dunne were raising their four children. She did not compete "seriously" because of a chronic knee ailment caused by a fall from a bicycle when she was a child. Margaret Abbott Dunne died in 1955 perhaps never realising that she was America's first women's Olympic champion.

Margaret Ives Dunne,
15th June 1878 - 10th June 1955

P. W.

