

EVOLUTION OF SPORTS: FEMALE TRADITION

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ABSTRACT

For a long time women played no more than a marginal role in the Olympic movement. Even in 1992 women represented less than 30% of the competitors at the Summer Olympic Games. On their way to Olympia women were faced with a great number of obstacles. The opposition which they met was directed at not only women's participation in sport but also the masculinization that this was alleged to produce as well as the 'emancipation' of women and the perceived threat of change in the gender order itself. In an age when the ideals, duties and roles of the two sexes in everyday life were being radically transformed by processes of modernization, it was hoped that sport and the Olympic Games might contribute towards upholding the myth of the male as the 'stronger sex'. In the 19th century, women, like the ovens they cooked on, belonged in the home and not on the sports ground. This was true of both Europe and the USA. It lay 'in the nature of things' that girls should be excluded from the first initiatives and concepts of physical education which, like German Turnen or Swedish gymnastics, began to appear in the early 19th century. Girls and Women, for example, were not allowed on the first German Turnen grounds opened in 1811 in a Berlin park known as Hasenheide; they could only admire the feats of the Turner from the perimeter. Modern sport of English origin was, in its early phase, also an exclusively male domain. Although physical exertion and competition were held to be contrary to a woman's nature, by the end of the 19th century a few women did take part in bicycle racing, swimming contests and even in parachuting or ski jumping, much to the horror of the public.

Key words: Olympic movement, emancipation, Swedish gymnastic

INTRODUCTION:

It was no wonder then that the Olympic Games were considered to be a male preserve as they had been in ancient Greece. Throughout his life, de Coubertin, a typical man of his times, thought that women should not sully the Games with their sweat but should merely crown the victors. However, he only succeeded in excluding women once, in 1896. The bold intention of a Greek woman to compete in the first Olympic marathon was firmly rejected. However, she was not to be deterred from carrying out her plan and ran the full distance of 42km 194m alone some days before the Games began. She took hours to complete the course. Another woman, a 35-yearold mother of seven children, was so excited about the victory of Spyros Louis that after the

games she tried to emulate him. She, too, was able to run the full distance without any difficulty in 5.5 hours.

12 women took part in the tennis and golf competitions in second Olympics games 1900, in Paris. However, women participated in the Games without the official consent of or comment from the IOC' At the St Louis Games in 1904. only eight American women represented their country, this time in archery, although IOC members, who were strong opponents of competitive sport for women, declared the archery competition to be an exhibition only (Welch & Costa, 1994).

It was not until 1908, when the Olympic Games were held in England, the birthplace of modern sport, that women's sports achieved a modest upswing, with women competing in four disciplines – ice-skating, sailing, tennis and archery – all of them sports with high social prestige.

STRUGGLES AND CONFLICTS:

The growing significance of women's sports and the increasing activities of the FSFI forced the IOC at regular intervals to turn its attention to the role of women in the 'Olympic family'. At the IOC assembly in 1920, for example, de Coubertin announced that women should be excluded from the Games. In 1923 there was renewed debate in the IOC about the 'abus et excès' of this new women's sports movement and it was recommended that women's sport should be placed under the supervision of the international sports federations. From then on the 'women's issue' was on the agenda of almost all IOC meetings, and the international federations started to play a major role in the debate on 'Olympic Women In the committees of the IOC and the IAAF various strategies were developed. At first there was a general consensus that women should be prevented from competing in Olympic track and field disciplines, but later the men were forced to concede a minimum degree of integration in order not to lose their influence on women's sport completely. The main strategy used was that of limiting women's participation to only a small number of disciplines. However, the attitudes of IOC and IAAF members to the 'women's issue' varied, not least because they also followed the interests and directives of national sports federations. One result of this is to be seen in the run-up to the 1932 Olympics in Los Angeles,

where the American members of the IOC supported the participation of women in track and field events since they were aware that there were good chances of their female athletes winning medals in these disciplines.

DIGRESSION:

Women's sport as reflected in the medical discourse-

The great controversy about allowing women to compete in sports events is closely connected with the stereotype views on the nature of women and the myth of the 'weaker sex'. In the 1920s the arguments put forward in this debate were wholly supported, like all the popular theories on the abilities and roles of the sexes both in sport and elsewhere, by mainstream medicine. The central issues of the medical discourse focused on the forms of physical activities suitable for women as well as the participation of female athletes in competitive sports. In the view of the medical profession, forms of women's physical culture were determined by their obligation to bear children. Women seemed to be both the products and the captives of the reproductive system. For most doctors, therefore, the only question raised by women's participation in sports was that of its possible effects on childbirth. It was the general belief that 'all sporting activities undertaken by adult women have to be judged from the point of view of reproduction'. Although there was little knowledge about the effects of physical exertion and athletic activity on the number of children a woman might have or on the course of childbirth, most doctors discouraged women from participating in competitive and strenuous sports. With the authority of medical science they constructed a variety of theories on the negative effects of sports on the female body. The 'vitalistic' theory, popular in the 19th century, contended that the human body contained only a limited, unrenewable amount of energy. Applied to women's sports, this meant that women had to conserve their energy for their essential purpose in life, i.e. for bearing and looking after children: 'Its premature exhaustion [by sporting activities] violates the nature of girls and women'. In the 19th century it was a widespread belief that the uterus was the most vulnerable and fragile part of the female body. Even in the 1920s gynecologists were still of the opinion that the uterus 'pulls at its sinews with every vigorous jump a woman makes, and may

even tilt backwards'. In addition, excessive physical exercise was said to hinder the development of the pelvis and, as a result, cause difficulty during childbirth. A further, very influential theory put forward by a well-known gynaecologist claimed that women should have slack muscles capable of expansion: 'Each attempt to train the muscles of the female abdomen and pelvis leads to a tautening of the muscle fibres so that childbirth becomes much more difficult, if not impossible. Scarcely any male doctors and only a handful of female doctors were convinced that women by nature were not as weak and needful of care and rest as was claimed in the medical textbooks. Many of the first doctors (in Germany, at least) to begin systematic research into the effects of physical activities on the female body were women. Female doctors, for example, interviewed and examined more than 1500 participants at a sports festival in 1928. They were, like many of their colleagues, unable to discover any negative effects of sporting activities on the women they examined. The results of investigations into women's sports were summarized at an international congress of women doctors in 1934.'

Observable progress has been made in the struggle for equal opportunities among men and women in the Olympic movement, but is this enough? When women have achieved integration and are thus potentially able to exert influence, are they not called upon at the same time to play a more active role than they have done up to the present in seeking solutions for the problems connected with high-level sports? Furthermore, in many countries women have scarcely any opportunity of taking up a sport in their leisure time. In a time of economic austerity and limited resources, the question here is how and where priorities are to be set. Whatever conclusions are reached, it must always be borne in mind that women's Olympic successes are good publicity for women's sport in general and that this publicity must at the same time be used to help dismantle the barriers which prevent or hinder the active participation of women in sport.

ASPECTS RELATED TO THE ELITE FEMALE ATHLETES :

- Physiological aspects and female athletes

The physiological demands of most sporting events are similar for men and women athletes. Likewise, training methods seem to be similar. Although men athletes may be swifter, able to go

higher and are stronger than women athletes in absolute terms, women athletes respond to training with many of the same physiological adaptations. Although much is known about the initial responses of women to training and about the physiological adaptations (e.g. changes in cardiac structure and function) seen in athletes and attributed to training for many years, to reach their full potentials athletes need to make little adaptations in their entire sports life.

- Biomechanics and female athletes

It is important to recognize that biomechanical aspects are the outcomes or effects of forces (kinetics) applied to the body system. Therefore, if a coach is viewing an effect (i.e. a change in position or velocity), the resulting change is a consequence of an applied force. In order to change a performance outcome, the coach must focus on the cause of motion (force) and how, when and where it is applied. In any situation, we are governed by Newton's three laws of motion in an environment subjected to the forces of gravity and friction. The athlete who best utilizes her mechanical advantages by manipulating the COM and lever systems while understanding how Newton's laws are affecting her is often the best performer in any given event.

- Psychological aspect and female athletes

The research reviewed indicates that the most adaptive and effective training of female athletes must consider the psychological components and consequences of such training. Élite female athletes have been found to possess strong mental skills as well as outstanding physical skills and physiological capacities. Most relevant to sound sport practice, the psychological skills in question, such as maintaining one's concentration (focus) and confidence, reducing stress, use of imagery and goal-setting, are trainable. The training of serious female athletes becomes extreme when both the physical and psychological requirements are too great. The inferences of overtraining for the female players affect the body and the mind and, eventually, her continued involvement in the athletic domain. Conceptually driven investigations are now providing insight into, and guidance concerning the nature of, the training environments most beneficial to the performance and participation of female athletes in sport.

CONCLUSION:

It is essential to focus on why more women are needed in international and national sports governing bodies. First, it can be regarded as a matter of equality. Equality can be defined in different ways and I have found the following definition, taken from the Swedish Sports Confederation (1990), useful: Equality means that women and men have the same rights, obligations and opportunities in all the main fields of life; women and men share power, influence and responsibility in all sectors of the community. But unfortunately this is not the case for sport. There are three arguments why it is important to change this situation.

1. Women account for more than half the population. They are underrepresented in sports organizations not only in membership but also in relation to other roles such as leadership, coaching, management and referees. Equality in decision-making assemblies is therefore a matter of democracy.
2. Women and men have different knowledge and expertise. Therefore it is important that the views of both groups are considered.
3. Women and men have different values and different interests. Therefore increased representation of women can lead to new perspectives on many issues.

In conclusion, sports organizations need the participation of women more than the women need sports organizations. The solution to recruiting more women into the leadership of sports organizations, and keeping them, is difficult. The results of the studies presented in this chapter indicate that changes in the sports organizations themselves are necessary. Emphasizing women's lives, experiences and values in the further development of sport may be one way. This can most easily be done by women themselves just because they are women. To be certain that many more women can gain access to leadership roles in practice, more knowledge, i.e. research, is needed. This should focus on the interrelationship between power, sexuality and the structure

of sports governing bodies and/ or how sports organizations construct gender and how gender relations construct the sports organizations.

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