

This is a postprint version of the following published document:

Valiente, Celia. (2020). Women Pioneers in the History of Sport: The Case of Lili Álvarez in Franco's Spain. *The International Journal of the History of Sport*. 37(1-2), pp. 75-93.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09523367.2020.1722645>

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Women Pioneers in the History of Sport: The Case of Lili Álvarez in Franco's Spain

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Abstract:

This article explores the historical role played by female pioneers of elite sport by studying the singular case of Lili Álvarez (1905-1998). Álvarez was a high-profile Spanish female athlete with an outstanding career characterized by remarkable achievements in various sports, including being singles finalist in Wimbledon for three consecutive years (1926-1928). In Franco's Spain, Álvarez contributed to the promotion of sports by publishing articles and delivering public lectures on sporting topics. In her published pieces and public talks, Álvarez tried to convince Spaniards of both sexes to exercise, however minimally. Álvarez also disseminated knowledge about sports other than soccer, the national sport. Thus, Álvarez contributed not only to the development of women's sport but also of sports in general. An analysis of Álvarez's case reveals much related to the role of elite female pioneers and their contribution to the history of sport across countries.

Key words: Lili Álvarez; Spain; Franco; sport; gender

What is the role of women pioneers in the history of sport? More concretely, in what ways, if any, have these female pioneers contributed to the promotion of sporting activities? To address these questions, published documents and secondary sources are analyzed regarding the case study of Lili Álvarez of Spain (1905-1998).

Álvarez was a solid all-round athlete, competing at the highest levels in both tennis and skiing. As a female pioneer in Franco's Spain, she also became a public intellectual writing and lecturing on sports, among other topics. She popularized knowledge and debates about sports other than the national sport of soccer such as tennis and skiing, exhorted Spaniards of both sexes – but particularly women – to exercise, and commented on international tournaments of the time. The role of female authors, of non-fiction, has been analyzed by historiography only recently,¹ and has been less studied than other roles, including those of sport instructors or role models for the next generation of sporting females. By being an author on sport issues, Álvarez fostered knowledge and practice of sport in a political context that was a dictatorship, in a country (Spain) with a minimal history of sport practice, and in a society dominated by the Catholic Church where women's sport was strongly opposed.

Historian Nancy Struna convincingly argued that feminist historiography should not only attempt to add the study of women's sport to a mainstream history of sport, but also to consider how mainstream sport history is modified thanks to the analysis of women's sport.² Applying this proposition to Álvarez's legacy to the history of Spanish sport means analyzing in depth Álvarez's efforts to promote sport in general, and not only women's sport in particular. Álvarez advocated for sport as part of Spain's 'modernization' and integration into a modern global sport culture. She understood sport heroes as modern celebrities, and fashioned herself as a modern sport celebrity, which allowed her to have an impact on the history of sport as a whole.

Drawing on data chiefly from bibliographies and Spanish newspaper articles – principally but not exclusively *ABC* and *La Vanguardia* – the main aim of this article is to examine the role played by Álvarez in the history of women's sport,³ and to answer the

following questions: What role did Álvarez play in the history of sport in Franco's Spain? And what can the case of Álvarez reveal about the contribution of female pioneers of elite sport to the promotion of sporting activities across countries? The first section of this article reviews current knowledge on high-profile female sporting pioneers, before providing a rationale for examining the case of Lili Álvarez. Álvarez's efforts to encourage sport in general and women's sport in particular are then explored, before discussing her overall influence as a female sporting pioneer during Franco's Spain.

Lili Álvarez: A Pioneer of Women's Sport in Franco's Spain

In all countries in contemporary times, men's sports developed considerably earlier than women's sports. Numerous barriers against women's sport existed including plain prohibition and public and social denigration of sporting females. In spite of these and other obstacles to women's physical exercise, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, some women managed to play sports and even achieved national and international victories and records. Initially, there were very few highly-ranked female athletes, and thus studies on them are often based on single cases.⁴ The experiences of these women pioneers are not necessarily 'representative' of other cases but rather 'personal, unique, and telling', according to historian Carly Adams.⁵

An important question posed by historians about these first high-profile women athletes was how they were able to excel in sport. Very often (but not always) these pioneers of elite sport were women from the upper classes – including the aristocracy in countries where nobility existed – because only women from these social strata had the necessary time, money and connections to afford various types of leisure including physical exercise.⁶ Many of these women pioneers were encouraged to practice sport by relatives, mainly fathers, who

had themselves sporting skills and/or access to sport facilities and activities.⁷ Likewise, the first high-profile women athletes stood out in sports that were at least semi-open to women, or not completely prohibited to women. These female pioneers probably excelled more often in individual rather than team sports, as training with and competing against other women in teams was beyond the reach of most females in the early years of women's sport.⁸

Notwithstanding the knowledge gained by research on how some individual women managed to become high-profile sporting pioneers, many other aspects of their exact role in the history of sport remain less known. As feminist historian Jennifer Hargreaves claimed, early sporting heroines' performances 'were exceptional and it is difficult to assess the extent to which they influenced a more general trend in women's sport'.⁹

Historiography suggests at least four ways in which the first high-profile athletes contributed to the development of women's sports. First, some of these first elite female athletes served themselves as inspirational role models for younger sporting females.¹⁰ However, in other cases, some of the first top-female athletes were rather unique and spectacular exceptions without equal in the next cohorts of women. Barriers against women's sport may have continued to be in place in spite of the appearance of high-standing female pioneers. Moreover, additional obstacles may have been erected to prevent other women to exercise and excel in sport. On the other hand, in the absence of private organizations and political institutions dedicated to fostering competitive women's sport, it was highly unlikely that new cases of high-profile sporting females would emerge. Additionally, female pioneers may have not voluntarily taken the responsibility to lead other women to excel in sport, nor should they have been held responsible to do so.

Second, some of the first elite female athletes became sport instructors and trained other women. For instance, in Victorian Britain some skilled female equestrians taught other

women how to ride and hunt well, as women rode side-saddle and men did not know this riding style. Some of these female equestrian pioneers wrote riding manuals for female riders.¹¹ Also in Victorian Britain, some of the first female professional swimmers taught other women swimming and lifesaving, as swimming instructors teaching their own sex was the socially prescribed practice.¹² At the beginning of the twentieth century, British pioneers of women's judo, Phoebe Roberts and Edith Garrud, instructed other women; the former in Britain and mainland Europe, the latter in Britain.¹³ Some female sporting pioneers helped establish and manage institutions dedicated to training would-be instructors. The most famous case is probably again from Victorian Britain, where Madame Bergman-Österberg, among other accomplishments, founded the first college for the training of physical education instructors open only to women.¹⁴

Third, elite female sporting pioneers generated an interest in their own sports among women through various activities. In Victorian Britain, some of the first women equestrians wrote novels with equestrian plots. By writing this type of fiction, these women contributed to promoting their sport among their readership. Also in Victorian Britain, the first female professional swimmers helped generate an interest in swimming among women of various social classes through performing aquatic exhibitions and entertainment and participating in endurance and racing events.¹⁵ In the early decades of the twentieth century, British pioneers of women's judo, Phoebe Roberts, Edith Garrud and Sarah Mayer, popularized judo as a progressive sporting activity for women (and men) by participating in exhibitions and theatrical performances and/or writing newspaper articles on the sport or related topics, such as self-defence for women.¹⁶

Fourth, the first outstanding athletes designed clothes and instruments to better perform their sports. For example, in Victorian Britain some of the first women equestrians

designed riding clothes for women and invented or perfected equestrian equipment such as side-saddles and stirrups.¹⁷

Two caveats are necessary at this point. Although in Western countries, upper-class women were over-represented among first-class female athletes, there were exceptions to this general pattern. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, if some sports were practiced principally by elite women, for instance, golf, tennis or horse sports, other sports attracted women practitioners of more diverse and/or lower social origins, including track-and-field, gymnastics and swimming.¹⁸ Thus, the role played by women of different social classes in the history of sport is complex and has to be specified in different cases. On the other hand, whatever the role played by high-profile female pioneers in the history of sport, it is important to remember that some of these first sporting women faced monumental opposition by the male sporting establishment while others did not.¹⁹

To explore the role of women pioneers in the history of sport, the case of Lili Álvarez in Franco's Spain is analyzed. Álvarez was a Spanish woman who was born in 1905 in Rome and died in 1998 in Madrid. She was an only child. During her childhood, adolescence and youth, she lived in several European countries (Switzerland, France, Germany and England) in hotels and spa resorts. Enjoying an aristocratic life style, she practiced several sports including ice-skating, skiing, tennis, mountaineering, fencing, golf and motor racing. These were some of the sports practiced by a minority of aristocratic and affluent women in countries that were economically more developed than Spain, but not so in Spain itself.²⁰ It was common at that time that the first sporting females practiced and excelled in more than one sport.²¹

Álvarez's multi-sport achievements were remarkable. She was more known for her tennis successes, including reaching the Wimbledon Final on three consecutive years (1926-

1928) and holding the unofficial world number two rank in women's tennis in those years. Suzanne Lenglen, from France, held the world number one rank in 1926 and Helen Wills Moody, from the United States, held the number one rank in 1927 and 1928. The years 1926-1928 constituted the peak of Álvarez's tennis career, but she continued to win tennis tournaments beyond that period. In 1929, partnering with Cornelia Tiedemann-Bouman from the Netherlands, she won the women's doubles at the French Open. In 1930, 1931 and 1936 she reached the singles semi-finals at Roland Garros (and in 1927, she reached mixed doubles finals there). In 1930, she was singles champion at the Italian Open, and the individual and mixed doubles champion, partnering with Ronaldo Boyd, in Argentina that year. In Spain, she was the individual champion in 1929 and 1940, and doubles champion in 1941 and 1942.²² Along with three other lawn tennis players, she was the first woman to represent Spain in the Olympic Games, in 1924 in Paris in tennis. She reached the quarter-finals of both the singles and mixed doubles, with Eduardo Flaquer, but lost her first match in women's doubles. It was another thirty-six years before the next women represented Spain in the Olympics, in Rome in 1960.

It should be stressed that, comparatively speaking, tennis was a sport open to women earlier than other sports, and international competition developed in tennis earlier than in other sports.²³ This means that Álvarez, a Spanish young woman living abroad, excelled in a sport that women could practice and whose main competitions were international, which provided elite sportswomen like her with fame and recognition abroad and at home.

Alongside tennis, Álvarez excelled in other sports, for example skiing, where she was a champion in Spain in 1941, and her sport victories were outstanding given the modest sporting tradition in Spain.²⁴

In 1934, Álvarez married French aristocrat Count of Valdène, but after losing her

premature child, she separated from her husband, and then settled permanently in Madrid after the Spanish Civil War ended in 1939. During the Francoist dictatorship, Álvarez became a well-known public intellectual, prolifically publishing articles and books on religion, women's status and to a lesser extent, sport.

Knowledge of the role played by pioneer elite athletes in the history of sport is not only limited, as shown above, but also derived mainly, but not exclusively, from studies on democracies – however imperfect these democracies are – of mainly Britain and North America.²⁵ The different political system in Spain, however, is argued to have affected the influence of high-profile female sporting pioneers in society and politics. Between the mid-1930s and 1975, Spain was governed by an authoritarian regime headed by General Francisco Franco. Freedom of expression, association and demonstration was abolished, and a severe censorship was imposed on the mass media. The only political organizations permitted were the single party and its auxiliary organizations such as the so-called Feminine Section, which managed most women's issues, including women's sport. Political dissent and political opponents were ferociously repressed.²⁶

Historiography on women's sports has dedicated more attention to some periods than others. The period between the last decades of the nineteenth century and the onset of World War II has been researched more often and more deeply intensively than other time periods.²⁷ It is therefore advisable to go beyond these formative decades of women's sport and analyze subsequent eras.

Álvarez's Efforts to Promote Sport in Franco's Spain

During her childhood, Álvarez did not attend school regularly but was taught by private instructors and learnt several foreign languages. She did not attend college either.²⁸ In

spite of her lack of formal education, she began publishing articles and books in her youth, and by the time she settled permanently in Spain in 1939, Álvarez had already authored sport publications for an international readership. As a public intellectual, Álvarez published and delivered public lectures and conferences, attempting to foster sports by: spreading knowledge about different sports and exhorting the Spanish population to exercise; covering specific international competitions, as a journalist; and explaining to Spaniards the debates on international sport management, such as the public debate on amateurism and professionalism in tennis.

Authoring Sport Publications before 1939 for an International Readership

Already in 1927, at the age of twenty-two, Álvarez published, in English, a handbook titled *Modern Lawn Tennis* printed in Great Britain.²⁹ This guide comprised four introductory chapters, eight chapters dedicated to the main strokes (forehand, backhand, service, return of service, volley, half volley, smash and lob), and two final chapters about ‘some essentials to remember’ and tactics. Fifteen photographs of Álvarez playing tennis illustrated the content of this manual, which was targeted mainly to beginners. The language was simple and did not include technical jargon.

When writing this handbook, Álvarez probably had a British readership in mind. The only main tennis tournament referred to, and profusely so, was Wimbledon. Moreover, in the first chapter of the guide, Álvarez affirmed:

I am assuming also that you are a member of some club, or that there is some court on which you can play, either a friend’s or a public court. There is little difficulty in England in these days about those things.³⁰

The potential readership of this manual most likely comprised both men and women. When Álvarez mentioned famous players, she usually referred to male players and rarely to female players. On the other hand, a handbook targeted to women players would have probably contained a long section on sporting clothes. This was not at all the case of *Modern Lawn Tennis*, where absolutely nothing is said about the topic. One of the introductory chapters, titled ‘Choosing your tennis kit’, simply advised the reader to select a racket made by a good manufacturer and with which the player can play easily. Álvarez additionally suggested to use two pairs of comfortable shoes and utilize high-quality balls.³¹

It should be noted that sport guides were especially useful before the invention and widespread use of television sets. In pre-television decades, many tennis practitioners had limited opportunities to watch elite competitions and learn from them. World-class tennis players shared their expertise with less skilled practitioners through the manuals they wrote. In fact, Álvarez was not alone at penning a sporting handbook, as other tennis celebrities of the time also did.³² Álvarez herself was very conscious of her role as a sport celebrity and how (illustrated) mass media played a part in this. It was certainly not by chance that her book was published at the peak of her career as a tennis player and media celebrity in England. That could also explain why a book that does not position women as their main and explicit readership is only illustrated by photos of herself.

Apart from instructing English-speaking tennis beginners with her 1927 guide, Álvarez spread knowledge on sporting issues to an international audience of Spanish-speaking people. In 1930, she travelled to Argentina, where she became individual and mixed doubles tennis champion.³³ In an article, in Spanish, in the main Argentine newspaper *La Nación*, Álvarez argued that if in the past the well-known people had been politicians,

philosophers, scientists and literary authors, in contemporary times celebrities were sport champions. She used her own biography to show that a personal history of sport successes permitted high-profile athletes like herself to interact with people high on the social ladder, including politicians, intellectuals and even kings. Álvarez mentioned Lord Balfour, Lord Birkenhead, George Bernard Shaw, and Alfonso XIII of Spain among her acquaintances.³⁴

Spreading Knowledge about Sport and Exhorting Spaniards to Exercise

In Franco's Spain, in various publications and public lectures, Álvarez disseminated knowledge and opinions on sporting topics targeting a domestic general audience. At different times and places, Álvarez declared that the sport she liked the most was skiing.³⁵ In a two-page article published in 1952, she wrote a concise history of this winter sport, describing the origins of twentieth-century skiing in Scandinavia, Switzerland, Italy and France, before mentioning the subsequent expansion of the sport globally. She lamented Spaniards' ignorance and indifference towards skiing in spite of the fact that Spain had abundant snow-covered mountains. Regretting the scarcity of winter sport facilities in Spain, she celebrated the few infrastructures recently built. In general, the article encouraged Spaniards to enjoy the pleasures derived from skiing.³⁶ What effect her message had on readers is unknown, but by reading her article they at least expressed their fondness for skiing, even if in a vicarious and sedentary way.

Álvarez published various articles on sporting topics in the main newspaper *ABC* and its weekly supplement *Blanco y Negro* principally in the 1960s. In these pieces, Álvarez denounced that Spain was lagging behind other nations in physical exercise and should catch up:

We [Spaniards] do not take sports seriously. We do not conceptualize sports as a basic ingredient of a nation's life. Rather, we think that sports are simply "games", capers, races and jumps typical of early youth and not necessarily practiced by the most intelligent individuals.³⁷

In Álvarez' opinion, Spain was a nation formed by sport spectators and not by nationals who exercised:

We are ... anti-sporting [people]. I do not know if this is caused by the sun or the easiness of our southern life. The truth is that we adapt badly towards the difficult, continuous, organized muscular asceticism. What we like is the "show", that is, to watch how others make an effort and fight. We are not only passionate spectators but also splendid faultfinders.³⁸

Álvarez was particularly critical towards fellow Spaniards who did not exercise but went to sport stadia to watch sporting events in an uncivilized manner.³⁹ Some of them she described as 'simply vociferous voyeurs making digestion [in a stadium after a copious lunch] ... with a fan's mentality that only yearns for his team's victory'.⁴⁰

Álvarez relentlessly tried to persuade Spaniards of all conditions to take sport seriously and exercise regularly. Belonging to a sporting nation was everybody's responsibility, and not an objective to be achieved by only a few. Having said that, Álvarez also affirmed that some individuals could do more than others in this regard. Writing about tennis, the sport that converted her into a celebrity, she criticized clubs in Spain for dedicating themselves mainly to the organization of snob social events, remarking:

I would like to know how many [tennis clubs] throughout our Spanish territory are less preoccupied by the condition of their courts than their ballrooms, and the technical level of their trainers rather than the rhythm of their orchestra. The frivolous and anti-sport irresponsibility of these clubs make them prone only to increase the snob appeal of their facilities and their overflowing coffer.⁴¹

As an additional illustration of the poor record of sport in Spain, she mentioned that Madrid, a city of 2.5 million inhabitants, did not have any indoor tennis courts. Not wanting only to criticize but also suggest solutions, she pinpointed at least two private clubs that could afford to build an indoor court, and she also recommended that the state federation help another club to build one.⁴²

Given the scarcity of sporting tradition and practice in Spain, in comparison with other nations, it is not surprising that the country hardly excelled in international competitions. Commenting on the poor performance of Spain in the 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games, Álvarez argued against authors who explained this poor performance based on the idiosyncrasy of Spaniards. These authors suggested that Spaniards were more inclined to arts than sports, or that they were not keen on disciplined effort. For Álvarez, the medals won by a country in the Olympics and other international sport competitions were closely linked to its economic development. As a nation industrialized, sport became part of the way of life of its inhabitants. She illustrated this point with two examples: England and Catalonia. England was the cradle of the industrial revolution and also the first country with a general appetite for physical exercise within the population. Catalonia, a north-eastern region of Spain, was, in Álvarez's opinion, the most industrialized area in the country and also the area where

sporting activity was more widespread. As Spain became an industrialized country, the sporting level of its population would likely increase. The objective to be reached by Spain was that ‘there exists a widespread majority of individuals hooked to physical exercise, and that its practice is embraced by people of all types and social classes. Champions and medals would surely be obtained subsequently’.⁴³

Again, we do not know whether Álvarez’s articles convinced any of her readers to start exercising or to intensify their sporting habits. Perhaps this happened in some instances, and maybe some other readers adopted a more favourable view towards sports. Approving dispositions towards physical exercise are important because they help constitute a social public that welcomes and appreciates sporting individuals.

Covering International Tennis Competitions, as a Journalist

Álvarez contributed to increase Spaniards’ knowledge about sport by sporadically covering international sport competitions as a journalist. She used her deep knowledge of tennis to make the leading tournaments of the 1960s, and other tennis topics, comprehensible to the readers of the main newspaper *ABC* and its weekly supplement *Blanco y Negro*, which were not specialists on this racket sport.

In 1965, at the age of sixty years, Álvarez was sent to Sydney, Australia, to cover the Davis Cup Final for *Blanco y Negro*.⁴⁴ Before the competition, she described the playing style of Manuel Santana, Spain’s best player, but she also predicted that Australia would win the tournament.⁴⁵

Indeed, Australia won the 1965 Davis Cup and Spain finished runner-up. After the final, Álvarez published a nine-page report in *Blanco y Negro* exposing at length why Spain did not win the tournament. In her view, the Spanish team was internally unbalanced and

formed by an outstanding player and others of a lower technical level. Álvarez denounced the sporting parochialism of Spanish sport managers, sport journalists and even players which consisted of blaming the type of court surface (grass) for the defeat of Spain, as at that time, these individuals argued that with another type of court surface (clay), Spain was unrivalled. Álvarez claimed that all major international tournaments except Roland Garros were played on grass, so Spain had ‘to give in to this grass sovereignty without a murmur’.⁴⁶

Álvarez also attacked the supremacy of soccer as the Spanish national sport by arguing that Santana was an internationally well-known sporting figure, better known than nationally and internationally renowned bullfighter ‘the Cordobese’ (*El Cordobés*). Álvarez lamented that Spanish sport managers and journalists active in the 1965 Davis Cup were in reality experts primarily on soccer. She also argued that tennis was a sport for everybody, and not merely a sport for ladies or minorities, as was commonly said in Spain in the 1960s. Moreover, tennis was a sport practiced in all parts of the globe. To attain greater success, she also recommended for Spain to imitate the Australian sport policy of building numerous tennis courts and teaching tennis lessons to a large number of children.⁴⁷

At the age of sixty-two, in July 1967, Álvarez also published another tennis chronicle for *Blanco y Negro*. This time, Álvarez covered the Davis Cup European zone matches between the Soviet Union and Spain, held in Barcelona. The general prediction was that Spain would win and in fact it did. Álvarez informed the readership about both mistakes and good shots of the Spanish and Russian teams, and praised the fast development of tennis in the Soviet Union in previous years. She also mentioned the debate that existed in the management of tennis worldwide between amateurism and professionalism, a topic she returned to on numerous occasions.⁴⁸

Explaining Debates on International Sport Management

In addition to covering international tennis competitions as a journalist, in Franco's Spain, Álvarez made the general public aware of a debate that intensified in the 1960s regarding the management of international tennis. In the world of tennis, players who participated in high-prestige international tournaments such as Wimbledon or the Davis Cup were traditionally and mandatorily amateurs, that is, they did not receive financial remuneration. In the late 1920s, and coinciding with the peak of Álvarez's tennis career, professional tennis began to emerge. Within this system, which commenced in 1926 when the French star Suzanne Lenglen signed a contract to play a series of exhibition matches in the US, professional players were paid. Once an amateur player turned professional, however, s/he could not be reinstated as an amateur and subsequently was not allowed to take part in the most important international contests. Álvarez had always been an amateur player.⁴⁹ She clarified:

Apart from the concentration in 1924 in Paris for the Olympic Games to which I was invited, it was only in the third and fourth years that I participated in Wimbledon, that is, after having been finalist there two or three times, that I received five hundred pesetas for travel expenses from the Spanish federation. This was all I have received from it [the federation] my whole life. It is clear that if I had not been wealthy enough, my sporting career would not have been possible or would have been truncated.⁵⁰

Although Álvarez had been an amateur player, in the late 1960s she published various articles in the main newspaper *ABC* and its supplement *Blanco y Negro* vehemently

defending the removal of the distinction between amateurism and professionalism in tennis. She therefore challenged those who argued that paying money to tennis players made tennis impure and dirty, and that the true and noble sporting spirit could only be preserved if high prestige tournaments were only the realm of amateur players competing for the sake of sport.⁵¹ In her articles, Álvarez provided numerous arguments against the aforementioned distinction.

She defended that money was neither impure nor dirty. If a player was paid money, this money would simply be a recognition of his or her value.⁵² Moreover, the distinction between amateur and professional sport people was snobbish. According to this distinction, only very wealthy people could devote themselves to elite sport because, in the 1960s, athletes had to dedicate many hours and years to training and competition in order to excel in sport.⁵³ On the other hand, the sporting career of a top tennis player was very short. What would an amateur do afterwards, if they had not won any money in the international circuit?⁵⁴ Money was definitely present in amateur tennis competitions, since clubs, managers and federations accrued a lot of money at the expense of players. In her own words: ‘the lofty theory of “amateurism” was a splendid fable and excuse used by clubs to exploit at ease players’ sweat and talent’.⁵⁵

Álvarez forecasted that the technical level of amateur tennis would increase in the absence of the distinction between amateurism and professionalism. What happened in the 1960s, and before, was that once players obtained victories in major amateur world-class competitions, they passed to professionalism. Subsequently, the amateur tournaments were deprived of some of the best tennis players of the world. As she stated:

Currently, in the amateur sector, I notice insufficient challenges. The technically best

players, that is, the professional players, cannot take part in amateur tournaments and additionally can be completely ignored. Subsequently, amateur players are not compelled to demand a lot of themselves. They know that they are required to excel only occasionally (in important tournaments).⁵⁶

Additionally, Álvarez dared to mention corruption by denouncing that amateur athletes received payments ‘under the table’.⁵⁷ She explained the trick of amateur players who were paid generous ‘expense fees’ such that for some of these athletes ‘it was more lucrative to remain in the amateur sector than to pass to the professional sector’.⁵⁸

The management of international tennis evolved in the direction defended by Álvarez and others. In the late 1960s, the distinction between amateurism and professionalism was progressively abandoned, and the open era subsequently commenced, allowing all types of players to participate in the most prestigious tournaments. As a journalist, in 1968, Álvarez chronicled again for *Blanco y Negro* the first ‘open’ Wimbledon.⁵⁹

Indirect evidence points to the great influence of Álvarez’s articles on this subject. *ABC* was one of the principal newspapers for a general readership of the country, and Álvarez’s articles were published in *ABC* and its supplement *Blanco y Negro*. Moreover, the aforementioned articles were reprinted in 1968 forming a book titled *The Myth of Amateurism* by a leading publishing house: Editorial Prensa Española.⁶⁰ The book was widely published in *ABC*: an advertisement of the publication was printed in *ABC* on twenty-three different days between June 14 and October 6, 1966. With her writings, Álvarez attempted to direct Spaniards’ attention away from the national sport of soccer and towards tennis, a sport practised and watched by a minority of the population. Perhaps Álvarez succeeded in this regard to some degree, and she also tried to foster sporting interests and

practice among girls and women, another minority in sociological terms.

Álvarez's Attempts to Promote Women's Sport

In Franco's Spain, women who wanted to exercise faced numerous obstacles. Detractors of women's physical exercise abounded and included, among others, traditionally-minded families and a fraction of the medical profession. The most vocal and intransigent opponent to women's sport was possibly the Catholic Church, whose abhorrence to female physical exercise was monumental. The Church hierarchy attacked women's sport, both amateur and professional, with many arguments.⁶¹ In the book titled *Sport from the True Moral Point of View* by the doctoral canon of the Vich cathedral Father Esteban Orriols, sport, especially when played outdoors, was un-Catholic because it implied the public exhibition of women's bodies.⁶² These constituted temptations that fostered men's lust. Women were to remain at home, and dedicate themselves to domestic chores and caring duties. This principle also applied to young women, who should be at home preparing themselves for domesticity and motherhood or alternatively for a life devoted to religion, by becoming nuns. In essence, women should take care of their souls while repressing their bodies. Especially watchful were Catholic prelates regarding sport clothes. These were defined as immoral because these were light, uncovered parts of the female body and promoted women's indecency. The list of detrimental effects of sport on women's life was long and included, among others, the masculinization of women's bodies, the hypertrophy of specific body parts, internal injuries, rejection to housewifery (*odio al hogar*), avoidance of maternity (*huida de la maternidad*) and sterility.⁶³

In its aversion to women's sport, the Spanish Catholic hierarchy followed the fierce hostility of the Vatican against women's sport – but not men's sport – expressed in the 1929

Encyclical *Divini Illius Magistri* and other papal documents, which were often quoted by Spanish Catholic prelates.⁶⁴

It is true that in the first decades of the twentieth century, Catholic hierarchies also antagonized women's sports in countries other than Spain including Poland, Germany and Italy.⁶⁵ However, historiography suggests that the degree of hostility against female physical exercise held by Catholic prelates was not exactly the same across societies, with German bishops slightly less harsh in their (nonetheless firm) condemnation of sporting females than their Spanish, Polish and Italian counterparts.⁶⁶

In Spain, the Catholic Church was an actor of paramount importance. After the expulsion of Jews in 1492 and Muslims afterwards, Spain became a nearly homogeneous Catholic country up to the end of the twentieth century, notwithstanding periods of contesting Church power. In Franco's Spain, Catholicism was the official religion of the country. Freedom of worship was abolished. The state allowed the Catholic Church to control part of the educational system, that is, an important number of primary and secondary schools. In all primary and secondary schools, the state made religious teaching and religious practice mandatory and education had to conform to the teachings of the Catholic Church. Some Catholic doctrines were reflected in state laws. For instance, Catholic marriage was mandatory, with very few exceptions, divorce was abolished, the selling and advertising of contraceptives was prohibited, and abortion was criminalized in all circumstances. The state economically supported the Church, which was exempt from taxation. In turn, the Church supported the authoritarian regime and provided it with legitimacy. However, in the last decades of the dictatorship, a part (only a part) of the Church distanced itself from the regime, self-criticized its earlier support to the regime and even gave support and protection to political dissidents.⁶⁷

In her published articles and public lectures, Álvarez challenged these ideals of the Catholic Church, and exhorted girls and women to practice sports. As stated above, she began to pen articles some years before the Spanish Civil War. Already in 1930, Álvarez defended some sports, for example tennis, suggesting that they suited women while other sports did not, for instance boxing or polo. Regarding tennis, a scholarly analysis of over fifty British and American textbooks and instructional guides published between 1880 and the onset of World War II found that ‘the standard and style of women’s play was compared to men’s and always found wanting’.⁶⁸ In 1930, Álvarez also compared women’s and men’s tennis. However, she argued that women played tennis not worse than men, as it was often stated, but in a different way. She recognized that female tennis had not reached the same level as male tennis, but this difference was due to the situation of subordination in which women lived. Arguing in this manner, Álvarez linked female sporting achievements to the general status of women in society, and reassured her readers that it is possible for women both to play tennis and at the same time be very feminine.⁶⁹ On the other hand, also in 1930, Álvarez argued that elite women tennis players were often distracted by fans and mass media, and so advised female players to remain focused on their sport.⁷⁰

In Franco’s Spain, Álvarez advocated for girls’ and women’s sport by delivering public lectures and talks in various locations. Usually, her talks were announced in advance in the main newspapers and once delivered, these newspapers summarized their main arguments and reported that large audiences listened to the talks. For example, in 1959, at the exhibition commemorating the 25th anniversary of the establishment of the Feminine Section, Álvarez delivered a lecture titled: ‘The Spanish Women, Sport and Everything Else’. She bitterly argued that most Spanish women were trapped in a state of mind characterized by passivity. She acknowledged that Spanish women had traditional and laudable feminine

qualities such as generosity and abnegation. Nonetheless, Spanish women lacked their own judgement and initiative. Sport could help women reach a higher stage of maturity and personal development. The major newspaper *ABC* announced this talk in advance and summarized its content.⁷¹ Catalonia-based main newspaper *La Vanguardia* also synthesized the lecture and reported that ‘at the end of her talk, the lecturer was greatly applauded by the large audience that completely filled the lecture hall’.⁷² Additionally, Álvarez gave a talk with the same title on December 7, 1960 in Barcelona. Again, *La Vanguardia* announced the talk in advance,⁷³ and, in summarizing its content in detail, the newspaper wrote that the lecture ‘was delivered ... at the bridge room of the Turó Royal Tennis Club, which was converted into a cosy lecture hall whose capacity was clearly insufficient for the large and selected audience who attended the lecture’.⁷⁴ It was also reported that the lecture was interrupted ‘due to the audience’s applause’, and that ‘a long ovation followed the magnificent dissertation by Lili Álvarez. She was warmly congratulated at the end, and several flower bouquets were given to her after the talk’.⁷⁵ In a more restrained tone, *ABC* announced that a lecture with a similar title would be delivered on 30 November, 1961 at the Madrid headquarters of the Spanish Association of University Women.⁷⁶

Lastly, in Franco’s Spain between 1940 and 1942, Álvarez briefly collaborated with state authorities on women’s sport policy. The Feminine Section of the single party was in charge of the management of female sport, and set up an advisory committee on sport, which, in 1940, nominated Álvarez to be one of these advisors.⁷⁷ In the early 1940s, Álvarez taught training courses to would-be tennis and skiing instructors, since, generally speaking, the Feminine Section faced an acute shortage of female sport instructors.⁷⁸ In addition, Álvarez also sporadically participated in political events managed by the Feminine Section. In 1941, at the Fifth National Congress of the Feminine Section held in Barcelona and Gerona,

Álvarez delivered a public speech. According to newspaper accounts, she talked about the promotion of sport in various countries, and praised ‘totalitarian’ regimes for their hard work in this regard.⁷⁹

Sport as Part of Spain’s Modernization

According to two propositions drawn from historiography, female pioneers of elite sport directly influence the next cohort of elite women athletes by serving as role models and/or instructors. Undoubtedly, Álvarez was a female pioneer of elite sport, but these propositions are not confirmed in Álvarez’s case. The peak of Álvarez’s tennis career occurred during the years 1926-1928, when she was finalist at Wimbledon for three consecutive years and held the unofficial number two rank in the world of women’s tennis. However, in Spain, the next cohort of female world-class tennis players did not appear in the years following the peak of Álvarez’s tennis career, not even during Franco’s dictatorship. It was only in the 1980s and 1990s that Spanish women reached the summit of female tennis world, when Arantxa Sánchez Vicario and Conchita Martínez won world-class tournaments. They were born in 1971 and 1972 respectively, that is, when Álvarez was in her late sixties. Álvarez was not directly involved in Sánchez Vicario’s and Martínez’s tennis careers prior to their ascent to the peak of female tennis. Martínez never met Álvarez.⁸⁰ Sánchez Vicario met Álvarez for the first time in 1989, when the newspaper *ABC* awarded her the prize called ‘Golden ABC’ after her singles victory at the 1989 French Open at Roland Garros.⁸¹ Afterwards, they met only rarely, and Álvarez occasionally telephoned Sánchez Vicario to congratulate her after her victories in international tournaments.⁸² Thus, Álvarez’s and Sánchez Vicario’s very few encounters, whether face-to-face or by phone, happened after, but not before, the latter reached the summit of female tennis.

In Franco's Spain, Álvarez was directly involved in public policy towards female sport only between 1940 and 1942, when she collaborated with the Feminine Section in the management of women's sport. However, this collaboration was very sporadic and brief, and not long enough for Álvarez to leave a direct legacy on public policy related to female sport. Also, the Feminine Section did not direct its efforts to elite sport, and instead avoided competitive sport and focused on fostering physical exercise at the grass-roots level.⁸³ To the best of my knowledge, Álvarez was not involved in the management of private sport clubs either. In theory, private clubs could have fostered women's excellence in sport, but generally speaking, they did not play this role for women. With important exceptions, the same was true regarding men's sport. For example, regarding tennis, and as Álvarez herself denounced, private clubs functioned mostly as social clubs and only to a lesser extent as true sporting organizations dedicated to developing talent. The case of Álvarez in Franco's Spain suggests that in order to directly influence the next cohort of female elite athletes, female pioneers of elite sport should participate in the management of female elite sport within the state and/or in private sport clubs. Although this participation is not a sufficient condition, it may be a necessary circumstance.

Historiography has recently claimed that some pioneer sporting females promoted women's sport by inventing or perfecting sporting apparel and designing more suitable sporting clothes. Again, there is little evidence found of Álvarez's activities in this regard.

Extant literature on sporting pioneers, as discussed above, argues that the interest generated in their sports was due to various activities including, among others, being authors of sporting publications. Álvarez definitely contributed to the promotion of sport in Spain in this way. She was a very famous world-class athlete who enthusiastically exhorted women and men to exercise in the newspaper and magazine articles she published and the public

talks she delivered in many different locations. She also helped to disseminate knowledge on sport in society by publishing articles on the topic and covering specific tournaments as a journalist. In her articles and public speeches, she attempted to focus Spaniards' attention away from soccer, by far the most popular sport in Spain, to other sports such as tennis and, to a lesser extent, skiing, which were practiced and followed by a minority of the population.

It should be stressed that Álvarez's impact on the promotion of sport did not refer mainly to women's sport but to sport in general. Álvarez's case suggests more generally that sporting female pioneers may influence the history of sport of their countries, and not only the history of women's sport.

Seen from another and broader perspective, it is apparent that Álvarez's promotion of sport can be understood as part of Spain's 'modernization' and integration into a modern global sport culture. This theme unifies almost all of her writings and the discrete topics she wrote about, including: sport as something that everyone can practice and appreciate; sports beyond soccer; intricacies of tennis tournaments; amateurism versus professionalism; and female exercise. This theme situates Álvarez within the Francoist dictatorship. She began affiliating herself with the fascist discourse on sport during the dominant phase of this regime in the early 1940s, but then her writings seemed to shift in parallel to the regime's discourse. Most of her writings and lectures featured here were from the late 1950s and 1960s, which fit into the shift in the Franco regime's discourse from autarchy to international integration and 'modernization' as a way for Spaniards to catch up and integrate to the rest of the world. Thus, Álvarez had an impact on what has become a core part of Spain's claimed 'modernity' and identity today, that is, international sporting performance. Álvarez had such an impact because she was both a sport celebrity and a public intellectual.

However interesting the case of Álvarez is, it might be claimed that she constitutes an

exceptional case. Álvarez was an exceptionally high-ranked woman athlete in Spain and remained unique in this sense for decades. Spanish female world-class athletes emerged many years after the 1920s, when Álvarez was at her peak in tennis. For example, it was only in 1992 that a Spanish woman won a medal at the Winter Olympics (Blanca Fernández Ochoa, bronze medal in slalom), and that same year that Spanish women won medals at the Summer Olympics.⁸⁴ Additionally, Álvarez excelled in tennis, a sport that in Franco's Spain was generally considered suitable for women. She was famous while other Spanish pioneers of elite sport were not. For example, the three other lawn tennis players who along with Álvarez for the first time represented Spain in the 1924 Olympics were not as well-known as Álvarez. Margot Moles and Ernestina Maenza, the two women who first represented Spain in the Winter Olympics, in the German Games of 1936, remained virtually unknown. Furthermore, in Franco's Spain, Álvarez was famous not only due to her stellar sporting career but also because she became a public intellectual publishing and giving public talks on religion, sport and women's issues.

Through her writings and public lectures, Álvarez sent society the message that sport in general and female sport were legitimate. She did not influence directly a next cohort of elite female athletes, but probably she indirectly influenced other women and men, who ended up exercising or at least developing an interest in sport. To trace the specificities of this influence – possibly with the help of oral history and private documentary sources not utilized in this article – would be a potentially fruitful next step for future research on the impact of the first highly-ranked sporting females in the history of sport.

¹ Erica Munkwitz, 'Designing Diana: Female Sports Entrepreneurs and Equestrian Innovation', *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 35, nos. 7-9 (2018): 745-66.

² Nancy L. Struna, 'Beyond Mapping Experience: The Need for Understanding in the History of American Sporting Women,' *Journal of Sport History* 11, no.1 (1984): 120-33, 121-23.

³ Both newspapers are digitalized. Using the key words ‘Lilí Álvarez’, I searched all issues of *ABC* between 1930 and 1998 and *La Vanguardia* between 1919 and 1950.

⁴ Carly Adams, ‘(Writing Myself into) Betty White’s Stories: (De)constructing Narratives of/through Feminist Sport History Research’, *Journal of Sport History* 39, no. 3 (2012): 395-413; Dave Day, “‘What Girl Will Now Remain Ignorant of Swimming?’” Agnes Beckwith, Aquatic Entertainer and Victorian Role Model’, *Women’s History Review* 21, no. 3 (2012): 419-46; Gigliola Gori, A Glittering Icon of Fascist Femminity: Trebisonda “Ondina” Valla’, *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 18, no. 1 (2001): 173-95.

⁵ Adams, ‘Writing Myself’, 408.

⁶ Jennifer Hargreaves, *Sporting Females: Critical Issues in the History and Sociology of Women’s Sports* (London: Routledge, 1994), 89; Erica Munkwitz, ‘Angels and Amazons: Fox-hunting and Sporting Emancipation for Women’, *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 35, no.6 (2018): 511-29, 512.

⁷ Day, ‘What Girl’; Dave Day, ‘Swimming Natationists, Mistresses, and Matrons: Familial Influences on Female Careers in Victorian Britain’, *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 35, no.6 (2018): 494-510, 499, 502, 505; Gigliola Gori, *Italian Fascism and the Female Body: Sport, Submissive Women and Strong Mothers* (London: Routledge, 2004), 201.

⁸ Day, ‘What Girl’, 419-21; Day, ‘Swimming Natationists’, 494.

⁹ Hargreaves, *Sporting Females*, 103.

¹⁰ Mike Callan, Conor Heffernan, and Amanda Spenn, ‘Women’s Jujutsu and Judo in Early Twentieth-Century: The Cases of Phoebe Roberts, Edith Garrud, and Sarah Mayer,’ *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 35, no.6 (2018): 530-53, 532, 544; Day, ‘What Girl’; Gori, ‘A Glittering Icon’, 173, 178-79, 189; 193; Gori, *Italian Fascism*, 203; Hargreaves, *Sporting Females*, 118; Munkwitz, ‘Angels and Amazons’.

¹¹ Munkwitz, ‘Designing Diana’.

¹² Day, ‘What Girl’; Day, ‘Swimming Nationists’.

¹³ Callan et al., 535, 537.

¹⁴ Hargreaves, *Sporting Females*, 74-79.

¹⁵ Day, ‘What Girl’; ‘Swimming Nationists’, 5.

¹⁶ Callan et al., ‘Women’s Jujutsu’.

¹⁷ Munkwitz, ‘Designing Diana’.

¹⁸ Adams, ‘Writing Myself’; Callan et al., ‘Women’s Jujutsu’; Day ‘What Girl’, Day, ‘Swimming Nationists’; Hargreaves, *Sporting Females*; Munkwitz, ‘Angels and Amazons’; Munkwitz, ‘Designing Diana’.

¹⁹ Callan et al., ‘Women’s Jujutsu’, 547.

²⁰ Hargreaves, *Sporting Females*, 118-19.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 115.

²² Catherine G. Bellver, ‘Lilí Álvarez: Star Athlete, Writer, and Feminist ‘a su manera’’, *Letras Hispánicas* 7, no.1 (2010): 17-26, 18; *ABC*, 18 November 1930, 50.

²³ Hargreaves, *Sporting Females*, 100; Robert J. Lake, ‘Gender and Etiquette in British Lawn Tennis 1870-1939: A Case Study of “Mixed Doubles”’, *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 29, no.5 (2012): 691-710, 691, 693.

²⁴ Teresa González Aja, ‘Spanish Sport Policy in Republican and Fascist Spain’, in *Sport and International Politics: Impact of Fascism and Communism on Sport*, eds. Pierre Arnaud and James Riordan (London: Routledge, 2013); Arnd Krüger, ‘Strength through Joy: The Culture

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²⁶ Juan J. Linz, ‘An Authoritarian Regime: Spain’, in *Mass Politics: Studies in Political Sociology*, eds. Erik Allardt and Stein Rokkan (New York: Free Press, 1970).

²⁷ Catriona M. Parratt, ‘About Turns: Reflecting on Sport History in the 1990s’, *Sport History Review* 29, no.1 (1998): 4-17, 8.

²⁸ Catalina Riaño, *Historia cultural del deporte y la mujer en la España de la primera mitad del XX a través de la vida y la obra de Elia María González Álvarez y López-Chicheri, ‘Lilí Álvarez’* [Cultural History of Sport and Women in Spain in the First Half of the Twentieth Century Based on the Life and Works of Elia María González Álvarez y López-Chicheri—Known as Lilí Álvarez] (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Deportes, 2004), 29.

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³⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 25-30.

³² Riaño, *Historia cultural*, 79.

³³ Bellver, ‘Lilí Álvarez’, 18; *La Vanguardia*, 13 November 1930, 25, 28.

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³⁵ Riaño, *Historia cultural*, 37.

³⁶ Lilí Álvarez, ‘La fiesta del invierno: Breve historia del deporte blanco’ [Winter Party: Brief History of the White Sport], *Revista Gran Mundo* (1952) no.5.

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⁴⁰ Lilí Álvarez, ‘El sentido deportivo’ [The Sporting Sense], *ABC*, 18 March 1965, 47-48.

⁴¹ Álvarez, ‘Meditación’.

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- ⁵² Álvarez, 'El deporte y el arte', 39; Álvarez, 'El deporte y el concepto', 21.
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⁶⁹ Lili Álvarez, 'El tenis y la mujer' [Tennis and Women], *La Nación* (Argentina), 18 November 1930.

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⁷² *La Vanguardia*, 28 November 1959, 36.

⁷³ *La Vanguardia*, 7 December 1960, 31, 43.

⁷⁴ *La Vanguardia*, 8 December 1960, 35.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *ABC*, 30 November 1961, 65.

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⁷⁹ *ABC*, 15 January 1941, 6; *La Vanguardia*, 15 January 1941, 1.

⁸⁰ Conchita Martínez, 'Una lucha admirable' [An admirable struggle], *ABC*, 9 July 1998: 83.

⁸¹ *ABC*, 24 December 1989, 10; *ABC*, 7 January 1990, 16-21.

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⁸³ Ofer, *Señoritas in Blue*, 112.

⁸⁴ Roberto Jiménez, *El deporte femenino español en los Juegos Olímpicos* [Spanish Women's Sport at the Olympics] (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Deportes, 2015), 308-10.

Acknowledgements

For invaluable comments on earlier versions, I owe thanks to Rosemary Barberet, Xavier Coller, Roberto Garvía, Carmen González, Rodolfo Gutiérrez, Noemí de Haro, Pamela Radcliff, Esther Ruiz, editor Robert Lake and an anonymous reviewer. This article is dedicated to my son Ricardo, the joy and inspiration of my life.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This work was supported by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness (Grant number PGC2018-097232-B-C21)

Notes on Contributor; Error! Sólo el documento principal.

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