

WOMEN SPORTS AND THE OLYMPIC GAMES

(Extracts)

BY MARIE-THÉRÈSE EYQUEM

*General Superintendent of Women Sports
on the Executive Board of the High Commission
of Sport in France.*

The results obtained at the Olympics by women competitors have been the object of few or disparaging comments. This is an added proof of the indifference and general lack of interest in women sports.

Outstanding phenomena are the only people worth recording: 'Beautiful Wilma Rudolph who scored 11' (it is only fair to say that the wind was blowing at 2 m 47 per second); Yolande Balas (High jump) who scored 1 m 85) and was described as a 'slender daddy-long legs leaping and twirling like a windmill'; concluding with the hundred kilos contestants Brown and Press in the shotput event, who were described as: 'two clumsy cart-horses lugging about large hind-quarters in the style of 'a travelling train leaving half its heavy coaches behind!' (A. Blondin).

Yet I can swear that if a femalegrasshopper or a mastodon had won and succeeded in having the French colours flying from the Olympic mast, nobody would have dreamt to be so fastidious...

After every Olympic Games, the same kind of abusive nonsense is written and spread by opponents and detractors of women sports.

One could have thought these preliminary allegations and hackneyed conventions would have died out at a time when peasant women kill themselves with heavy manual work (which is detrimental to their looks), when employees and factory female workers although less robust than their husbands have to tackle housework and wear themselves out at home after a hard day's work. The fatigue is bound to tell on their looks in the long run. Times have changed, the days are gone when the husband could support his entire family on his salary, this of course entitled him to the devoted services of his wife who was 'a big-hearted slave' whose sole object in life was to serve and please her lord and master.

I still quote from Antoine Blondin who writes: 'The great genius of the Renaissance produced a set image of woman, she was the symbol of leisure and peace. This conception of woman is out of date nowadays, when one sees the leaping and swirling of clumsy country wenches hewn in the manner of wood-cutters in bas-reliefs.'

Clumsy country wenches existed long before women wentt in for hotput and if these very women, because ofsheir physique,

are good and successful in that event, why should we find fault with them? On the otherhand, I fail to see why sport should be held responsible for the fact that women of the XXth century have ceased to be a model of leisure and repose. Women are the first to regret it, poor dears! But since the modern woman assumes the full share of responsibilities why should she be denied some recreation and diversion?

'Women ought to be excluded from the Olympics' declares Percy Cerutti who jumps at hasty conclusions when he alleges that: 'the Greeks never allowed their wives to take part in competitions'. Beside the fact that we do not live under the same conditions as the ancient Greeks — where are, among many other things, the gynaeceum? — This assertion of his is erroneous. Cerutti, when staying in Rome, should have visited the Museum of the Vatican. I hope for his sake, that he did stop to admire the beautiful and most alive statue of the *Laconian* ending her race. She was one of the contestants taking part in the 'Games consecrated to Hera', which were held in Olympia every five years and were one of the greatest manifestations in those times. According to Pausanias, *Elide* V-16 who says: 'Girls can be of all ages and take part in these races according to categories: first of all the youngest, then the middle ones followed by the oldest competitors... The ground put at their disposal for these races is the Olympic Stadium which is reduced by a sixth of the total length of the track, the winners are presented with laurel wreaths and a piece of the cow offered in sacrifice to Hera.'

Cerutti goes on to say: 'There is no doubt, that many women athletes are masculine in looks. They do not have the wide hips of normal women, they are often devoid of bosom, one of the chief attraction of their sex.'

At the Olympic Games of Rome, however, the most valorous women competitors were admired for their grace which proves that womanly grace and record breaking are not incompatible.

Cerutti conclusive remarks fall into line with the strange proposal put forward by a member of the International Olympic Committee who suggested the following: 'If we must have women in the Olympic Games, let them compete with the men and not

between women, even if it entails placing them in a separate class while competing in the same event with men.' (*This member had in mind sports where women can hold their own with men, such as yachting, equestrian sports, etc.* Ed.)

I fail to see how this proposal can help in making the woman athlete more 'feminine'. Besides, a fight between the strong and the weak has always been repulsive to people of good taste and who have some feelings.

*

Is it necessary to remind people why women are biologically unable to compete on equal terms with men?

Doctor Jones who studied the influence of sport on women said:

— Differences in morphology (larger pelvis, internal convergency of the femoral bones, weaker waist and shoulder, more obtuse angle of the groin, sharper angle of the lumbo-sacrum articulation. Very wide angle of the pubian arch which brings a pression on the organs of the abdominal wall).

— Vital capacity of 3,200 cm³ (instead of 4,500 cm³).

— Reduced volume of the flow of blood.

— The total weight of female muscular tissue is 23 kilos (35 kilos in men).

— The muscle-fibre (contractibility of the tissue and special chimism and electrical influx which are lower) do not possess the same potential vitalism.

— The metabolism is more fragile.

— The functional sensitiveness of women depends on their cyclic functions, etc.

At the Olympics or the greatest sports events, what will happen to women competitors whose morphology or functional factors come nearer to those of men? this is logical since on this account, certain handicaps are suppressed.

The important question is to know if sport can be made responsible for women athletes lack of femininity, not if it provides them with the opportunity to show off and win fame.

Thomson, Pfeifer, Kral and Pros all agree that the influence of sport on making women more masculine is practically null. Sellheim thinks that women made masculine by the practice of sport are in point of fact women with an androidal tendency and who are successful in competitions precisely because of their genetic constitution.

The only criticism with which I agree is the inaesthetical aspect of a graceless woman. But one could argue that the same thing applies to man who has too much grace. I would like to ask to those who want to abolish women sports in the Games if they would have prevented Nijinski from dancing?

Is it not paradoxal that women should be excluded from the International Olympic

Committee and from the National Olympic Committees where women sports are considered too viril, even when women presence would contribute to make sport more « feminine'. (*There is no Olympic rule in existence which forbids women from becoming members of the International Olympic Committee. It is not said anywhere that this is a prerogative of men only!* Ed.)

If women gymnastics, so masculine at the beginning, has become exquisitely 'feminine', this is due to the understanding of the International Gymnastics Federation who left it to women to find their own bearings.

I pointed out this fact at the General Assembly of the Executive Board of the International Physical and Sport Education which was held after the Olympics of Rome. This meeting included a fair number of representatives of the International Olympic Committee and of the International Federations, when a request made by Zoya Romanova (USSR) Doris Magee (Australia) and Frances Kaszubski (United States) to the effect of having a woman delegate on the International Olympic Committee was submitted. The women competitors who participate in the Games do so in the proportion of 1/8th, therefore this request is only just.

*

In my opinion, Gymnastics triumphed and was the outstanding event in the Olympics of Rome.

Who could have foreseen in London, in 1948, that women gymnastics would reach the standard it did in Rome? The reason for this evolution resides in the fact that the leaders of that sport fully realized this axiom which I have repeated on several occasions: 'Women have nothing to be gained by imitating men for they run the risk to do badly what men do well. But when they develop on their own lines, women do well what men do badly.' Gymnastics for women has been running on *different lines* from those practised by men, and that is all there is to it. In 1942, I mentioned this point most emphatically, alas in vain, in the book I wrote: *Woman and Sport*, when I said: 'a woman is not a weak man!' This progress achieved by women with regard to gymnastics can, I am convinced, be realized with women sport, to men greatest enjoyment!

The Board, which fought so successfully against sport becoming too masculine, has not yet overcome all the difficulties, as was very well said by Berthe Villanchor, President of the Women Commission of the International Gymnastics Federation, who foresaw the other pitfalls such as: the introducing of acrobatic features or substituting dancing to gymnastics. But we can trust this Board's vigilance, and we congratulate her for not allowing the public to dictate her rules, since the public is always ready to acclaim the spectacular and showy performance of the circus.

The Olympics will come to an end the day when competitors are no more the products of education but those of uniform training, gymnastics fight against this very serious danger which, as a matter of fact, is *the only real peril*.

In Rome, the women gymnasts attracted so large a crowd that the Thermes Caracalla were hardly large enough to hold the crowd. The notation of the Japanese Ikoda caused a wave of indignation in the enthusiastic crowd. (The arbiters refused to penalize faults which were inevitable owing to the excessive difficulties of the contests. The public puzzled by unusual movements, became nervous at the risks the Japanese contestant took and overcame, it did not stop at details), it was finally roused to a paroxysm of enthusiasm when witnessing the elegance and this 'grace allied to strength' displayed. What a fine vision Asthakova made, pursuing her shadow and describing and giving a living but sober interpretation of Tchaikowsky's music. She made light of difficulties till the tragic moment... when she fell doing one of the exercises, thus forfeiting an Olympic title by a fraction of a second of weakness... inattention or nervousness. What a vision of despair Asthakova made when giving vent to her disappointment, she sobbed on the shoulder of a discreet, kindly captain...

I told Madame Demidenko, delegate of the Soviets Women Commission, that the girls from the Democratic Republics were the most... aristocratic... Whereas the Japanese were wonderful, the Americans utterly relaxed, free and easy in their manner were most cheerful.. The Czechs were moving images scarcely conscious of the image of pure beauty they made. What moments of pure delight we owe them all! and how near they were to the ideal of artists versed in plastic beauty!

In spite of the uniformity of rules, it was remarkable to see how the soul of everyone of these countries could be expressed individually through the personality of everyone of these girls. The Spanish competitors have not yet adopted the modern style, they are tied to a former style of gymnastics which kills in them all outward signs of national character, even to the extent of the Spanish music they chose to accompany their exercises which seemed an anachronism.

The French competitors know the rule and apply it but they have not yet found a style of their own when they can express themselves. They must be excused for this since they have not yet mastered the technique sufficiently well to acquire the ease that would permit them to express themselves freely.

We would be pleased to find again in them the national characteristics such as subtlety and our sense of humour. Their performances were too serious and a contrast to those of the Americans who were unconscious of the merriment they caused us.

When will people realize the important part played by imponderables present in all competitions? Human beings are not machines and when faced with such sustained effort and fierce competition, other forces are at work: ambiance, spiritual attributes, moral courage, endurance as well as the qualities of the heart all are of the utmost importance.

*

In Rome reference was made to doping, but no mention was of a particularly revolting form of doping that of women athletes who take male hormones which lead to castration of the functional cycle of women and amount sometimes to an atrophy of the ovaries which may cause a chronic disease in the long run. It may bring success in the immediate present but at what a cost!