



The changing role of women in the Olympic Games

Sport belongs to all human beings. It is unique to the human species. Like humans, other animals engage in play. But only the human species takes part in sport. We are the only ones on earth who set up barriers and try to jump over them to see who can get to the finish line first. We are the only ones who compete for the sheer satisfaction of winning.

Sport is our birthright. Sport provides an opportunity for individuals to set their own goals and accomplish those goals, whether to run a mile in four minutes or to jump eight feet. It allows a person to take on a personal challenge and to succeed. And yet, at the revival of the world's most enduring and im-

by Anita L. DeFrantz*

Games, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, was not in favour of women participating in the Games, or in sports in general. Writing in the *Olympic Review* in 1912: Coubertin defined the Games as “the solemn and periodic exaltation of male athleticism, with internationalism as a base, loyalty as a means, art for its setting, and female applause as reward”. According to the sport historian Mary Leigh, he believed that “a woman’s glory rightfully came through the number and quality of children she produced, and that as far as sports were concerned, her greatest accomplishment was to en-

it is not surprising that women were excluded from the first modern-era Olympic Games, held in Athens in 1896. Even though women were excluded from the 1896 Olympic Games, an enduring legend has maintained that a woman ran “unofficially” in the men’s marathon. The evidence suggests that no woman ran in the marathon alongside the men, but that a woman did run the marathon course the day after the Olympic Games.

By the end of the nineteenth century and during the beginning of the twentieth century, industrialization and the impact of social reform through the women’s movement changed the passive role of women to an active one. This change also was slowly becoming evident in sports.

Women competed in golf and tennis in 1900 at the Games of the II Olympiad in Paris, and archery was added for women in 1904 in St. Louis. Archery stayed in the programme through 1908, and tennis continued on the programme through 1924. Women also took part in yachting and figure skating at the 1908 Games. But the International Swimming Federation was the first to promote women’s involvement actively; it voted to include women on the Olympic Games programme in swimming in 1912. This opened the way for other international governing bodies to follow, but they followed extremely slowly.

The story of track and field is very enlightening in this regard. In response to the exclusion of women from track and field in the Olympic Games, Alice Milliat of France founded the Fédération Feminine Sportive de France (FFSF) in 1917 to oversee national women’s athletic competition. Four years later, she established the Federation Sportive



Start of the women’s 800m in Amsterdam in 1928.

portant sporting event, the Olympic Games, 51% of humanity was excluded. The founder of the modern Olympic

courage her sons to excel rather than to seek records for herself. With such strong feelings on the part of Coubertin,



Anita DeFrantz (second rower from the left) and her bronze medal-winning team-mates at the Games of the XXI Olympiad in Montreal in 1976.

Feminine Internationale (FSFI) to include international competition. The FSFI conducted the first Ladies' Olympic Games in 1922 in Paris, and similar games every four years until 1934, and the programme of athletic events rose as high as 15, with 19 countries participating in these games in 1934 in London. In fact, the 1924 Women's International and British Games were attended by 25,000 spectators.

Naturally, when it became apparent that the Ladies' Olympic Games were successful in terms of competition and participation, the men's international governing body, the International Amateur Athletic Federation (IAAF), became interested in absorbing the FSFI. The struggle between the IAAF and FSFI

went on for 14 years. During the struggle, the IAAF decided to offer women an opportunity to compete in the Games of the IX Olympiad in Amsterdam in 1928. But the women were offered only five events, and the press (still a male-dominated institution) was decidedly against participation by women in the Olympic Games.

At the centre of the 1928 controversy was the women's 800-metre run. The administrators, members of the IOC, and the media apparently had decided that women were too frail to compete in a race as long as 800 metres. As a result, the reports from the 1928 Games not only distorted the results of that race, but in some cases completely fabricated facts to support their viewpoint. The

tragic result was that the event was removed from the Olympic programme and was not reinstated until 1960.

John Tunis, a prominent sportswriter of the day, portrayed the 800-metre event as follows: "Below us on the cinder path were 11 wretched women, 5 of whom dropped out before the finish, while 5 collapsed after reaching the tape". Unfortunately for Mr Tunis the camera and motion pictures had been invented by 1928. Photographs and film, as well as Olympic Games records, clearly indicate that only 9 women started the race, not 11. Furthermore, all 9 of the women finished the race. The winner, Lina Radke of Germany, set a world record. She and a few of the other competitors were understandably spent after racing at

world-record pace. Some of them lay down beside the track, but none of them dropped out or collapsed from exhaustion.

And yet, members of the press chose to write what would suit the purpose of the male-dominated administration, and effectively prevented women from competing in any race longer than 200 metres in the Olympic Games for the next 32 years.

It is interesting to compare a report on men's events from earlier Games. The men's 800-metre race at the Games of the III Olympiad in St. Louis in 1904 was described as follows:

"Thursday afternoon at the finish of the 800-metre run, two men fell to the track, completely exhausted. One man was carried to his training quarters, helpless. Another was laid out on the grass and stimulants were used to bring him back to life."

Apparently the men were allowed to collapse following 800 metres, but the women were not. It is interesting that no one used this race to prevent men from running that distance in subsequent Olympic Games.

Of course, we know today that the decision-makers were wrong in denying women athletic opportunities equal to those enjoyed by men. We also know today that, given the opportunity to participate, women will excel and improve. The 800-metre event in 1928 challenged the ability of women to excel. Women have met that challenge. In fact, the improvement in women's athletic achievements since then has been remarkable.

The gender gap is shrinking rapidly in sports events shared by men and women. For example, the women's world record in the 800 metres set by Lina Radke in the Games of the IX Olympiad in Amsterdam in 1928 was only 26 seconds slower than the men's world record. In marathon, the women's record of 2:21.06 set by Ingrid Kristiansen would have defeated all of the men in this Olympic Games competi-

tion up to 1960, including the legendary Emil Zatopek, over whom she would have had a three-minute margin. Kristiansen would have beaten the male winner of the 1928 marathon by a full 12 minutes.

The growth of women's participation in track and field in the Olympic Games following the 1928 incident was painstakingly slow. By 1936 the IAAF had managed to absorb the women's organization completely. Leaders of the IAAF promised increased participation and support for women's sports at all levels, but the records suggest that they have been slow to fulfil that commitment. It was not until 1960 in Rome that women were once again permitted to race the 800 metres. In 1964 in Tokyo, the 400 metres was added, and in 1972 the 1,500 metres. By 1984 in Los Angeles the women had lobbied successfully for inclusion of the 400 metre hurdles and the marathon, and finally in 1988 in Seoul the 10,000-metre race gained acceptance on the programme. The 10,000-metre race walk event took place for the first time in 1992 in Barcelona. The triple jump and 5,000-metre race were added in Atlanta. It has taken nearly 70 years, since that first 800-metre race, for women to approach parity with men in terms of the number of events on the Olympic Games track and field programme, from just 5 events in 1928 to a slate of 20 events at the Games of the XXVI Olympiad, the Centennial Games, in Atlanta in 1996.

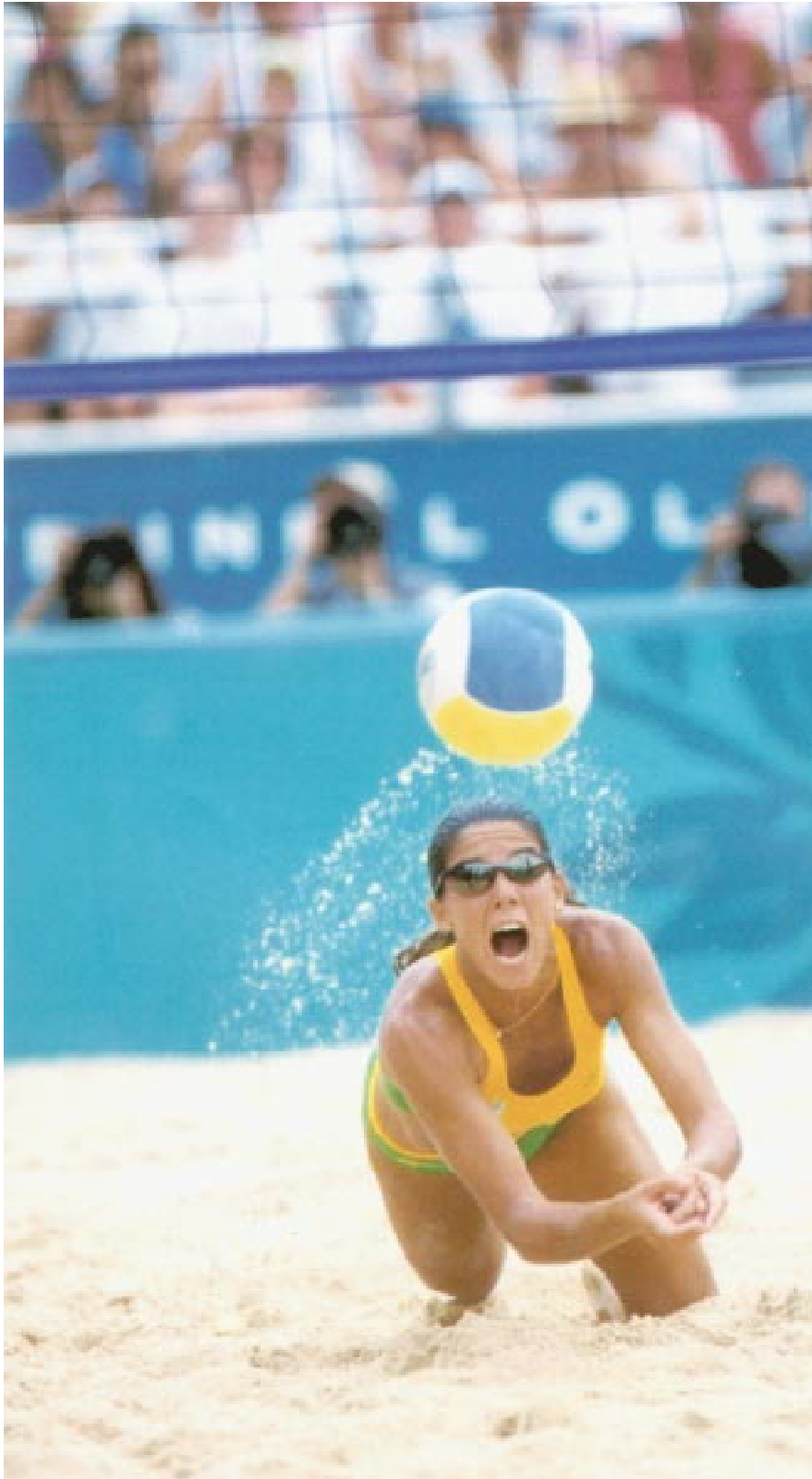
In sports other than track and field, comparisons reflecting the shrinking gender gap are even more remarkable. For example, in swimming, the 800-metre world record held by Frenchman Jean Tarris in 1930 was a full 2 minutes faster than Yvonne Goddard's women's record, but in 1989, the diminutive Janet Evan's world record trailed the men's time by less than 30 seconds, and her time of 8:17.12 is more than 2 minutes faster than Tarris' 1930 world record. At the III Olympic Winter Games in Lake Placid in 1932, in speed skating there

was a 14.6 second difference between the times of the men's gold medallist in the 500-metre race and the winner of the women's 500-metre demonstration event. By the XV Olympic Winter Games in 1988 in Calgary the margin between the male and female gold medal winners in 500 metres had decreased to 3.65 seconds.

Despite the impressive performances of female athletes in this century, women continue to see their athletic accomplishments distorted by the sporting press, just as they did in 1928. Study after study during the past 20 years has shown a clear pattern of underreporting and trivialization of women's sport by both print and electronic media.

In addition to the problems of media coverage, girls and women are hindered by lack of input from women at the administrative level. Women are conspicuously absent from the upper-level management positions where policy is determined world-wide. An informal survey undertaken by the Amateur Athletic Foundation of Los Angeles in 1990 revealed some disturbing evidence. The study discovered that of the nearly 13,000 administrative positions available in North American sports and the Olympic Movement, a mere 5% were held by women. This is in stark contrast to the fact that women constitute more than 51% of the world's population.

Change is in the air, however. And, it is coming from the top. In 1994, IOC President Juan Antonio Samaranch, a strong advocate of a greater inclusion of women in sport at all levels, asked that the Study Commission for the Centennial Olympic Congress, Congress of Unity, examine the issue of women's participation in the Olympic Games. The Commission made several recommendations including a call for more women on the IOC, an expansion of the women's competition programme and the creation of incentives for National Olympic Committees (NOCs) and International Sport Federations (IFs) to train women coaches and administrators.



Beach volleyball match in Atlanta, 1996.

In 1995 President Samaranch created the IOC Women and Sport Working Group to develop a strategy for implementing the recommendations of the Centennial Congress. The group endorsed the Congress's proposal that the NOCs and IFs reserve for women 10% of "offices in all their decision-making structures" by the year 2000 and 20% by 2005. The IOC Session passed the proposal at its 1996 Session prior to the Atlanta Games. The 105th IOC Session also elected three more women members to the IOC, bringing the total of women in the IOC to 10.

Additional evidence of the increasing role of women in sports is that the Games of the XXVI Olympiad, the Centennial Games, in Atlanta in 1996 featured an unprecedented number of women athletes (3,626) from a record number of countries (169). Women comprised about 35% of the total athletes and competed in approximately 40% of all events. Women competed for the first time in Olympic football (soccer) and softball.

Sport and the Olympic Movement have long been held in high regard for their ability to appreciate and celebrate human excellence. The Olympic Movement has been responsible for bringing together nations of the world. And, despite a rather slow start, the Olympic Movement has been instrumental in spreading opportunities for women in sports throughout the world. The challenge for all of us is to keep the effort under way.

The 1990s have brought enormous change in the political environment of the world. This environment of change should be used by all of us who care about sport to ensure that women and girls truly exercise their right to participate fully in the world of sports.

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